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# Biopolitics in critical tourism theory: a radical critique of critique

Rodanthi Tzanelli

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## Introduction

- 1 In tourism analysis, “biopolitics” is a knife with a double-edged blade cutting at both ends (theory and practice) sharper than it should. Originally envisaged and theorised as part of the philosophical portfolio of well-being by European nation states, tourism was subsequently also theorised by scholars as a pathway to performative pedagogy and liberation from cultural and institutional insularity (Dann and Liebmann Parinello, 2009). The institutional portfolio (of welfare as well-being) continues to inform the study of biopolitics in tourism. However, it helps to remind scholars that biopolitics in organisational studies advocates a grim, structured view of the social world as a system, which can lead to the human subject’s passivity towards injustice and the strangulation of leisurely freedom and free play at the same time. The “good life” is not achieved just by tackling social injustices, but also by attending to the vicissitudes of access to leisure time, which ensures personal self-growth and the maintenance of emotional health. As I proceed to explain in latter parts of this article, social justice and leisure/pleasure could inform the design of tourism futures in more balanced ways if the very concept of “biopolitics” is revised.
- 2 In section I, I provide a short explication of the conceptual origins of biopolitics, followed by some key thematic applications in tourism theory and practice. In section II, I call for a more refined use of it in terms of practice, subject orientation (to whom/ what it can be applied) and theoretical development. I conclude in section III with some observations on the concept’s inherent limitations, which should be taken seriously in the development of a social and cultural theory of tourism, travel, and leisure.

## I. The origins of biopolitics and applications in tourism analysis

- 3 The social science literature on biopolitics is vast and impossible to acknowledge in this short essay. Mostly associated with Michel Foucault's (2003) work on the management of human populations through the institutional vessels/vehicles of power (the state, the police, the clinic, the prison and so forth), and Giorgio Agamben's (1998) thesis on power's hold over the human right to live or die (biopolitics after Hannah Arendt's work on *bíos* or biographical life vs. *zōé* or biological life), the concept entered the analytical lexicon of tourism theory in the last few decades. To establish a more panoramic view, in Fuller's (2011, 2012) programme for a comprehensive philosophy of social science, biopolitics occupies one of the three key domains of human interests - the other two being the ecological (or the organisation of environmental domains, spanning those of sociality and nature) and the cybernetic (the governance of cyberspace). At first this "programme" appears to conveniently reflect the current concerns of critical tourism studies scholars with labour justice (biopolitics - Lapointe and Coulter, 2020), climate change (ecologies - Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019) and the mobilisation of digital tools in sustainable development (cybernetics - Germann Molz, 2014). However, the application of this neat division of critical analysis into three interest-based domains in real contexts of tourism mobilities is not failproof. In real contexts of tourism mobility biopolitics crosses and interacts with ecological and cybernetic processes all the time. This real-life blending of human interests is better addressed in some scholarship, such as that associated with the "new mobilities paradigm" [e.g., see Sheller's (2016) transition to systems theory].
- 4 The most established uses of biopolitics in tourism analysis focus on the instrumentalization of labour in tourism (Coulter and Lapointe, 2020) via what I shall term technologies of 'family resemblance'. This 'resemblance' is fictional in the sense that it is constructed by an institutional authority, whether this is the family, the state, or the market. To apply and explain further, we may consider how lumping together individuals as labour (taxonomizing them) is presented by markets as a 'natural drive', an impulse to grow business through the maximisation of efficiency. "Technologies of family semblance" enable institutions and independent business alike to discipline bodies and minds so as to maximise obedience to power. This strategy or 'signature of power' (Dean, 2013, p. 4) ensures that the human subject is individualised as *a species* (the labourer) rather than *an aggregate of bodies* via processes of sociation (a group of creative workers). However, making human bodies obedient and productive does not optimise the state of life (i.e. ensure wellness) but mainly that of (capitalist) production.
- 5 Notably, the biopolitical sorting of labour (that is, the process of disciplining workers' bodies and minds) depends on mechanisms of "normalisation" - what begins from the moment humans are born/inculcated into a community. In this respect, biopolitics is always about the maintenance of abstract laws of progress and obedience: the making of heritage based on history and genealogy that transforms things and humans into families. With over a decade between them, Ek and Hultman (2008) and Lapointe and Coulter (2020) attempt to build a critique of old managerialist approaches to the tourism industry so as to unmask interplays of power with the symbolic order of the social world of labour. Biopolitical sorting in networks of tourism has also been

discussed in regard to both “sticky” non-human categories, such as landscape and land in tourism destinations (Minca, 2010; Lapointe, 2021) and hypermobile human categories, such as professional/business travel and professional migration networks connected to film tourism, event-staging, travel dark/heritage tourism and voluntourism (Tzanelli, 2015, 2016, 2017).

- 6 Such macro-socio-political approaches have been complemented with considerations of the meso-level of human socialites and cultural interactions, which support the symbolic orders of gender, class, disability, and race/ethnicity. For example, the most basic unit of sociation, the family was examined as a mediator between the effectiveness of disciplinary mechanisms and the uncertainty connected to biopolitical diversity in tourism and hospitality labour (Tzanelli, 2011). It is not coincidental that such research focuses on the social variables of gender and sexuality, as well as race and ethnicity: they all participate (become complicit) in the classification and hierarchisation of human worth. Thus, Veijola and Jokinen’s (1994) discussion of the body in tourism acknowledges the importance of massification (versus individualisation) in the tourist’s release from biopolitical sorting in leisure contexts. Tzanelli’s (2011) analysis of the ways women are exploited within family-based tourism enterprise supporting nationalist values, shows how key institutions (the state and the family) adopt the logic of the market to taxonomise labour in tourism (i.e., men are business leaders and women are unpaid labour).
- 7 In short, institutions do communicate with systems of exploitation: for example, sex work, especially in developing countries that experienced colonisation (system) has been a clear biopolitical vehicle researched by tourism studies scholars for decades without an explicit reference to Foucault (Ryan and Hall, 2001).
- 8 If one wishes to trace the origins of such debates in “grand tourism theory”, the influential theses of “the tourist gaze” (Urry, 1990) and “worldmaking” (Hollinshead, 1999, 2009a) serve as appropriate starting points. Admittedly, Urry’s reflections on the ways tourism professionals systematise the ways both post-industrial advertising and tourists apprehend tourist destinations and Hollinshead’s (2009a) argument about the authorial (but collaborative with tourist industries) role of the nation state in the production of marketable/touristified identity in tourist destinations do not explicitly draw on biopolitics but the adjacent disciplinary couple of power/knowledge. However, it is worth bearing in mind that biopolitics is embedded:
  - a. In the individualisation of human subjects, which is achieved by the twin processes of professionalisation and citizenship. These are prerequisites for a better understanding of who is involved in the production of the tourist gaze (as per Urry 1990 and Urry and Larsen, 2011) and how/where from they draw legitimacy for their involvement in it (Guerrón Montero, 2020).
  - b. In what Foucault (1979, p. 135) has termed the “symbolics of blood”, which grant the father/ ruler of a household or dominion with the right to “dispose” of members not conforming to its fundamental values. This idea guides the spatialisation of heritage and its concomitant marketisation in global markets that Hollinshead (2009b) discussed as a worldmaking mechanism, which “advance [s], manufacture[s], or correct[s] held designations or expressions about culture, heritage, [or] nature” (Hollinshead and Suleman, 2018, p. 204).
- 9
- 10 These orientations communicate with the current use of the term, which concentrates on the ways structured power circulates in the dominant economic system of mobility:

capitalism. Behind these structured mobilities of money and human bodies (travellers and labour), hides the selective dissolution of national borders for the convenience of big enterprises. Otherwise put, according to this argument, national institutions have either lost their rigor or were rendered obsolete in the organisation (rather than “institutionalisation”) of norms, values and thus discourses driving development in the tourist sector.

## II. Theoretical, contextual and practice adjustments

- 11 I suggest that critical tourism analysis may manage to design hopeful futures beyond unrealisable utopias if it pushes for the implementation of a revisionist pragmatic approach to agency. Agamben’s (1996) orientation towards political theory before the post-structuralist turn, and Steve Luke’s (1974) “radical view” of power suggest pragmatic revisions to Foucault’s view on biopolitics without discarding the importance of norms in the civil organisation of human development. Pragmatism is already part of the critical tourism analysis on ecological considerations focusing on the environment (Caton, 2012; Grimwood and Caton, 2018), but such approaches are too focused on particular post-humanist philosophies in which ecological ethics assert the primacy of the natural world. At the other end of the spectrum, the organisational and business-orientated origins of tourism favour Foucault’s view over continuities between discipline and biopolitics. In the late 1980s tourism studies scholarship the polemical response to “business as usual” drew on systems theory (Krippendorf, 1986) to address the presence of a “neo-colonial” model of exploitation of countries/cultures serving as tourist destinations (formed colonised parts of the world or peripheries) and satellites of Western tourist business (subordinates to the “world centre”). Such approaches persist in philosophies of degrowth applied to tourism to date for good reasons: the former colonised countries remain tourist hotspots exploited by capitalist networks. It is just that this approach is not enough when we deal with multiple crises that do not affect just the poor and the disenfranchised of the Global South but all of us.
- 12 The shift to post-structuralist biopolitics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century tourism studies endorsed an even more insidious vision of power than that introduced by Frankfurt School scholars (Ateljevic et al., 2013). As true descendants of Althusser’s (2014 [1970]) thesis on interpellation that is free flowing in society and thus impossible to locate and address institutionally, Foucaultians argue that power *subjects* the human not just unconsciously but also willingly to the rules of the market. Ironically, such total visions are ameliorated in political theory through examinations of what actually constitutes agency in the first place. In sociology, thinkers such as Margaret Archer (2003) advocate deliberative thinking and reflexivity, but do not address agency qua power in their work (they speak of structures instead, thus not considering systems of inequality). Contrariwise, Lukes (1974) proposed the ideal of a “community” of morally autonomous subjects, who knowingly and consciously give consent to the exercise of power, which nevertheless acts in their best interests in transparent and just ways. Similar ideas are hinted in Agamben’s (1998) approach to human freedom, which are more orientated towards questions of power legitimisation qua human rights. The concept of “bio” is transformed into a vehicle of autobiography, enlarging understandings of belonging through ongoing engagements with others in

communities of ascent, shared interest and thus processes of “becoming” a planetary citizen in small ways (Tzanelli, 2022, forthcoming).

- 13 It is worth stressing that although not belonging to the same epistemological and ontological traditions, the political programmes of Lukes, Agamben and Foucault are all part of European cultural and political thought. Unlike them, theorists of degrowth and post-colonial/decolonial critics of biopolitics are critical of both European political legacies (colonialism) and epistemologies (anthropocentrism, ocularcentrism). Such perspectival differences persist in tourism analysis. The problem with such either-or approaches is that they strand practice between a totalitarian vision of anthropocentrism that maintains evil governance (while also reifying the passive victimisation of subjected human populations for self-valorisation), and a new post-humanist agenda in which nature’s rights should take precedence over the extended use of technological infrastructures that make the world move in non-natural ways (e.g., digital tourism). But here is a reality check: as a species, we have spent some thousand years producing technological civilisations, which are now identified as “part of the current problem” – and this comes under the names of the death of nature or “ecocide” (Hall, 2022). Clearly, this post-biopolitical claim is anti-cybernetic and anti-ecological, where “ecology” stands for the needs of human life. The absurdity of some extreme environmentalist activism leads to unworkable questions: whose agency and rights can be promoted, if human interest is muted, given that the animate natural world will never speak a language that a legislator can understand? Should we not propose instead a more radical view on power over earthly forms life, in which we do not target particular systems of exploitation or inequality, but the systemic roots of ecological neglect (see also Córdoba Azcárate, 2020)? I call this a *fight against ecological speciesism in tourism*. I define this as a commitment to de-metaphorizing (“de-fetishizing” or de-tokenising) human difference in projects of degrowth and development alike, to better situate human and non-human difference in non-utilitarian terms (on colonial responsibility and metaphor see Stinson et.al., 2021). A post-humanism attacking biopolitical classification can be as damaging to planetary diversity as the call to put an end to “ecocide” in tourism (Hall, 2022).
- 14 To translate my proposition to a workable social, cultural, and political programme, tourism scholars may need to take a number of ethico-epistemological steps: first, they should not analytically conflate tourism as an activity and an industry, allowing for free-moving transitions between the agency of tourist subjects and tourism labour and the organisational and normative structures of tourist business. This would allow for an exploration of the pragmatic aspects of human agency over power and corporate violence, discarding the idea of complete human automation/subjection (the Foucault “plague” of over-structuring). Second, they should both investigate actual examples and advocate pragmatic models of agency that can drive social change in tourism and hospitality contexts. Pragmatic action is rarely “revolutionary”, but is, or can be counter-biopolitical, in that it can revise biased classifications of populations by business and the nation-state. Third, and concomitantly, they should discard practice seemingly driven by commitment to justice, which in fact marginalises the “objects” of care, such as exploited labour, indigenous populations and natural ecosystems acting as tourist destinations. The latter is an obscene aspect of biopolitical sorting camouflaged under an optics of care for the vulnerable. Fourth, a more careful approach needs to be adopted to biopolitical *context*. Especially in the age of species extinction and extreme urbanisation, considering the “bio” of political agendas demands that we step out of

our comfortable conceptions of biopower based on distinctions between species individualisation and massification. The post-humanist paradigm propagates a new world in which humans are not just dethroned from planetary biopower but consciously step down in favour of preserving and improving a collective multispecies future. However, even this proposition comes with epistemological (for tourism scholars) and ontological (for the studied subject) challenges.

### III. Eurocentrism, totalitarianism = post-humanism, post-agentism, environmental fascism

- 15 Let me shift perspective to critique the critique now: because biopolitics entered tourism analysis from political-philosophical debates, it ended up challenging tourism as an activity in leisure theory vis-à-vis the cultural-industrial organisation of tourism-related labour. The development of “critical perspectives” in tourism theory slowly remove the subject areas’ distinctiveness, turning it into a “case study” of ethics, political philosophy, social theory, or organisational studies. This may be fine for a political theorist or a sociologist, but anyone self-identifying as a “tourism studies scholar” risks becoming an “endangered species” (with apologies for the pun). So far, the outcome of this move toward grand theory (biopolitics) has been a thematic study of blended tourism-and-labour, which is better explored in the new mobilities paradigm as part of the politics and cultural poetics of purposive or directed (towards an end) movement (Hannam *et al.*, 2006; Urry, 2007). But this is not just about tourism analysis.
- 16 Also, regarding the new post-humanist movement in tourism analysis, we must never forget that the devil is in the detail and often speaks the language of environmental fascism: tourism theory aspiring to eliminate biopolitics may unwittingly adopt the so-called “Rapoport’s Rule”, which suggests that if a species such as the human lives or travels in biodiverse environments in temperate climate zones (read: the new Global South), they are *de facto* Anthropocenic neo-colonisers, putting at risk local ecosystems by crowding and eliminating other local species (Fuller, 2006, pp. 184-135). This is an unfortunate reading of natural economy as a disturbed equilibrium between species and individuals (in Foucault’s terms), which turns post-human collaborations into guilt games targeting particular groups, usually from the middle social strata. As much as such groups may engage in pollution or inhospitable behaviour, they are also the only ones with clout who act in tourism networks as supporters of various local causes, promoting variations of tourism amenable to development. In addition, some strands of post-humanism may end up forgetting that there is no ideal/universal human subject to identify as the enemy of the environment or natural ecosystems. If we think smaller for a while, human populations display such “superdiversity”, that saving nature may result in a new Holocaust for some social groups (for example, the old and the disabled, who may be producing more carbon footprint out of necessity), or even the whole parts of the developing world, which relies on tourism revenues and thus does not necessarily want to degrow. There is such a thing as a mindless moralisation of “problems”, which traps those in real need in a world of rules without practical solutions.
- 17 In conclusion then, tourist scholars may have to steer clear of moral universalisms to consider how both different species and different human categories develop

capabilities rather than “resiliencies” in different ecological contexts. To dispel any confusions, I suggest that we must learn to think of different ways of “homing” human and non-human alterities, without turning their homes into exiles. Because understanding and recognising difference calls for dialogue with it, the post-human programme cannot function *without* the plurality of human voices – hence, their biographical signatures. This is not the signature of power advocated in Foucault’s view of the world, but an implementation of Arendt’s vision of a polis/power on a mission to gather hospitality labour, tourism professionals and tourists in appropriate cultural spaces of tolerance for another and each other in small, workable ways.

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## ABSTRACTS

The article reviews the uses of the concept of biopolitics in critical tourism studies. After a brief genealogical account of the concept in political philosophy, it follows its transposition and its thematic applications in tourism theory and practice. It is argued that biopolitics is only one of the three key domains of 'human interests', which must be subjected to a radical critique in tourism studies and practice. Such critique should be entwined with questions of (a) institutional and discursive power in the making of tourism worlds and destinations ('worldmaking' – Hollinshead, 2009a), but also, crucially (b) the analogous counter-discourses instituted by critical tourism studies scholars, who seek to legitimise their own epistemic community and thus produce a majoritarian voice endorsing an apparent (but not interest or motivation free) support of morally just causes for a better human and planetary futures.

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