



Research note

Assemblage theory in tourism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 October 2022

Received in revised form 10 March 2023

Accepted 16 March 2023

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Consumer culture

Tourist experience

Ontology

Destinations

Materiality

The boundaries between human and nonhuman entities, subjects and objects, individuals and technologies are increasingly characterized by fuzziness, requiring alternative examination approaches (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). To capture this complexity, social scientists have used non-representational theories (Thrift, 2008). Relational ontologies, such as assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), have gained acceptance for their ability to interpret space and agency in entities formed by humans and non-humans. Sharing the same ontological perspective, these two theories are also significant for the emphasis on the lack of social order (Law, 1994).

This study focuses on DeLanda's (2016) assemblage thinking for its potential: (a) to contribute to a better understanding of tourism production and consumption, and (b) to uncover the agentic value of non-human entities in participating to the construction of tourism experiences. Indeed, assemblage theory can assist in interpreting the intertwined relationships between human and non-human elements and assessing their influence on consumers' experience. This study advocates for a deeper understanding of Assemblage Theory, calls for applications to tourism and proposes avenues for future research.

Assemblage theory

Assemblage theory is a theory of social complexity stemming from the neorealist school of philosophy that uses a non-human-centric comprehensive approach to interpret reality; it is flexible, open-ended and has a non-systemic approach to relationships. Assemblage derives from the French word "agencement", giving emphasis to combinations and connections rather than to components (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), it denotes the creation of an agency and posits that the entirety – a combination of heterogeneous components – offers greater value than the sum of the elements (DeLanda, 2016). Assemblage theory is rooted in the Deleuze-Guattarian philosophy; assembled identities are tentative, as processes arranged into temporary stable states can neither persist nor be repeated. Deleuze posited that the whole assemblage is not reducible to its parts and Guattari

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introduced the interpretation of collected agencies (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Subsequently, DeLanda (2006) developed a set of instruments to interpret the complex and changing interrelations among various elements of the social world (i.e., parts-to-whole relationships). Based on creative realism, DeLanda's approach reinterpreted Deleuze and Guattari's ideas and facilitated assemblage theory's applicability to an understanding of social phenomena.

The cornerstones of assemblage theory are: flat ontology, components, properties and capacities, and the spatio-temporal dimensions (DeLanda, 2006; Lury, 2009). The flat ontology implies a nonhuman centric approach that considers all socially relevant entities (humans, organizations, ideas) and processes on the same ontological level. This allows considering the agency of non-human components as equally relevant. An assemblage is defined as "a whole that does not totalize its parts" (DeLanda, 2016, p. 11). Components that constitute an assemblage maintain their identity and can be part of multiple assemblages at varying scales. Humans, ideas, and objects are all components that hold the same ontological weight irrespective of their origin and nature. Assemblages can operate on different scales and can interact with each other; thus, each assemblage can become part of larger assemblages (DeLanda, 2006, 2016). Assemblages are individual entities, historically unique, and their ontological status is equal. In assemblages, entities -human and nonhuman- are autonomous and their ontological status allows for endless combinations, disentanglements, and re-compositions; in the Deleuzian's view *an endless becoming*.

Assemblages emerge from the interaction of components - human and non-human heterogeneous elements - that are linked to an assemblage but are not fixed. These elements have an independent identity, and exist outside the assemblage, thus might be parts of other assemblages at varying scales, remaining all at the same ontological level. Properties specify the essence of an assemblage and are "measurable characteristics" of assemblages (Hoffman & Novak, 2018, p. 1184). Capacities are the possibilities to act that a component activates once interacting with other components or assemblages (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Capacities define the way the components of an assemblage interact and enable or constrain the scope of actions of those components (DeLanda, 2016; Hoffman & Novak, 2018). The spatio-temporal dimension is related to the ability of assemblages to produce value (Lury, 2009), which is created in relation to the difference that emerges in space and time. Assemblages can emerge accidentally, contingently and contextually. Assemblage thinking helps to describe and explain non-human elements of experiences, and can bridge two levels of analysis: the macro-social frameworks and the individuals' lived experiences (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). The key tenets of assemblage theory applied to experiences allow conceptualizing the way consumers configure, conceive and experience various elements as belonging to contingent and progressive processes of creation (Harman, 2008).

Assembling tourism?

Past research

Assemblage theory has been broadly used in a range of disciplines germane to tourism studies (e.g.: philosophy, sociology, geography) as a framework to study social complexity. Tourism scholars have recently applied the theory with varying degrees of rigor and depth to different aspects of the phenomena. Destinations can be conceptualized as assemblages resulting from multiplicities of practices that enable assemblages and dis-assemblages available for tourism consumption (Briassoulis, 2016), therefore a dynamic destination management that adapts and evolves according to the time-spatial settings is needed. Assemblage thinking facilitates the examination of activities at destinations that entail complex and contradictory relationships among discourses, places and policies (Burrai, Mostafanezhad, & Hannam, 2017).

Tourists' experiences are also studied as assemblages. Wilson, Chambers, and Johnson (2019) explore the embodied sound experiences of tourists traveling by campervan; through a metaphorical analysis, a fluid relationship between humans and non-humans emerges. Whereas Rhoden and Kaaristo (2020) offer insights on experience with water, noticing how the unpredictability of fluid assemblages contributes to tourists' enthusiasm. The agentic mobility of water emerges and facilitates tourism practice, reinforcing the relevance of non-human actors. The role of non-human elements is also examined in the context of vacation planning; technological objects can develop their own agency in interacting with tourists when configuring alternatives and making choices; smart devices and tourists have the capacity to affect or be affected during their interaction (Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Mura, Sthapit, & Campo, 2022).

Future research

Assemblage theory offers potential to study tourism consumption and production. Since tourism can be conceived as an agentic assemblage, consisting of heterogeneous components with varying capacities, assemblage theory provides infinite possibilities to unpack the elements that constitute tourism phenomena. Thanks to its flat ontology, the theory can enable tourism researchers to deploy alternative configurations of reality in which tourists and businesses are not at the center of gravity. Rather the emphasis is on hybrid arrangements consisting of diverse human and non-human elements linked together in assemblages of different scale and type that can assume varying levels of liminality. This calls for a greater scholarly awareness of the properties and capacities of the various components (humans, ideas, things).

Tourism destinations are ideal "settings" to apply assemblage theory because of their multiplicity of entities, their varying spatio-temporal dynamics, and their evolving character. Tourism assemblages are not rigid, but rather represent fluid entities that are constantly manifesting, dissolving, and reassembling. Components disappear, are replaced, and added, yet assemblages retain their identity. Thus, scholars can examine how tourism entities such as destinations, brands, and tourism organizations maintain their identity while their components mutate. Hence, empirical research can observe the dynamics of stabilization and destabilization of tourism assemblages. Additionally, the spatio-temporal aspect shows the relevance of different scales at

which assemblages operate (DeLanda, 2016). The relative processual and nonlinear relationalities of assemblages make their identity unique and, therefore, tourism scholars should pay attention to the processes that sustain assemblage identity through space and time. Tourism research can also benefit from exploring the agency that emerges or is constrained through the interaction of components of tourism assemblages. This suggests that agency in tourism is distributed and ought to be studied as intertwined and fluid, as it derives from numerous and dynamic combinations, rather than from human subjects.

In an assemblage perspective, tourism experiences are made not only by the idiosyncratic capacities of individuals and tourism stakeholders, but also by those other non-human and human components outside the immediate spatio-temporal destination setting. As such, tourism experiences represent a relational space - with no fixed coordinates - of relations of diverse components assembled for, and by, tourists. Research can focus on capacities of individuals and other elements - discourses and technologies - and how these non-material components unite with tourists and affect their experiences. Additionally, since each tourism experience is an idiosyncratic assemblage, researchers can rightfully focus on individual experiences rather than analyzing the ideal reified general experience. Borrowing from consumer research (Hoffman & Novak, 2018), tourism scholars could explore: a) the different tourists' experiential responses to interactions with assemblages that involve non-human components; b) the interpretation and value of objects' secret life; and c) the significance of repeated experiences with assemblages.

Value is distributed in time and space and manifests itself in a distinct configuration of subjects, objects, and discourses. By means of assemblage theory, scholars can investigate how tourists, material, discursive and situative configurations produce valuable experiences. Indeed, assemblage thinking provides "a radically relational and contextual determination of value" (Lury, 2009, p. 79). Therefore, scholars can investigate: How are tourism assemblages formed? How does tourism value emerge as result of assemblages? How do humans, discourses, practices and technologies align or misalign in tourism? How do tourism entities cope with assemblages that generate continuous disruptions for tourism agents, territories, policies, and practices? That is, what are the repercussions of problematic and negative assemblages? How do tourists deal with the flat ontology? What are the implications for their experience, and for "object experience" (Hoffman & Novak, 2018)? How are the multiplicities of assemblages and their spatio-temporal ephemerality interpreted in tourism? How are tourism experience assemblages entrenched in wider socio-material systems?

Finally, assemblage thinking also requires alternative and multi-method research strategies. Tourism scholars should experiment more with metaphor-based research, atmospheric methods, enactivism, visual methods, and psycholinguistic analysis. Non-representational methodologies (Vannini, 2015) can help capture empirically the vitality typical of non-representational theories, thus can assist in solving some of the theoretical challenges that assemblage theory poses (e.g. the understanding of assemblage as a process, in time and with its repetitions), and in widening the study of various tourism-relevant entities (e.g. relations, practices, performances, affects).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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