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PAGES: 167-172

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/399989>

TOURISM AT RISK: FAILURES AND DICHOTOMIES OF RISK PERCEPTION THEORY IN TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

The turn of the century has brought a lot of radical shifts and risks for tourism industry, which ranged from terrorism to lethal virus outbreaks. Henceforth risk perception theory, which was formulated in psychology, was re-appropriated by policy makers and tourism-related scholars. However, from its inception this conceptual corpus was based on the economic-centred paradigm. This piece discusses critically the main limitations of risk perception theory and the rise of a new discipline, post disaster marketing, in view of the caveats and speculative assumption of “the precautionary principle”.

Keywords

Risk
Risk perception
Post disaster marketing
Disasters
Terrorism

INTRODUCTION

Over the recent years, the World turned its attention to the rise of a new more radical form of violence, adjoined to the political instability of Middle East after the two US-led invasions. The international terrorism not only wreaked havoc in the social imaginary mining the necessary trust for making holidays abroad, but affects seriously the organic image of destinations (Arana & Leon, 2008; Korstanje & Clayton, 2012; Saha & Yap, 2014). The urgency of policy makers today in tourism fields has changed a lot in comparison with the founding parents of the discipline. Today, risk

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and security were two chief factors that harm the functionability of destinations (Pforr & Hosie, 2009; Cohen & Neal, 2010). In the book *Risk Society*, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck holds the thesis that risk appeared as a new phenomenon which mediated between peoples and their institutions leaving the class division behind (Beck, 1992). No less true is that though risk perception is almost forty years old in the fields of psychology, it was massively used in tourism fields after the 9/11 and the attacks perpetrated against World Trade Center. From that moment on, the attention and publications of risk perception studies exponentially grew worldwide (Floyd, Gibson, Pennington-Gray, & Thapa, 2004; Kozak, Crotts, & Law 2007). Despite the attention given to this field, scholars have fleshed out a one-sided argument revolving around risk, which ushered the Academy progressively towards an ethnocentric stance and economic-based models. The present essay-review centres on the current problems of risk perception while lays the foundations for a new discipline aimed at helping destinations to recover from trauma and risky situations: post disaster marketing.

Preliminary Discussion

This short note of reflection places the problem of terrorism and risk perception into the foreground in order for expanding the current understanding to date. As Svein Larsen (2007) puts it, one of the problems of tourism industry seems to be its ephemeral nature, which is very sensitive to bad news, as well as the volatility of subjective experiences. Though in recent years, tourism-related research focused on the role of risk and communication as the precondition to the survival of destinations, no less true is that there is a dissociation between risks, which are cognitively adjusted to what people think and emotionality, which encourages or discourages the visit to a certain destination (Larsen, Brun, & Ogaard, 2009; Larsen, Ogaard, & Brun, 2011). In this respect, in earlier approaches Korstanje (2009) have enumerated some critiques to risk perception theory, which –per his viewpoint- lacks of robust methodological platform. At a first glimpse, risk perception studies are prone to obtain further information as to how tourists see the world, but instead of delving into qualitative and ethnographical instruments, which oscillates from the story-life to ethnography, they explore naively how risk are individually or collectively perceived and the correlation with demographic assets. To put this in bluntly, many of these researches indicate that females perceive further risks than males. At a preliminary

view one might speculate that risk perception correlates directly with genre but this rests on shaky foundations. However a closer approach would suggest that females are educated to protect their offspring or families while males are often repressing their feelings. The archetype of masculinity never accepts fear as a valid option (Zinn, 2010).

A second point which is important to discuss associates to how the samples are formed and the information gathered. These approaches are based on the efforts of pre or post graduate students who are happy to make field-working but are complacent with their professors -sometimes even tergiversating information without further control-. In addition, these types of studies over-valorise the Western mainstream values for example as democracy and security as the best of possible worlds. This leads them to assume incorrect diagnosis or hypotheses, which cannot be validated in the fieldwork. Ethnocentrism, in this vein, plays a leading role making people to believe the own cultural values are the best we may grasp, no matter the culture or the time. As a result of this, there are serious risks to oversimplify the issue or simply closing the borders to the presence of the alterity. Korstanje and Olsen (2011), who have reviewed in depth some modern horror movies, found that terrorism opened the doors not only to a hierarchy of risks and dangers posed over tourism industry, but also paved the ways for the rise of a new Anglo-centrism, which portrays tourists coming from English Speaking Nations are easily targeted from terrorists because their exemplary values. At the same time, those nations which do not meet the cultural criterion of West are drawn as dangerous, or as a cradle of criminals and psychopaths. Besides, risk research is oriented to protect tourist destinations expanding programs and protocols under the auspices of the correct step, instead of understanding the roots of the phenomenon. Basically, this leads to economic-centred positions and theories which are prone to identify and eliminate those risks which may place the industry in jeopardy. Though this clearly represents a good point for policy makers, often they are far from understanding the complexity of risks. As Niklas Luhmann (1990) noted, risk should be differentiated from dangers, in as much as risk sounds different from disasters. While risks are often enrooted in a not so-distant future or at the best they are activated by a previous decision-making process, dangers take hit suddenly leaving victims defenceless. For the sake of clarity, risks operate within the spectre of contingency, which means the possibilities for decision-makers to avoid their aftermaths. Instead, disasters are externally-imposed to victims without any possibilities of prevention or caution. As this argument is given, an

airplane crash is a serious danger for passengers, while it is a risk for share-owners who are able to make decisions to lower the costs per flight.

Populism and Precautionary Principle

Many of risk perception works are erroneously based on the precautionary principle, which was widely criticized by Cass Sunstein (2005) in his book *The Laws of Fear*, which explores the reasons why people are frightening respecting to some events while others are overlooked. From a sociological point of view, he starts from the premise that deliberative democracy plays a leading role allowing further participations among agents to find clearer solutions to certain risks than dictatorships. It is vital to separate democracy from demagogue populism. While democracies give the citizens the necessary instrument to rationalize and consequently to mitigate the disaster, the latter creates further spaces of vulnerabilities and unpreparedness. The precautionary principle, which was enthusiastically embraced by Europe, leads to distortions in the ways risks are evaluated as well as populist demands which never can be met by state. Because the Principe of precaution gives entity to those risks which originally it fostered to fight, as Sunstein adds, risks should be analytically and rationally-studied by the net of experts to obtain an accurate diagnosis (Sunstein, 2005). Raoul Bianchi and colleagues called the attention to the advance of globalization as the precondition for the emergence of geographies of fear, which are reinforced by an ethnocentric view of the otherness. As Bianchi writes, the globalization of risk not only triggers climate of political instability in the third world, but also legitimates some disciplinary mechanism aimed at subordinating the local Other. While millions of Westerners are legally encouraged to travel abroad, non-westerners travellers are closely-scrutinized at borderlands and at airports as never before (Bianchi, 2006; Bianchi & Stephenson, 2013; Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014). The aesthetics of postmodernity adjoined to global consumption not only contributed to the commoditization of peoples, cultures and landscapes, as goods to be globally exchanged under the logic of sign but unilaterally divided the world in *domesticated spots and wild-life zones* (Lash & Urry, 1993). For some reason tourism and terrorism seems to be inextricably intertwined (Korstanje & Clayton, 2012).

CONCLUSION

For all these caveats and problems described in earlier sections, risk perception theory not only sets the pace to new conceptual corpuses as dark tourism, Thana tourism, disaster tourism or post-disaster marketing (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Cohen, 2011; White & Frew, 2013; Korstanje, 2016). What all these new disciplines have in common appears to be the needs of escaping to precautionary laws to work to mitigate the effects of disasters just upon concretion. It is not important to prevent disasters, simply because they are unpredictable, lest working on affected community to accelerate the timeframe of recovery (Ladkin, Fyall, Fletcher, & Shipway, 2008; Seraphin, Ambaye, Gowreesunkar, Bonnardel, 2016; Seraphin, Butcher, & Korstanje, 2017; Walters & Mair, 2012). In this token, the term resiliency, which originally was formulated by Victor Frankl, starts to be applied in tourism post disaster literature. This involves not only spaces obliterated by disasters, but spaces whipped by terrorism and other traumatic events. Some critical voices emphasized on the needs of coordinating efforts for all involved stakeholders to participate in the negotiation of the message, these types of places offer (Korstanje, 2016; Tzanelli, 2016). Particularly, politicians and officialdom devote their time to elaborate a biased explanation of facts, which helps to protect their status quo. Since this facilitates things towards the commoditization of disasters, serious risks the same event repeats turn higher (Korstanje, 2016). Lastly, as a new emerging sub-discipline of tourism research, which has captivated the attention of academy, post disaster marketing exhibits the failure of risk perception to understand the intersection of risk and complexity in an ever-changing World, where the borders between reasons and effects have been blurred.

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