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Advancing evolutionary economic geographies of tourism

trigger events, transformative moments and destination path shaping

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Published in:
Tourism Geographies

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1080/14616688.2023.2285324](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2285324)

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Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
James, L., Halkier, H., Sanz-Ibanez, C., & Wilson, J. (2023). Advancing evolutionary economic geographies of tourism: trigger events, transformative moments and destination path shaping. *Tourism Geographies*, 25(8), 1819-1832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2285324>

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Published in *Tourism Geographies*

Advancing evolutionary economic geographies of tourism: trigger events, transformative moments and destination path shaping

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Abstract

The study of tourism destination evolution has been enriched in recent years by the adoption of concepts from Evolutionary Economic Geography (EEG). The aim of this article and those constituting this special section is to further develop this field of research by discussing recent developments within EEG and Tourism Studies, paying special attention to the nature and impact of trigger events and transformative moments that represent a turning point in destination path development. Three key issues are identified: the role of human agency, the co-evolution of tourism with other development paths, and the importance of utilising political economy perspectives, including legitimisation and discursive practices.

Keywords: evolutionary economic geography, trigger events, tourism destinations, path development, moments

Introduction

It is now almost ten years since *Tourism Geographies* published a special issue on ‘evolutionary economic geography and the economies of tourism destinations’ (Ioannides, Halkier and Lew, 2014). In that publication, Brouder (2014) identified only nine existing tourism papers that used an evolutionary economic geography (EEG) approach. Since that time, EEG has developed into an established sub-field within Tourism Studies (Brouder et al., 2017), and more than 100 papers that address the evolution of tourism destinations have been published during the past decade (e.g., Ma and Hassink, 2014; Brouder and Fullerton, 2015; Gill and Williams, 2018; Benner, 2022).

The aim of the present special section is to consider the implications of recent developments within EEG and Tourism Studies, and specifically to explore the nature and impact of trigger events that represent a turning point for a destination’s development path. It was originally inspired by the

plethora of reports, opinion pieces and academic articles published during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, which speculated on the likelihood that tourism development paths would be radically altered as a result of the crisis. Many of these contributions discussed the probability of a radical shift towards more sustainable and just tourism practices versus a return to 'business as usual' (Ateljevic, 2020; Brouder, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Ioannides & Gyimothy, 2020; Niewiadowski, 2020; Vargas, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; 2021). While some commentators were optimistic about the prospects for change, others were more cautious. The pandemic has thus reawakened debates about how, why, and when destination development paths undergo significant changes and, in particular, the impact of what might be termed 'trigger events'.

Butler (2014, p218) discussed the notion of 'triggers', suggesting that they represented a 'major area that has not been dealt with to any extent' in tourism research. Trigger events could take the form of unexpected shocks – such as a pandemic or a terrorist attack – that have a negative impact on destination trajectories, and there is a well-developed literature on the resilience of tourism destinations in the face of disasters and crises (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019; Ritchie and Jiang, 2021). Previous research has, for example, investigated the impacts of terrorism (Raja & Raghu, 2021; Liu & Pratt, 2017), earthquakes and tsunamis (Calgaro and Lloyd, 2008; Orchiston, 2013), Ebola, SARS and Zika (Zeng, Carter and De Lacy, 2005; Novelli et al., 2018) on destination development. Such events are typically seen as different from longer-term path development processes, often with negative connotations of disruption and crisis, with consequences that are sometimes aggravated by lack of management and anticipation. In this vein, Urso et al. (2021) understand shocking events as 'spaces of rupture and reconfiguration' of the existing social, economic, and political institutions, and whose long-term consequences might not be easily estimated.

Trigger events could, however, also be the result of endogenous processes that represent opportunities for destination upgrading and constructive mindful deviation through policy intervention, the actions of key actors, or the development of collaborative alliances (Grillitsch et al., 2022). These represent what Moulaert et al (2007) term 'selective' moments, which embrace intervention as policies and key agencies as elements enabling urban socio-economic change. In this vein, Sanz-Ibáñez et al. (2017) developed the concept of 'moments' as path-shaping evolutionary inflection points that generate change and disruptions to the status quo. This approach encompasses selective trigger events such as the deliberate actions of policy makers or investment strategies enabling urban socio-economic change, as well as spontaneous trigger events. One of the key arguments of this special section is that we need to consider a wider range of path-shaping triggers and the role of a wider range of stakeholders in relation to 'moments' of change.

In this introduction to the special section, we reflect on recent developments in EEG and their significance in relation to trigger events and destination evolution. Firstly, we consider current discussions on path development in EEG and their transferability to the tourism context. Secondly, we identify three key issues that should inform future research on trigger events and the evolution of tourism destination development paths: the role of human agency, the co-evolution of tourism and other development paths, and the importance of political economy (and cultural political economy) perspectives, including legitimation and discursive practices. Finally, we highlight the contribution of the articles in this special section in relation to building bridges between tourism geographers and economic geographers using EEG, as well as other concepts that may open new avenues for research on destination evolution.

Tourism, EEG and destination path development

In their survey of the nascent EEG/Tourism literature, Brouder and Eriksson (2013) identified three major theoretical EEG perspectives: Generalised Darwinism, Complexity Theory, and Path

Dependency. Of these, the latter has undoubtedly become the most popular approach within Tourism Studies, (Brouder, 2017; Brouder et al., 2017) and focuses attention on the importance of historical conditions, routines, and institutional inertia (Ma and Hassink, 2013; 2014; Randelli, Romei, and Tortora, 2014). According to the so-called canonical path dependence model, initial conditions and random events result in the initiation of a particular development trajectory. This is reinforced by a variety of increasing return effects, which further entrench the dominant path, eventually leading to a stable, self-reproducing but rigid state. This would result, as Ma and Hassink (2014, p 583) put it, in 'a local tourism industry lacking competitiveness, and adaptability to the changing market and external shocks...[It] would thus enter into stasis or even decline'. A shock or other external action would then be required to break this lock-in and begin a new path. Several studies have examined processes of path dependence and attempts to break lock-in and create new tourism paths; for example, Gill & Williams' (2011; 2014; 2018) research on Whistler, British Columbia, and Brouder and Fullerton's (2015; 2017) work on Niagara. In this sense, tourism research followed in the footsteps of the mainstream EEG literature, which grew out of studies of old industrial regions and how they could break out of declining paths and develop new activities (Stihl, 2022). Most tourism scholars, however, draw on a relatively open 'path as process' perspective from EEG (Martin, 2010). This approach was developed explicitly as an alternative to the canonical model, and path development is instead conceptualised as a process that *might* lead to stasis but could also lead to 'dynamic adaptation that leads to further growth in a new round of path preformation, creation, and development' (Benner, 2022, p3). The 'path as process' approach thus accommodates a wide range of different types of path development, beyond the path dependence/creation dichotomy (Sanz-Ibáñez et al, 2017), and attention has turned to different forms of 'path plasticity' (Halkier & Therkelsen, 2013; Strambach & Halkier, 2013).

Various forms of path plasticity can be identified in the existing EEG literature, and could inspire further work within tourism studies that moves beyond the path dependence/path creation dichotomy (Anton Clavé & Wilson, 2017). Firstly, *path extension*, which can be described as 'business as usual' and is 'characterized by incremental product and process innovations in existing industry and along prevailing technological paths' (Isaksen 2015, p587). In a tourism context, this can be seen in destinations where development plans focus on better marketing of existing attractions and incrementally improving current services and infrastructure rather than developing new products or market segments. Secondly, *path upgrading* is characterised by major intra-path changes, for example, new technologies or major organizational changes (Asheim, 2019). An example of this type of path development in tourism is when destinations adapt their core products to target new market segments; for example, by adopting digital technologies or re-organising supply chains to create new experiences. Path upgrading thus represents a significant shift within an existing path through which industries to adapt to changing market conditions and enhance their competitive position (Isaksen, Tödtling and Trippl, 2018). Thirdly *path branching* occurs when new paths develop from existing industries and technologies, typically due to diversification of existing firms into related sectors or new product areas. In tourism, this would be represented by the development of new types of tourism based on existing resources, for example, gastronomic tourism as a form of diversification from agricultural or food production (see Flood Chavez et al., 2023, this special section). Finally, it is also now acknowledged that not all path development processes are inherently constructive. Although relatively few studies have explored the so-called 'dark side' of path development (Blažek et al., 2020; Trippl et al., 2020), more explicit attention has been paid to that path development processes that involve decline or the destruction of existing paths. Blažek et al. (2020), for example, identified *path downgrading*, *path contraction*, and *path delocalization*. These path development types are characterised by the decline of existing activities, the de-locking of assets, and the transfer of economic activity to other regions. Although these types of path development have negative connotations, it is important to consider how constructive and destructive path development are linked. Trippl et al. (2020), for example, discussed the importance of dismantling unsustainable paths

by disrupting existing support structures, removing subsidies, and changing financial incentives through taxes. Their reflections also remind us that new path creation is not always positive. While some contribute to sustainable and inclusive outcomes, others may reinforce existing inequalities or unsustainable practices. As Wilkinson et al. (this special section) argue, path creation is not a guarantee of a more sustainable trajectory.

Furthermore, tourism paths may be affected – or themselves affect – the development of other industrial paths (see e.g., Stihl, 2022). This is an area that has until recently been relatively neglected in EEG. Frangenheim et al. (2020) have developed a model of inter-path relations based on access to markets and regional assets (such as labour, capital or knowledge), while Breul et al. (2022) have identified three categories of impacts that an emerging path might have on pre-existing paths. Path expansion (when the formation of a new path creates positive multiplier effects), path renewal (due to new related assets) or no reformation (when the new path has no influence on existing activities). Flood Chavez et al.'s contribution to this special section builds on these insights to analyse the connections between tourism and timber, tourism and dairy, and tourism and the wine industry in the Margaret River region in Western Australia, showing that relationships vary from competitive to mutually supportive or neutral. In this case, the dissolution of a dairy farming path left behind assets that were subsequently used by the emerging wine industry and later on a new 'blended' wine-tourism path developed, with its own distinctive market, assets and actors.

As Ioannides et al. (2014, p 537) noted, 'tourism does not exist in isolation as an economic activity' but is embedded in highly complex networks stretching from the local to the global scale. Tourism development paths are interconnected with other economic activities and inter-path relations are an important topic for research. Key questions for future research include what types of relations exist and the basis for (e.g. shared resources, labour or spaces) and how trigger events originating on one path affect the development of related paths. Tourism is often a seasonal activity, and developing supportive relations between paths may help to diversify regional economies, that would otherwise be more vulnerable to shocks and crises. There is also a need for more studies of tourism policies to support constructive co-evolution, so that competition and cooperation between paths is balanced.

Human agency and trigger events in destination path shaping

While all path processes are characterised by path dependence in the sense that 'history matters' (Simmie et al., 2008), the important role of human agency, understood as 'intentional, purposive and meaningful actions, and the intended and unintended consequences of such actions' (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020, p707) has received increasing attention in EEG. In a similar vein, studies adopting a EEG lens in tourism acknowledge that human agency has a great impact on the contingent and unpredictable nature of destination evolution, both in terms of positive advancements and negative constraints (Sanz-Ibáñez and Anton Clavé, 2022). Recent theoretical contributions have sought to conceptualise the ways in which different stakeholders attempt to shape the future direction of development paths (Dawley, 2014; Steen, 2016; Steen and Hansen, 2018; Sotarauta et al., 2017; Jolly, Grillitsch and Hansen, 2020; Grillitsch, Asheim and Nielsen, 2022). In this context, Grillitsch and Sotarauta's (2020) 'trinity of change agency' framework has been widely adopted, and comprises three elements: entrepreneurial agency, institutional agency, and place leadership. Entrepreneurial agency revolves around the innovation and development of new products, processes, services, or business models that deviate from established industrial norms (Grillitsch, Asheim & Nielsen, 2022). This form of agency acts as a catalyst for disruptive innovation, opening doors to fresh economic opportunities. In contrast, institutional entrepreneurship involves concerted efforts directed at introducing new organizations, reforming existing ones, and reshaping the formal or informal

regulations governing economic activities (Grillitsch, Asheim & Nielsen, 2022). Institutional entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in influencing the institutional landscape, challenging established norms, and driving structural changes that support novel growth trajectories. Complementing both entrepreneurial and institutional agency, place-based leadership shifts its focus towards mobilizing and coordinating actors to stimulate path development (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). By fostering collaboration, facilitating knowledge exchange, and cultivating shared visions, place-based leaders play a pivotal role (Kurrika and Grillitsch, 2021).

Along similar lines, Anton Clavé and Wilson (2017) argue for a wider range of social and cultural criteria in the analysis of agency in tourism evolution – advocating the use of a cultural political economy (CPE) approaches to offer alternative perspectives on path shaping and shifting tourism situations. If political economy focuses attention on diverse forms of social and economic agency in relation to the spatialities of capitalism, CPE expressly incorporates notions of culture into the study of political economy to enhance its interpretive and explanatory power (Jessop, 2009; Ribera-Fumaz, 2009; Sum and Jessop, 2013). This facilitates consideration of the co-evolution of economic processes with political, cultural and biophysical processes in terms of inherent multiplicities; subjectivities, assemblages; and local-specific cultural contexts.

Another important development within EEG and tourism studies is the recognition that not all agency is directed towards transformative change. While some stakeholders may pursue radical innovations and transformative strategies, others may adopt more incremental or adaptive approaches within existing paths, or indeed work towards simply maintaining an existing path trajectory (Jolly, Grillitsch and Hansen, 2020). In her study of three Norwegian tourism destinations, Bækkelund (2021) introduced three types of reproductive or maintenance agency. The first is replicative entrepreneurship, where new firms are established, albeit bearing strong resemblance to existing businesses (Bækkelund, 2021, p759). The second – institutional work – entails the maintenance of established institutions and practices, which are often taken for granted. Lastly, maintenance leadership involves mobilization and collaboration aimed at preserving existing paths (ibid, p759; see also Bellandi, Plechero and Santini, 2021).

In their contribution to this special section, Wilkinson et al. also consider the important role that reproductive agency plays in destination development, noting that stakeholders facing a crisis may deliberately decide to continue along an existing path rather than diverging from it. This ‘mindful continuation’, they argue, may be seen as a form of resilience when a beneficial and sustainable development path is threatened by disruptive trigger events. Their study of the views of major stakeholder groups in North Devon, England, regarding potential scenarios for tourism development during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that their longstanding commitment to sustainable destination management was not substantially altered by the crisis. An important contribution of Wilkinson et al.’s article is thus to remind us that trigger events ‘do not necessarily have to precipitate overt action or catalyse tangible change’. This insight is especially salient given the methodological predominance of path tracing in studies of destination evolution (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023). This approach involves the mapping of different phases of path creation, development, lock-in, and branching over many years or even decades, based on the identification of ‘critical junctures’ (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007) where paths change direction (clearly resonating with Sanz Ibañez et al’s (2017) notion of moments as evolutionary inflection points). While this approach enables the analysis of destination evolution over a long period of time, it nonetheless prioritises change over continuity.

A further issue with path tracing as a methodology is that, as Flood Chavez et al. (2023, p 3) note, ‘triggering events might not be noticed when they occur...their true effects may only be noticed once they are ‘rationalised by hindsight’, and the identification of critical junctures is difficult in cases where there is a pattern of gradual changes and overlapping phases. Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020, p717)

called for empirical studies of path development that collect narratives or repeat observations over time, as well as ‘zooming in on the ‘subjective stories of individuals, and grasp their perceptions, intentions and change strategies’. We would also argue that it is theoretically important to mix longitudinal studies with contemporary analyses of current and very recent events in order to unravel the mechanisms and practices employed by various actors as they attempt to influence the trajectory of destination development paths. It is also important to recognise that narratives of destination path development are indeed subjective, and that local stakeholders, through their retelling of past events, often seek to legitimise and rationalise previous actions. Furthermore, as MacKinnon et al. (2022) argue, stakeholders often seek to align their narratives to broader political and economic agendas to attract support from national and supra-national institutions. Processes of legitimation – involving the promulgation of visions and narratives about the past and future – have been highlighted as a crucial dimension of path development more generally (Sagheim, 2022, Gong et al. 2022; Njøs et al., 2020), and we would suggest that this is an important area of research to explore also within tourism geographies.

One further important insight from recent work on agency in EEG is that actors do not only respond to current circumstances but also anticipate future developments (Steen, 2016; Steen and Hansen, 2018; Sotarauta, Beer and Gibney, 2017; Grillitsch, Asheim and Nielsen, 2022). Thus, it is important to acknowledge ‘the capacity of people to make, debate and respond to forecasts, to anticipate risks and vulnerabilities, and change behaviour to pre-empt or mitigate losses’ (Bristow and Healy, 2014a, p928). This means that perceptions of, and expectations about, the future also play a key role in shaping destination path development. Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2018; 2020) argue that the future can be conceptualised as an opportunity space rather than a projection of historically developed paths, and that future opportunity spaces are time specific, region specific and agent specific. However, they emphasise that ‘the realization of some pathways is more likely than the realization of others depending on the regional preconditions and actors’ ability to perceive and utilize future opportunities’ (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2018, p5-6). This implies that an understanding of destination development paths requires careful analysis of the relationships between structure and human agency, economic and social legacies, and future-oriented actions on the part of key actors. We would argue for a conceptualisation of trigger events as particular types of ‘moments’ (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2017): time-spaces where destination development paths are in flux and human agency plays a crucial role, not just in responding to external events but also actively envisioning and shaping future development trajectories.

As Bohn et al. (this special section) note, institutional and governance configurations form the context within which individual stakeholder act. Institutions legitimise some forms of destination path development and limit others (see also Strambach and Halkier, 2013). Thus, stakeholder actions reflect contested and evolving political agendas, and outcomes might also be the result of decisions and actions taken elsewhere. Two contributions to this special section engage specifically with human agency in relation to such political and institutional processes. Firstly, Belay and Adu-Ampong present an analysis of the impact of political transitions as trigger events in relation to the development of a new regional tourism path centred on Unity Park in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As Belay and Adu-Ampong note, there has been increasing focus on the role of the state as an agent of path development (Dawley, 2014; Halkier et al., 2019). Their study is notable not only because it adds to the very sparse existing literature on path development in the Global South, but also because it demonstrates the importance of state politics and power for path creation processes. While they recognise that collective agency on the part of state institutions is critical, they also draw our attention to the exercise of power by individuals through mechanisms such as authority, coercion, charisma, leadership and persuasion. Secondly, Bohn et al.’s contribution to this special section deals with political processes, but in the context of the sparsely populated Arctic regions of Northern Sweden and Finnish Lapland. Their contribution focuses on the role of public funding, exploring not only whether it is used to

reinforce existing pathways, but also whether funding bodies use financial instruments to initiate or respond to critical junctures. They conclude that public funding is typically reactive to disruptive events rather than actively creating new pathways. One reason for this is the predominance of temporally limited project funding, which makes it difficult to establish longer term development activities. Furthermore, the bureaucracy surrounding public project funding, especially EU regional development funding, precludes immediate adjustments in the face of crises or shocks, and creates a time-lag between the identification of needs and disbursement. Analysis of the rhythm, pace and temporal horizons of path shaping activities and opportunity spaces is therefore crucial to understanding how stakeholders engage in destination path shaping.

One area where tourism researchers can make a distinct contribution is in relation to the role of different types of stakeholders in path development, and especially in relation to trigger events. The EEG literature on path development and human agency has expanded the range of agents considered, moving from an almost exclusive focus on firms to explore the actions of other regional stakeholders (Hutchinson and Eversole, 2022; Benner, 2023). However, those writing within the field of EEG tend to focus primarily on firms, regional policy organisations or knowledge institutions. The contributions to this special section reflect a widening of the type of institutional and political processes that are included in studies of destination path development, and how tourism researchers are not only borrowing from EEG but are also contributing to more general theoretical developments in relation to path development processes. Within tourism studies, there is a strong focus on studying the role of a wide range of stakeholders, including community groups, destination management organisations and non-governmental organisations, as well as tourists themselves. These stakeholders also exercise agency in relation to destination evolution (James and Halkier, 2023) but we know little about their motivations and strategies in relation to path shaping processes. This is an important dimension to consider, particularly following the advent of participatory governance and co-creative strategies in tourism policy contexts. Demand creation – for example through market-building and public procurement has recently been highlighted as an important element in path shaping (Martin et al., 2019; Uyarra and Flanagan, 2021). Tourism as a sector where consumers themselves play a central role in the co-creation of the tourism product – and therefore in the type of tourism paths that develop. Furthermore, the creation of new tourism markets is rooted in place-based marketing and branding activities. Analyses of agency in tourism path development therefore has the potential to broaden understandings of the complex network of actors involved in regional path development processes more generally.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that the papers in this special section build on recent theoretical developments within EEG and advance our understanding of trigger events and destination evolution, especially concerning the role of human agency, the co-evolution of tourism with other development paths, and the salience of political economy approaches. Besides providing valuable theoretical insights illustrated with case studies from diverse geographical locations (Australia, England, Ethiopia and Arctic regions), some useful remarks related to the methods used to tackle path development in EEG were also raised. We hope that this collection of papers will therefore contribute to the development of further dialogue between tourism researchers and those working in mainstream EEG, and that it will inspire new research on the evolution of tourism destinations. Future research within the field may also address other significant aspects such as complexity dynamics (Martin, 2021) to gain a comprehensive understanding of how tourism places or spaces evolve from a multi-scalar viewpoint and to recognise the interdependent nature of the components that constitute a destination. Amidst global shifts in society, the environment, and the economy driven by factors such as the global economic and energy transition and the heightened awareness of climate change, renewed interest in the concept of regional resilience may also inform studies of destination evolution

(Duke et al, 2017). It highlights not only the capacity of recovery in the aftermath of catastrophic shocks but also the political capacity to foster sustainable change through ongoing innovation and learning, thus building the ability to adapt and overcome vulnerability and ultimately enhancing adaptability (Simmie and Martin, 2010; Halkier and James, 2017). Finally, considering a more expansive understanding of co-evolution dynamics may allow EEG scholars to recognise the pivotal role of institutions in destination transformation, which are closely intertwined with policies aiming at alternative goals such as place sustainability, social innovation or social equality (Gong and Hassink, 2019).

Acknowledgements

Cinta Sanz-Ibáñez and Julie Wilson acknowledge support from the I+D+i ADAPTOUR project (Grant number PID2020-112525RB-I00). Laura James, Henrik Halkier and Cinta Sanz-Ibáñez also are also grateful for the financial support of the Regional Studies Association Small Grant Scheme which funded the project 'Bouncing back or bouncing forward? Place leadership and post-pandemic recovery in European tourism regions'.

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