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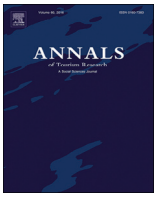

Research Note

Tourism in Oppressed Destinations: Political responsibility and the prospect of oppression offsetting

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Introduction

Democracy is on the decline. A report by the University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute (2023, p. 7) shows that 72 % of the world's population now live in autocracies. Ten years ago, this figure was 46 %. Over the same decade, global tourism has also grown, including in countries listed in the report as some of the world's most oppressive. The intersection of tourism and oppression is a budding topic of public and academic debate (Arnesson, 2022; Hudson, 2007) — something accelerated by controversial mega-events such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. These debates often interrogate the question of whether tourists should travel to undemocratic destinations characterised by political oppression, henceforth known as "oppressed destinations".

In this research note, I highlight the value of Iris Young's theory of political responsibility in meeting this question. Using Young, I argue that a weakness in existing approaches to effect change through (non-)travel is the unwillingness of most tourists to recognise a political responsibility towards those living in oppressed destinations. In response to this, I raise an initiative by Swedish NGO *Civil Rights Defenders* known as Oppression Offsetting, which attempts to clarify this responsibility by calculating tourists' economic contributions to autocratic governments. In asking tourists to offset these contributions, it operates in a similar vein to how carbon offsets seek to mitigate tourism's negative environmental impacts.

Political responsibility in tourism

Political theorist Iris Young was interested in our individual responsibilities for global injustice. One focus of hers was the garment industry and "sweatshop factories", where workers toil in miserable conditions to manufacture cheap clothing for the de-

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veloped world (Young, 2011). Young wanted to articulate the responsibility global consumers have for these conditions. Her conclusion, as expressed in her social connection model, is that while individuals are not personally to blame for these conditions, given they are too small a cog in the system and are not collective agents acting with one intention, they do partake in the market that permits the structural injustices that affect these workers. Therefore, wittingly or not, consumers contribute to injustice and thus share a "political responsibility", which demands that all those involved in that process collectively act to "prevent massive harm or foster institutional change for the better" (Young, 2011, p. 76). In a tourism context, Young's social connection model suggests that while we should not blame tourists for the oppression in their chosen destination, they are politically responsible as they are "causally embedded in processes that produce a problematic result" (Young, 2011, p. xx). Concretely, this could involve paying tourist taxes to oppressive governments.

In tourism studies, Jamal (2019) has used Young's theory to highlight the importance of seeing tourism impacts as relational, and as a way to reveal the entanglements tourists have with structural injustice in tourism destinations. This reflects a wider call within tourism scholarship for tourists to contemplate their complicity within violences past and present (Stinson et al., 2021). To do this requires overcoming a market-driven depoliticization of tourism and the acceptance of political responsibility for the people and places tourists visit (Guia, 2021). The question is: do tourists accept political responsibility and if so, what can they do about it?

For those that do, political consumerism appears a sensible course of action. This involves the purchase or non-purchase of products with the aim of changing government or market practices (Micheletti et al., 2005). Tourism boycotts are the most popular tactic and have proliferated in the last 15 years, with a concern for human rights the leading reason for a boycott call (Shaheer et al., 2019). If successful, tourism boycotts are an effective way of depriving oppressive regimes of income, causing reputational damage, and ultimately changing government policy (Seyfi & Hall, 2019). The problem is, however, that boycotts are more likely to fail than succeed (Friedman, 1995). As with political responsibility more broadly (Young, 2011, p. 154), tourists often reject boycotts as they do not see the connection between their own consumer behaviour and the egregious behaviour in question (Shepherd, 2021).

Conversely, some tourists *do* acknowledge political responsibility. Guia (2021) forwards justice tourism, which involves travel to oppressed destinations to hear people's stories, develop solidarity and advocate for justice through activism, as one example of this in action. However, justice tourism remains niche, with most tourists unwilling to sacrifice scarce leisure time for this "explicitly political form of travel" (Guia, 2021, p. 515). Instead, tourists often continue to consume conventional tourism in oppressed destinations, albeit more "responsibly" by, for example, avoiding government-owned tourism infrastructure (Michalon, 2017). Consequently, existing approaches towards tourism in oppressed destinations are struggling given the common rejection of political responsibility among tourists. It therefore seems pertinent to look at how an understanding of political responsibility could be fostered among tourists. It is here that a new initiative called Oppression Offsetting proves interesting.

Oppression offsetting

In 2022, Stockholm-based NGO Civil Rights Defenders released an advertising campaign entitled *Diktaturkompensera*. While translated literally as Dictatorship Compensation, Civil Rights Defenders prefers the term Oppression Offset. For commuters, the adverts caught the eye with alluring pictures of blue seas, sandy beaches and palm trees, yet written above such images were sentences such as "Stay near torture in gorgeous Zanzibar" or "Sun, shopping and slavery in Dubai". Also featured on the ad was the text "Oppression Offset with Swish" — a Swedish mobile payment app. The idea behind Oppression Offsetting is that if a tourist travels to an undemocratic country, they can offset their economic contributions to the oppressive government by donating to Civil Rights Defenders, who in turn, will fight to protect individuals working for civil rights in such destinations.

To calculate the offset, Civil Rights Defenders provides an online calculator where tourists input their destination, the length of their stay, and the size of their travel group. Using the average daily spend of a Swedish tourist abroad according to the national growth agency's tourism statistics (Tillväxtverket, 2022), the level of sales tax in each country taken from Deloitte and PricewaterhouseCoopers (e.g. PWC, 2023), and the ranking of the destination on V-Dems democracy index (V-Dem Institute, 2023), an amount is calculated in Swedish Kronor as a suggested offset to be paid to Civil Rights Defenders.

Rather than leaving tourism's impact on oppressed destinations to morally relativistic understandings of what constitutes ethical, moral or just tourism (Arnesson, 2022), Oppression Offsetting suggests that *all* tourists contribute to systems of oppression, regardless of good intentions. Thus, by implication, tourists have a political responsibility for the places they visit that must be acted upon. True to Young's (2011) insistence on forward-looking action, Oppression Offsetting does not tell tourists not to travel but rather assigns them with a responsibility to redress oppression in the destinations they visit. In permitting travel to oppressed destinations, Oppression Offsetting also deals with a critique levelled at boycotts — that they impoverish and isolate those suffering from oppression (Hudson, 2007; Seyfi & Hall, 2019), which could constitute political irresponsibility in harming those we should be working in solidarity with. Moreover, by financing the work of human rights and democracy activists in oppressed destinations, tourists would be contributing to the collective action Young sees as a necessary part of taking political responsibility.

However, the idea that we can offset our contributions to dictators is clearly problematic. One could argue that tourists would act more responsibly by simply donating to Civil Rights Defenders than travelling to oppressed destinations and offsetting. Such an argument echoes those made regarding carbon offsets which have been criticised as a way for society's richest to pay for absolution for their negative impacts (Dhanda & Harmtann, 2011) and for its assumption that impacts in one destination can be compensated for in other times and spaces (Vereb, 2022). Equally problematic is the assumption that oppression within tourism is geographically bounded within undemocratic states. The case of cruises departing from democratic countries, which

nonetheless rely on crew subject to labour laws made in autocratic countries, problematises such an assumption, and would, using Young (2011), also entail political responsibility for the tourists taking such cruises. Finally, the existing set-up crudely suggests that only undemocratic countries can enact oppression.

Conclusion

Based on Young's (2011) social connection model, tourists share a political responsibility for the systems of oppression they contribute to when they visit oppressed destinations. Existing political consumerist approaches struggle as most tourists are unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge such a responsibility. Oppression Offsetting makes this responsibility clearer by underlining tourists' economic contribution to dictators. Even if Oppression Offsetting remains primarily a marketing initiative more in line with discursive political consumerism (Micheletti et al., 2005), it nonetheless highlights a political responsibility tourists may have when they visit oppressed destinations. This could, in turn, encourage engagement with other forms of political consumerism, such as boycotting. Despite this, Oppression Offsetting also raises valid questions about the continuing use of offsets to compensate for tourism's negative impacts. After all, if human rights have a price, what's next?

Further research is needed on the interplay of political responsibility and tourism in oppressed destinations, and the tool of Oppression Offsetting offers fertile ground for future investigations. Eliciting tourists' attitudes to and willingness to pay for Oppression Offsetting would be one way of seeing how tourists understand their political responsibility in oppressed destinations. This would be particularly insightful when compared to opinions on existing political consumerism approaches such as boycotting or buycotting. Moreover, studies investigating the willingness of tour operators to integrate oppression offsets into their packages, as we see developing with carbon offsets (Bösehans et al., 2020), would help us understand important supply-side perspectives on the notion of political responsibility in tourism. Finally, studies looking at the tangible outcomes of Oppression Offsetting on civil rights initiatives would be necessary to truly understand the initiative's contribution to the collective action Young (2011) sees as essential.

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Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest to be reported.

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