

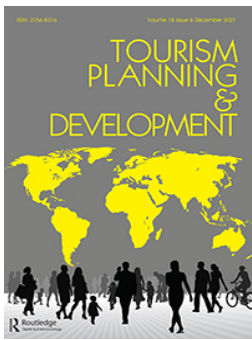
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# Tourism and Development Theory: Which Way Now?

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism has long been explored through the lens of development theory. David Harrison was one of the earlier academics to do so, subsequently turning his attention to critiquing the relevance of such theory to tourism, concluding that although much tourism research has been framed within it, development theory has contributed little if anything to knowledge and understanding of the tourism-development nexus. Recognising David Harrison's contribution to the field, this paper reviews his critique of development theory as related to tourism before going on to suggest that the increasingly popular notion of degrowth offers an alternative conceptual lens through which tourism and development may be viewed. More specifically, it argues that within the context of the global environmental crisis and the need to address growth-inspired excessive production and consumption, degrowth can be considered a viable approach to or theory of development that demands attention in the context of tourism.

## KEYWORDS

Development theory;  
modernisation theory;  
dependency theory;  
environmental crisis;  
degrowth

## Introduction

In a recently published book, not uncoincidentally written during the height of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, Tim Jackson (2021) imagines a post-capitalistic world in which, as the cover blurb puts it, “relationship and meaning take precedence over profits and power”. More specifically, he argues powerfully and convincingly that prosperity and well-being are to be found not in consumerism and the accumulation of wealth but in the achievement of health, not only physiological but also psychological, social, spiritual and sexual health. In other words, he suggests that in its long and relentless adherence to the (increasingly discredited) policy of economic growth, “society has taken a profoundly wrong turn in its pursuit of prosperity” (Jackson, 2021, p. 63; also Jackson, 2016).

Such arguments are not of course new. The Club of Rome's report half a century ago called for “limits to growth” (Meadows et al., 1972) whilst, during the same period, Herman Daly was developing his vision of the steady state (i.e. no growth) economy (Daly, 1974a, 1974b) and Schumacher (1974) was famously espousing his idea that “small is beautiful”. Moreover, it is also in the late 1970s that the roots of the concept

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of so-called degrowth can be found (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). However, with increasing acknowledgement of the global environmental crisis (Attenborough, 2020), what were perhaps once considered niche, radical and unworkable proposals, competing at that time with an ascendent global neo-liberal paradigm, have gained greater traction (Hickel, 2020) both in academia (see degrowth.org) and more generally with numerous publications exploring the arguments for a shift away from growth-based economic policies. Though varying in approach—Mackinnon (2021), for example, argues that the solution lies in consumers stopping or, more precisely, reducing and adapting their shopping habits, whilst others call for a more fundamental restructuring of the global political-economy (Kallis et al., 2020)—the majority of these publications emphasise two key themes: first, that continuing global economic growth is not only environmentally unsustainable but also exacerbates the socio-economic challenges it allegedly addresses; and second, that the adoption of meaningful lifestyles based on the principle of “enoughness” rather than “more”, along with a commensurate reduction in consumption (and production), may enhance people’s wellbeing within the planet’s environmental limits.

In essence, this proposed rejection of growth-based economics and lifestyles is, if not a new paradigm, then a new approach to development; although the fundamental driving force is environmental sustainability, its explicit objective is greater prosperity (as envisaged by Tim Jackson) for all. The same can of course be said for the concept of sustainable development, but a distinction lies in the rejection of economic growth which, contradictorily, remains a fundamental tenet of sustainable development (Adelman, 2017). And if indeed the notion of degrowth can be thought of as a new approach to development, then the question inevitably arises: what are the implications particularly for tourism, an increasingly ubiquitous contributor to contemporary growth-based economic development that has long been considered within the conceptual framework of development theory (Telfer, 2015)?

In order to address this question, and in the spirit of this commemorative special issue, this short essay builds on David Harrison’s work on tourism and development theory. Though others had previously explored the role of tourism in development, primarily in the Caribbean (Britton, 1982; Bryden, 1973; Pérez, 1975), David was of the first to apply development theory more broadly to tourism (Harrison, 1992; see also Brohman, 1996; Opperman & Chon, 1997). His academic roots lay in development studies and his first published academic text was *The Sociology of Modernisation and Development* (Harrison, 1988); it was this disciplinary background that enabled him to cast a critical and informed eye on a variety of perspectives on tourism’s potential developmental contribution. In his later work, he begins to question the relevance of development theory to tourism (Harrison, 2014, 2015), perhaps reflecting concerns with regards to development studies more generally (Payne & Phillips, 2010). He argues that, as a global socio-economic phenomenon that, in his view (in a pre-pandemic era), will continue on a mass scale and “be promoted through *some form or another* of capitalism” (Harrison, 2015, p. 66, emphasis in original), tourism should be considered not from a “development” but a globalisation theoretical perspective that embraces global political-economic influences on tourism’s trajectory (see also Harrison, 2007).

This essay sets out to counter this argument. More specifically, it suggests that it is no longer tenable to accept unquestioningly the inevitability of capitalism and economic growth as the driving force behind tourism (and, by implication, other economic

sectors), and that it is necessary to rethink tourism within the emerging concept of degrowth. As such, though acknowledging David's observation that "there is a continued need for theoretically informed perspectives on tourism's relationship to development" (Harrison, 2014, p. 149), it does not set out to propose a new approach to the development of tourism; rather, it seeks to stimulate further debate by locating tourism within an approach to (or theory of) development that is attracting greater attention and support as the environmental crisis become more acute. In order to do so, it is first necessary to review briefly the contribution of development theory to the understanding of tourism as critically explored in David's work.

## **Understanding tourism development: from modernisation to globalisation**

Although the foundations of contemporary mass-scale tourism are commonly traced back to the evolution of cheap rail travel in the mid-nineteenth century, it was only in the 1950s that, with the advent of charter flights, international tourism in particular both literally and metaphorically took off. This era is also identified by many as the beginning of the age of development. In 1949, US President Truman made a speech in which he referred to "underdeveloped areas" and the duty of the West to support them (Potter et al., 2018, p. 8); consequently, "development" became established as a global project led by Western institutions and ideology in an emerging post-colonial world (Rist, 2014). It is not surprising, therefore, that tourism soon became considered by countries, development agencies and, subsequently the World Tourism Organisation as an important player in this project.

In the decades that followed, the perhaps naïve enthusiasm with which development was pursued in general under the auspices of the World Bank and other agencies and, indeed, through tourism in particular—what Jafari (1989) refers to as the advocacy stage of tourism development—became tempered. With regards to tourism, questions were soon raised regarding the extent to which it represented a "passport to development" (de Kadt, 1979) with many commentators, establishing a trend that was to intensify, identifying the negative economic, socio-cultural and environmental costs of tourism. To this day, addressing the "tourism-development dilemma" (Telfer & Sharpley, 2016)—that is, balancing the benefits and costs of tourism—remains a challenge not only for destinations but also, as noted later in this essay, more widely in the context of climate change.

Development too, both as a global ambition and in terms of its underpinning theories, has followed something of a tortuous path, not least because definitions of what development "is" have proved to be both elusive and dynamic. Whereas it was once (and briefly) considered synonymous with the tangible metric of economic growth (defined as an increase in per capita GDP), development has come to be viewed in more nebulous terms of individual well-being, prosperity or, as observed above, "health" (Jackson, 2021), albeit dependent upon a sufficient level of wealth. Consequently, how development might be achieved has become more problematic although certainly it is acknowledged that, globally, development (at least, as envisaged by Western development models and objectives) has not been achieved, as the so-called post-development school is quick to point out (Escobar, 2007; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997; Sidaway, 2007). For example, poverty (both absolute and relative) remains endemic and its measurement increasingly criticised

whilst inequality, identified long ago by Seers (1969) as fundamental evidence of underdevelopment, is increasing both within and between countries (UNDP, 2019), ironically as an outcome of economic growth policies (Hickel, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

Relatedly, not only have the two dominant and, arguably, only paradigms of development, namely, modernisation theory and underdevelopment / dependency theory, found to be lacking—by the 1980s, “*both* were increasingly found to be empirically invalid, theoretically inadequate and politically ineffective” (Harrison, 2015)—but also development theory more generally had by that time reached something of an impasse (Schuurman, 1994; Telfer, 2015). New approaches to development were to subsequently emerge, notably the unsuccessful neoliberal-influenced restructuring policies of the Reagan / Thatcher era of the 1980s, the concept of alternative development and, of course, sustainable development which attempts to chart a contradictory course through the competing demands of environmental sustainability, economic growth and specific and laudable, though nonetheless criticised (Bianchi & de Man, 2021) objectives most recently set out in the UN’s well-known Sustainable Development Goals (UN, n.d.). Importantly, however, these “certainly do not qualify as development theories, far less paradigms” (Harrison, 2015, p. 59).

The controversies and debates surrounding development, its objectives, processes, successes and failures and, indeed, its underpinning theories, are explored at length in the literature (see Potter et al., 2018). The point that David Harrison (2014, 2015) makes in his critical summaries, however, is that attempts to theorise development have failed; although “We have not (yet) experienced the death of theory ... its advocates are now more modest and their claims reduced” (Harrison, 2014, p. 146) and development is now more commonly assessed through empirical research. This conclusion consequently leads him to ask: “what has theory ever done for us?” (Harrison, 2015); putting it another way, given that tourism has long been explicitly employed as a tool for development, to what extent has development theory, such as it is, informed our understanding of and policy-making for tourism? The answer: not a lot.

This is not to say that the study of tourism has not been located within a development studies context. As already noted, in the introductory chapter to an early edited text (Harrison, 1992), David includes a section that reviews modernisation and development through the lens of both modernisation theory and underdevelopment theory. He justifies this “highly theoretical diversion” on the basis that it “indicates the changing framework within which all development strategies, including tourism, have been formulated over the last fifty years” (Harrison, 1992, p. 10). Going on to refer to the Philippine island of Boracay which had experienced rapid tourism development from the 1980s, he acknowledges that the island and its inhabitants were undoubtedly being “modernised” according to the tenets of modernisation theory but goes on to ask rhetorically: was this “development”? (p. 11). Interestingly, that question was perhaps answered in 2018 when President Rodrigo Duterte ordered the six-month closure of the island for its environmental rehabilitation from excessive tourism development, though with inevitable economic costs (Reyes et al., 2018). Others have since framed the study of tourism and development in general in development theory (for example, Mowforth & Munt, 2016; Sharpley & Telfer, 2015) whilst, of particular relevance to this essay, Andriotis (2018) provides a review of development theory as background to what he describes,

rather oddly, as “a young and still emerging paradigm in the field of tourism” (p.53), namely degrowth.

However, “little academic writing on tourism has explicitly used a modernisation perspective” (Harrison, 2015, p. 61). In other words, with the exception of a small number of studies that relate tourism development in specific island contexts to modernisation theory, such as Crete (Andriotis, 2003), the Pacific islands (MacNaught, 1982) and Cyprus (Sharpley, 2003), tourism research that is explicitly informed by modernisation theory is rare. Rather, modernisation theory more frequently offers an implicit perspective in discussions focusing on or related to the consequences of tourism development, such as commodification and challenges to authenticity or social change resulting from tourism, but does not inform critiques of such consequences. More notably, perhaps, modernisation theory or, more precisely, the policy mechanisms designed to support or promote modernisation, are implicit in many tourism development policies; “a modernisation orientation is also the default mode of thinking for policy-makers throughout the world, even if most are unaware of the quasi-theoretical base on which rests their advocacy of tourism as a means of obtaining foreign investment, economic growth, foreign exchange and tourism employment” (Harrison, 2015, p. 61). More simply stated, national tourism policies predominantly focus on increasing tourist numbers to underpin economic growth (Torkington et al., 2020) whilst, as Telfer (2015) observes, international development agencies’ support for and funding of tourism follows a distinctive neoliberal modernisation agenda. In short, much tourism development worldwide remains driven by an underlying modernisation agenda.

In contrast, the explicit application of underdevelopment / dependency theory has been much more evident in tourism studies. This is explored in some detail in David’s writing (Harrison, 2015) and a fuller review is not possible here. Essentially, however, the underdevelopment /dependency position is adopted by those who seek to critique or, more precisely, criticise tourism’s role in development. Following the basic argument espoused by dependency theorists (e.g.: Frank, 1966; Wallerstein, 1979) that, within the global political economic system, a condition of underdevelopment is not intrinsic to a particular society or country (as proposed by modernisation theory), but reflects internal and external political, economic and institutional structures that hold them in a dependent position relative to wealthier developed countries, they suggest that within the international tourism system, developing countries are unequal partners. They are susceptible not only to the power of transnational organisations based in the metropolitan centre, whether hotel companies, tour operators or airlines, but also to exploitation through profit repatriation or leakages associated with the import of goods and services necessary to support the tourism sector that cannot be produced locally.

Many attempts have been made to apply dependency theory to tourism (summarised by Telfer, 2015). By definition, these typically focus on developing nation destinations and typically seek to highlight power imbalances in the tourism system that result in the benefits of tourism development accruing primarily to transnational tourism organisations and local élites. Probably the most cited work in this regard is that of Britton (1982, 1987) who, exploring tourism development primarily in the South Pacific, provided the foundation for numerous other such studies, though some also expanded the concept of dependency into the cultural realm (for example, Erisman, 1983). However, not only is the dependency thesis unable to explain why some counties are nevertheless able to

achieve economic and social development but also, as David Harrison (2015) observes, its antagonism towards foreign capital ignores those situations in which such capital has underpinned the successful development of tourism and, interestingly in the arguably unique case of Cuba, not enhanced any sense of dependency (Sharpley & Knight, 2009). Moreover, reliance on foreign capital, knowledge and technology remains a necessity for many countries which simply lack the resources to develop the tourism (or any other) sector. Hence, dependency theory, other than being “adopted by groups and movements opposed, in particular, to mass tourism” (Harrison, 2015, p. 63) has made little if any contribution to understanding of tourism development processes, whether in theory or practice.

As noted above, although modernisation theory and dependency can be considered the only two “true” development paradigms—neither the so-called neoclassical counter-revolution nor, subsequently, alternative development offered a theory of “development” but, rather, a framework for economic restructuring and a set of micro policies in opposition to top-down grand theories respectively, whilst sustainable development remains a curious and controversial combination of specific goals located within the oxymoronic combination of environmental sustainability and economic growth—the latter two have long been promoted as approaches to tourism. Again, neither can be considered a theory of tourism (and) development. Alternative tourism, in its various guises, proposes small scale projects unified in their opposition to mass tourism and, hence, offers no perspective on development as, necessarily, a global objective whilst, as discussed elsewhere (Sharpley, 2020), sustainable tourism development is ambiguous and has proven to be unachievable in practice.

Drawing the arguments summarised in the preceding paragraphs together, David Harrison concludes that:

Modernisation theory, underdevelopment theory, neoliberalism ... along with environmentalism and sustainable development, have all been found wanting. They continue to co-exist ... but none dominate current development thinking, and for some time attention has been focused on lower level aims and objectives, for example, poverty alleviation, gender equality and basic needs. (Harrison, 2015, pp. 65–66)

He goes on to suggest that, consequently, none has taken root in tourism studies in particular though remain implicit in tourism development policy (modernisation theory) or critiques of capitalism-based mass tourism (underdevelopment theory). Yet, acknowledging that tourism studies—and tourism in practice—is typically located within a tourism-as-development framework, he argues that there continues to be a pressing need for a theoretically informed understanding of tourism’s relationship with development. Moreover, making two important observations, that: (i) in contrast to the traditional emphasis of development policies and processes on the developing world, tourism is utilised as a vehicle of development and regeneration in *all* countries of the world; and (ii) tourism globally is susceptible to a variety of political, economic, cultural and environmental influences (most recently and sadly demonstrated by the coronavirus pandemic), he proposes that globalisation theory offers the most appropriate theoretical foundation for considering the tourism-development relationship.

Significantly, however, not only is globalisation a contested concept (Munar, 2007)—not least given the increasing prevalence of nationalism on global politics (Bieber,



2018)—but also David bases his proposal on a number of key assumptions: (i) that tourism will remain a capitalistic endeavour for the foreseeable future; (ii) that large-scale (mass) tourism will remain the norm; (iii) that alternative forms of tourism will not replace but remain dependent on mass tourism; and (iv) international tourism should be seen as operating in an international and systematic way (Harrison, 2015). As the last section of this essay now argues, whilst these assumptions might be correct in a “business-as-usual” context, the increasing awareness that an alternative approach to growth-based economic development policies (of which tourism is a part) is vital to address the global environmental crisis suggests that degrowth, as an emerging theory of development, is an appropriate theoretical framework for informing understanding of tourism’s relationship with development.

### **Degrowth: a new theory for tourism and development?**

As observed in the introduction to this essay, the idea of limiting growth is not new. At the end of the eighteenth century, for example, Thomas Malthus famously expressed his concerns about the ability of an exponentially growing global population to survive in the face of what he saw as linear increases in food production. His arguments proved, of course, to be unfounded although the limits to growth school that emerged in the mid-twentieth century clearly reflected neo-Malthusian principles. More recently, however, the concept of degrowth has attracted increasing attention, primarily in response to growing opposition to the pervasive economic growth model that continues to inform national and international development policies (and, as noted above, tourism development policy in particular). Such opposition is, first, based on what has been referred to as the “growth delusion” (Pilling, 2018) or what Jackson (2021, pp. 1–16) describes as the “myth of [economic] growth”. Whilst globally it has undoubtedly facilitated development and social progress for many and brought affluence to some, the continuing promotion of economic growth is based on the widely contested belief that increases in wealth bring commensurate increases in individual well-being and (in the Aristotelian sense of *eudaimonia*) happiness. As Jackson (2021, p. 52) summarises, the myth of growth is based on the “suspicious assumption ... that money is a good proxy for happiness”. Not only has this assumption long been challenged, notably by the philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712–1778), but numerous contemporary studies have revealed this not to be the case; many developed countries have witnessed a “social recession” (Rutherford, 2008) manifested in, for example, greater inequality or increasing evidence of mental health issues that can be attributed directly to the pursuit of economic growth. In short and to paraphrase what many have observed, to measure development according to GDP is to measure the wrong thing.

Second, it is increasingly recognised that continuing economic growth or, more precisely, continuing growth in the production and consumption upon which economic growth depends is environmentally unsustainable. According to Liegey and Nelson (2020, p. 5), “we know that capitalist trade and production has increasingly outstripped [the Earth’s] regenerative capacity over the last 50 years”; more simply stated, we are living not with, but off the planet’s resources. The impacts of the excessive demands placed by humanity on the global ecosystem are arguably most acutely manifested in fossil fuel-induced climate change and global warming; at the time of writing, the

forthcoming CoP26 climate conference in Glasgow is considered by many to be “the world’s best last chance to get runaway climate change under control” (CoP26, [n.d.](#)). However, as pressing the need is to halt (and ideally reverse) the warming of the planet (the consequences of which have become increasingly apparent), the exploitation and loss of the Earth’s natural resources more generally are an equally important part of the environmental crisis equation. This loss is widely documented (see Attenborough, [2020](#) for a detailed, accessible account) and is starkly revealed in the work of the Global Footprint Network which annually assesses the ecological footprint of around 200 countries and territories. Currently, that footprint is calculated to be 170% greater than the Earth can provide for; globally we are using resources as if there were 1.7 Earths (Global Footprint Network, [2021](#)). But, access to and use of these resources is unequal; as MacKinnon ([2021](#), pp. 32–3) summarises, for the world’s population to live like the average American would require five planets and like the average European about 3.5 planets. For a sustainable future, the objective should be for all people to live a “one-planet lifestyle”.

To some, the solution to the environmental crisis lies in green or sustainable growth (e.g.: Jacobs, [2013](#)) which, in turn, is reliant on the technological fix of “decoupling” production from non-renewable resource exploitation. However, not only has it long been argued that “it is clear that growth of the economy cannot be [environmentally] sustainable over long periods of time. The term sustainable growth should be rejected as a bad oxymoron” (Daly, [1990](#), p. 1), but also that absolute decoupling (that is, maintaining growth whilst environmental pressures remain stable or decrease) is an unrealistic ambition (Ward et al., [2016](#)). Even the concept of net zero carbon emissions—developing technologies and offset policies to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere at the rate that it is emitted—has been discredited by climate scientists (Dyke et al., [2021](#)). To others, therefore, the solution lies in the adoption of the principles of degrowth.

Contrary to what the word suggests, degrowth is not about austerity or simply reducing production and consumption on a global scale, implicitly denying people the ability to have or achieve what (they believe) they need. As Liegey and Nelson ([2020](#), p. 3) explain, degrowth is seen as a means of:

establishing secure and safe lives, fulfilling everyone’s needs in collaborative and collective ways ... the degrowth principle of living within Earth’s regenerative limits in socially equitable and collectively supportive ways addresses both global and environmental crises.

Putting it another way, the concept of degrowth (or the perhaps the more palatable notion of postgrowth living) offers an approach to development that, at its foundation, demands a significant reduction in the throughput of the Earth’s natural resources—an overall reduction in production and consumption though maintaining growth in the world’s least developed societies to facilitate global equality. This be sought through one or more of a variety of processes and policies, from a softer reorientation of people’s values towards less materialistic, consumption-oriented or competitive and more meaningful, community-focused, slower lifestyles (requiring a deconstruction of what Liegey and Nelson ([2020](#)) refer to as the contemporary “growth imaginary”), through the development of social structures and forms of governance based on so-called “commoning”, to harder solutions such as the rejection of capitalism and the reform of political structures and processes on a global scale

Given this variety of perspectives, it may be ambitious or premature to label degrowth as a theory of development. Moreover, given that it directly challenges the received wisdom of economic growth, it is inevitably considered by some to be excessively radical, idealistic or simply unworkable (Foster, 2011). Nevertheless, it does offer an important and valid conceptual framework for considering the relationship between tourism and development, for the following reasons. First, the contemporary production and consumption of tourism is unarguably environmentally destructive; whilst much attention is paid to the relatively high contribution of air travel to carbon emissions, those from related activities such as agriculture and food production as well as the so-called embodied emissions (those associated with the entire lifecycle of a building from construction, through use to demolition) of tourism infrastructure suggests that the sector's overall contribution to global carbon emissions may well be in excess of the estimated 8% (Sustainable Travel International, 2020). Second, within the context of the global environmental crisis, further overall growth in the production and consumption of tourism (and, hence, that continuing mass-scale growth-induced tourism as envisaged by David Harrison) is untenable. This is not to say, however, that all destinations should seek to limit or degrow; opportunities exist for a more equitable sharing of the international tourism "cake", although the size of that cake must be reduced. Third, as a form of consumption, tourism appears to defy environmental awareness (Mkono & Hughes, 2020); it epitomises, perhaps, the materialistic, consumption-oriented lifestyles that lie at the root of the environmental and social crises that degrowth seeks to address. And fourth, from a developmental perspective, contemporary growth-based tourism policies feed inequalities, competition for local resources and other social challenges at the destination level. The principles of degrowth point to means of enhancing the prosperity and well-being of local communities through appropriate tourism development policies and the adoption of appropriate forms of tourism (Andriotis, 2018).

## Conclusion

As established in the introduction, the purpose of this short essay has not been to propose a new approach to fulfilling tourism's contribution to development or, more precisely, ways of "operationalising" degrowth in the tourism context; this is attempted elsewhere (e.g. Hall et al., 2021). Rather, through reviewing David Harrison's work on the contribution of development theory to tourism studies, it has sought to demonstrate that not only has "traditional" development theory been ineffective in informing our understanding of tourism and its role in development but also that David's argument, based on his assumption of "business as usual" in tourism, for the adoption of globalisation theory is no longer appropriate. In so doing, it has suggested that as the validity of development based on economic growth becomes increasingly questioned, the concept of degrowth represents a potentially strong and critical framework for exploring the relationship between tourism and development. That relationship has, of course, been thrown into sharper focus during the coronavirus pandemic, giving rise to some rigorous academic debate on issues central to degrowth (see for example, Butcher, 2021 and Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019), but the developmental challenges facing the post-pandemic world will be such that, both in theory and in practice, it can no longer be "business as usual" in tourism.

## Disclosure statement

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