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COMMENTARY

The decline of book reviews in tourism discipline

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JEL Classification: A3, Y3, Z30

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1 COMMENTARY

The psychological motivations to write a short note on the importance of book review in the fields of tourism coincides with my appointment as book review editor of the Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing. In this respect, one might speculate the tradition of a book review is far from being consolidated in tourism research. As Korstanje (2010) observes, book reviews not only provides fresh insight to other scholars of new advances in the discipline –first and foremost in case of polemic theses- but validates a second viewpoint to the involving authors. In the English speaking circles, book reviewers are well-renowned experts in the fields they are convoked (Korstanje 2010). Sometimes books are accepted and published in consideration of the potential profits, not the content quality. Under some conditions, books are certainly published by the author's reputation with minor remarks in the review process (Korstanje, 2010). Having said this, the book review strips out the veils of the editorial project from its sainthood. Beyond any speculation, it is safe to say that the book review process is a vital part of the professional maturation of any discipline and applied-research (Goldthorpe, 1973). At a closer look, books often are published out of the strict peer review process which is proper of academic journals. In other cases, the culture of publishing and perish marks the pace of professional researchers who are pushed to publish full-length papers instead of books (Hall, 2011; Korstanje 2016). The problem of metrics and the obsession to publish in top-ranked journals –probably with the end of improving the citation impacts- leads invariably to a crisis of identity in the field which merits to be discussed (Fennell 2013). Interesting studies show how while the number of publications exponentially increased over the recent decades, the numbers of research notes or book reviews slump down (Ertas & Kozak, 2020). As book series editor of two leading publishers, I hold that it is hard to select distinguished authors or voices, which had the time

either to write or edit a book in our days. They often exclaim: I am interested but you know, I need to publish two papers in Q1 journals to keep my position as professor, or my university only pays me for published papers in journals indexed in Scopus or WOS. Quite aside from this, academic pressure in scholars to publish in peer review journals seems to be a point that has not been widely approached (Buckley 2019). This begs the following vexed questions: what is a peer-review process and why is it so important for tourism-related scholars?

At a first look, a peer review process includes the revision of colleagues who are expert in the field who make a substantial or minor objection to the manuscript. Whenever the identity of the author and reviewers is not open, it calls the blind review process. Academicians strongly believe the process is more objective under the blind review process and a simple peer review stage. If readers ask me, this is far from being true!

The process is certainly based on countless contradictions, errors and discrepancies that often a small portion of what is being published is a high-quality piece (Tobin & Roth, 2002). Ideological or partisan viewpoints without mentioning the surface of the idiomatic barrier during the process of publication (De Vries, Marshall & Stein, 2009). To the best of my knowledge, the manuscript is subject to three or four rounds of revision, some of them in charge of different reviewers. Not only this delays the publication times but also puzzles researchers who are passively forced to face unjust and harsh comments, above all when English is not their primary option. As a result of this, reviewers exert pressure on authors when the main argumentation of the text does not match with their views. This seems to be particularly true when managerial viewpoints collide with sociological one in the tourism-research. Since the review is not paid, the lack of descent reviewers is one of the headaches of editors. What is equally important, the top-ranked journals receive hundreds of submission in the month, most of them of low quality. The editorial board member list appears to be not enough to



manage the flow of incoming manuscripts, in which case, editors make the decision to perform high desk-rejection rates. The negative effects of these rejections are threefold. Firstly, since the review process follows an emotional logic, authors desist to submit new initiatives to the journals where they were mistreated; doubtless affecting the credibility of the journal. Secondly, editors should take attention to minor points instead of the common-thread argument of the text. To put the same in bluntly, texts are simply rejected by editors because of some minor grammar issues or the lack of updating in the bibliography. Potential good papers are declined because of minor issues. Secondly, reviewers sometimes recommend their publications (to enhance their citation impact) or press authors to cite 5 works previously published in the targeted journal. These unethical practices harm not only the innovative works which commonly confront with the dominant paradigm but also in the resulted quality. Third, authors are exaggeratedly compelled to cite their own works in which case, the reviewer knows exactly who is or are the authors.

In a nutshell, there is an erroneous belief that punctuates those journals featured of high-rejection levels are most prestigious than those low-rejection rates. In consequence, a whole portion of scholars and professional researchers jostle to publish in top-tiered outlets while low-tiered journals are on the brink of collapse (Seglen, 1997). The culture of publishing or perish is, in fact, a war of all against all, with no clear winners, at least to the long-run. In the mid of this mayhem, it is tempting to say that books are not being considered by academicians to make public their recent advancements (Korstanje 2010).

As the previous argument is given, scientific journals pursue scientific methods which mean either the possibility to recreate outcomes at a later stage or validating the previous hypothesis following the marked path. The peer-review process is essential in the configuration of scientific knowledge because the information is validated and tested by experts (Spier, 2002). The problem lies in the fact that in tourism fields, journals are not scientific but marketing-led magazines. The publications one may read in the leading tourism journals are studied based on consumers' motivations, push and pull factors, organic image destination or tourism management. As Adrian Franklin (2007) puts it, one of the problems of tourism research seems to be the tourist-centricity, which exhibits an uncanny obsession to understand what the tourist believes. The tourist situates, in this way, as the only credible source of information for professional field workers. In the same way, tourism research mainly consists of interviews or open-end questionnaires administered to tourists or visitors in different transport hubs, hotels or airports. This tourist-centricity is gradually leading the epistemology of tourism into a serious crisis. Invariably, so to speak, other voices and methods are relegated to the periphery. For some voices, it marks the triumph of the managerial perspective over the sociological perspective (Harris, Wilson & Altejevic, 2007; Tribe 1997; 2007; 2010). Quite aside from this, let's remind readers the significant importance of books to knowledge production, at the best the method I have been educated when I pursue the anthropology degree.

Scientific papers are often seen as objective pieces that crystallize a mix-balanced argument oriented to test

hypotheses by the application of a rational method. There are a lot of guidebooks, and tips in the social network explaining and indicating how to write a coherent scientific paper to avoid desk-rejection (Spier, 2002; Davis, Davis & Dunagan, 2012).

Above all, scientific production coincides with scientific communication (Duppe & Weintraub, 2014). I start from the premise that papers crystallize a stage of maturation –in applied research- where previous ideas, prejudices and hypotheses are empirically tested, but what is more important papers come from the critical reasoning only books give. To yield theory, fieldworkers should dive into the magic world of books, which provide with the bones to the flesh. Books not only allow all-encompassing viewpoints but they are the conceptual tenets of applied research. Of course, because of time and space, books contain information, debates and theories which are impossible to reflect in a manuscript twelve pages of length. To write a good paper, the first step consists in reviewing a seminal book. A book review seems to be simply a net of critical ideas about the main argument of the book, or a description of its chapter. The review should attend three main relevant aspects: why did the author study the theme or what is his socio-economic context? what has he or she said? And what are the limitations or contradictions of the book?

A book review is a very important piece that places the main argumentation under the critical lens of the scrutiny of the expert. Above all, in a moment of the editorial market where not all books are certainly peer-reviewed. The books review, solicited or not, still remains as the most important face of applied research. Some voices agree that unsolicited book reviews run the risk to be written by lay-persons, postgraduate students –but not experts. So preferably is the solicited book review, but it is not limited to. Excellent book reviews have been performed by students and lay-persons interested in a specific topic. Needless to say, the set of different reviews –all they organized revolving around the same topic- result in an essay review. For doing an essay-review, authors should synthesize each review in no more than five or six lines, stressing on the different conceptual lens of authors to approach the same theme, their commonalities, and differences of methods as well as their conceptual limitations or involuntarily flaws. Ultimately, a coherent abridged version of the full essay review comes to fruition in the state of the art of the next applied research.

Any scientific paper is mainly centered on three clear-cut pillars; so to say, a thorough review of the specialized literature which stems from the reading of scientific materials, books, journals and proceedings accompanied by a selection of the best theory that explains the problem placed by authors in the introduction. Here some scholars somehow misunderstand the difference between the state of the art and the theoretical framework. While the former represents all that has been published in consonance with the studied object, the latter signals to the most optimal theory carefully selected by the researcher to be empirically validated or discarded. Neither the state of the art nor the theoretical framework successfully goes ahead without books. Finally, the empirical validation of dataset, as well as the operationalization of measured variables, takes part of the empirical (last) section of the research.

Hence this short note encourages scholars to review books while alerting on the problem of the obsession for full-length papers. In his trailblazing book, *The Sociological Imagination*, Charles Wright Mills (2000) call the attention on the importance of the books to skip the humdrum routine of the peer-review process and scientific papers. Per his viewpoint, any discipline evolves according to a moment of imagination, disruption or creation which takes a room with the art of writing books. Wright Mills exerts a caustic critique on what he dubbed as “theories of middle-range” which mean the rise of applied research saturated with empirical information that goes nowhere. In fact, he strongly believed that theories of middle-range will put the sociology into a conceptual stagnation.

Although rich in information these theories lack any critical and new (innovative) perspective, validating or recreating the conditions towards an ecological fallacy. For the sake of clarity, an ecological fallacy can be defined as a set of ideas, stereotypes or beliefs based on a formal fallacy (speculation) that happens when inferences about the nature of individuals are deducted from the inferences about the collective to which individuals belong. To put this in bluntly, a common ecological fallacy is given in the field of risk perception when researchers obtain the conclusion that indicates women feel further risks than men. Researchers erroneously infer genre correlates directly to risk perception. A closer look of the same data reveals the opposite so to speak, both genres perceive risk in the same way. While women are socialized to express their emotions, men repress their inner-world sublimating his fear in angry. Last but not least, book review not only is an important task for the evolution of the discipline but the touchstone of empirical research. For these reasons, students, professional researchers and consecrated scholars should never forsake the custom to review books to expand their constellations and horizons. All said leads me to believe that books and book review are always the touchstone of professional research.

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