

THE SOCIAL DILEMMA OF BERLIN'S BOOMING TOURISM INDUSTRY

April 9, 2016 by Asaf Leshem



By Asaf Leshem (<http://socialscienceworks.org/about-2/associates/>)

As an urban tourism destination, Berlin developed rapidly since German reunification in October 1990. Its unique character, fascinating history, and low prices (compared to other over developed European urban destinations) made it attractive to many people from around the world. In a city suffering from a chronic financial deficit, and years of conditions unfit for investment, tourism suddenly seemed as the knight in shining armour, coming home to reclaim its land and save his damsel in distress. Alongside much needed investment in various parts of the city, the Berlin senate started making room for investment in tourism and the doors opened wide.

For many residents, tourism brought with it economic activities and financial opportunities. For many others, however, the correlation between the city's improvements in infrastructure and cultural activities, were and remain, unclear. Losing its naïve, alternative, almost town-like feeling is arguably a process that reached its maturation some ten years ago. However, in the ten years that went by, the typical negative impacts of urban tourism grew. These are things like infrastructure disabling construction (notably on Unter den Linden and other central areas), noise pollution in certain neighbourhoods, housing prices soaring creating the phenomenon of gentrification, pickpocketing (reaching staggering numbers of a 100 per day on average in 2015), and crowded streets and pavements.

berlin.de/de/zahlen-und-fakten) finds annual growth of 8.5% in overnight stays in such growth, comparable to few, if any, urban destinations in the world right now, one planning and management of tourism could ever maintain the pace of growth and ease of the negative impacts tourism has had.



The bad of tourism intertwined

and tourism are somewhat separated. If there are negative impacts of tourism, they positive impacts they tend to also manifest in a spill over effect to other parts of the city construction, catering, food manufacturing, and many other tourism supporting sectors. tion does not exist. Furthermore, Berlin is a large city with a relatively diverse

occupations and activities, which is exactly what makes it challenging to examine tourism separately from the lives of residents in the same urban space. In addition to that, and in spite of some improvements, the federal state of Berlin is still running a budget deficit of billions, putting the pressure on decision makers to do whatever it can to help tourism grow as quickly as possible. What are the positives from tourism then? Several hundreds of thousands of Berlin's residents call themselves artists. They are on the one hand aware of the challenges involved in attempting to stand out in a huge forest of wonderful offers: to be chosen by selective tourists and residents. On the other hand, artists have access to a lot of projects, funding for art, and opportunities to collaborate with other talented people. No doubt, having so many visitors in the city also means more people spending money on art and more funding for art in its various forms, providing residents, too, a richer cultural life.

One cannot deny that the tourism industry also brought along with it a successful construction sector. It is in fact so big that some of us have started bitterly joking that the motto of the city should really be 'Berlin: a construction site since 1451!' (<http://stigsguides.com/books/Berlin.pdf>) (in reference to the year building began on the city palace of the Hohenzollerns (<https://berlindividedcity.wordpress.com/2013/03/14/the-stadtschloss-the-royal-palace/>), a new version of which is once again under construction...).

And of course even if one decides to refer to tourism industry in its narrow sense, leaving art and construction out, Berlin is still a major employer of several hundreds of thousands working in hotels, transportation, airports, tour guiding, service staff and others; all directly benefiting from tourism.

For those of us who often walk or drive (or cycle!) in the city centre the investment in tourism is widely evident. Unter den Linden, for example, the city's historical street, has been under construction for years. Driving through it, is a traffic nightmare, which seems to not only improve but in fact deteriorate every year, as the tourist season peaks in July with close to two million tourists visiting, many of whom are in tour buses in an attempt to 'check' all the historical sites located in the vicinity of the central borough of Mitte. To further exacerbate the problem, Mitte, is also the home for many businesses, residential areas, the city campus of Humboldt University and many other academic institutes. The relatively cold climate of the region also means that major construction is mainly done in the tourism high season, adding to congestion in the city's major roads. The negative outcomes are sadly unmistakable, with many residents of Berlin developing anti-tourist sentiment. This antagonism has increased to the level of a phenomenon, where tour guides leading tourists in central areas often report that people come across from them, walk through the group intentionally bumping into tourists; sometimes blurring a swear word for the tourists who block 'their' pavement. The feeling that 'my city is no longer mine, I can no longer even walk in my own street' is widely spread. Nana Rebhan's documentary *Welcome Goodbye* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkCBrKXo41A>) from 2012 is another indication of the growing feelings of dismay made by residents of the city. Whereas a few of the protagonists in the film point out to real commonly known negative impacts of tourism, others appear borderline xenophobic.



(http://socialscienceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/berlin-1079616_960_720.jpg)

A social science approach

So what is to be done about this creeping xenophobic sentiment? A more academic approach to the topic was given to us by Sybille Frank (<http://skuor.tuwien.ac.at/en/professors/covvps/sybille-frank>) of the Technical University of Berlin, who in 2008 wrote a book about the tourism development of the famous (or infamous) Check Point Charlie. Frank analysed the very many problems linked to this nowadays-tourist attraction. Frank's book, *Der Mauer um die Wetter gedenken*, and other sources, point out two major issues with Check Point Charlie: for one, the authenticity of the site was lost completely, resulting in a phenomenon of 'Disneyfication' – an insult to those Berliners whose history is presented like a cultural product to be purchased on the shelves of a cheap Primark branch. The second issue is one of the site's location in the middle of an important traffic infrastructure, for Berliners to use on the way to work. The combination of the two not only makes a lot of Berliners angry, but makes the junction quite dangerous for tourists and local cyclists.

Perhaps one of the challenges in achieving such goals is that one cannot group all residents of a large city together as one homogenous group. Richard Sharpley (https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Tourism_Development_and_the_Environment.html?id=SDN-mIx571oC&redir_esc=y), analysed the different groups in any given destination according to their contact with tourists and whether or not they gain from tourism activities. Adapting a research by Krippendorf (1987, in Sharpley 2014) he proposes four types of residents, and therefore, the potential for at least four types of resident perceptions:

- 1) Those in direct business contact with tourists;
- 2) Those in irregular contact;
- 3) Those in regular contact, but only partially deriving their income from tourism; and
- 4) Those with no contact with tourism.

Berliners, new and old, could be divided into these groups. And, clearly, the last group is the one mostly to suffer from tourism's negative impacts, and on the other hand, see no direct gain from all the money pouring in. So can they all be made happy with the current trend of growth in visitor numbers and what it brings with it?

What can social science and social scientists do to help? Gathering specific knowledge is what social science does best. Social scientists are often familiar with positive examples from around the world.

Firstly, creating an open web platform for tourism professionals, who live and work in the 'tourism zone', to enable them to function as mediators between the tourists and residents. Although always busy, these are the people who come in contact with both tourists and residents, can therefore be the real collectors of knowledge. They can also benefit themselves from a positive change in resident behaviour, and from the potential to transform tourists to be more responsible guests.

Secondly, learning and applying the experience other large European destinations have had. Examples include London, Paris, Rome, and Barcelona. Berlin stands alone in Germany because of its size and the pluralistic multi faced nature of its attractiveness. It therefore cannot learn from the experience of other cities in Germany, rather, it has to learn from the examples above. These, are significantly older than Berlin as tourist destinations, and have suffered various levels of negative impacts. It can be argued that they have gone through more than one tourism destination life cycle, and are therefore more equipped to deal with such negative impacts.

Finally, and I may not be very original here, but I would strongly support a lot more investment in open and transparent tourism research, which will allow a diversity of Berlin specific tourism research; with an attentive ear to both Berlin's residents and its guests. With 14 million visitors, 205 museums, more than 500 galleries and hundreds of hotels, I often wonder why the best tourism faculties and departments in Germany are not here in the capital?

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