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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Anti-tourism activism and the inconvenient truths about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the debate on tourism has become remarkably polarised. For some, tourism represents the stalwart of neoliberal capitalism, nested in strongly skewed power relations, characterized by exclusionary and resource-degrading agency, which need taming. For others, it remains genuinely coherent with its original promise to be a ‘force for good’. This dichotomy is per se an eye-opener for critical reflections. Drawing on anthropology and critical geography literature and informed by longitudinal qualitative ethnographical research conducted in Barcelona between 2017 and 2024, this paper provides a set of critical reflections on the inconvenient truths about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism in the context of the current rising of anti-tourism activism in Southern European destinations. By offering a bird’s eye view on the well traversed debate, the purpose of this state of the art paper is to stimulate further critical considerations on the uneven dynamics of tourism capital accumulation, the deep-rooted inequalities associated with it and the effects of tourism excesses, with mass tourism being investigated as a phenomenon, touristification as a process and overtourism as a regime.

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Introduction

Over the last 50 years, neoliberal tourism development plans have been widely prioritized, indistinctively exploiting local resources and spaces for corporate benefit. The commodification of the commons and privatization of public goods processes have incentivized the growth of tourism centred around a short-term return on investment vision. Tourism extreme dependence on global plundering and dispossession of basic rights, unequal use of the commons, and natural resources extraction

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have led to the convergence of grassroots organizations and social movements, especially in urban and island destinations, to voice their concerns about the socio-economic and environmental implications of the excessive growth of tourism and the over reliance of local economies on a sector that has been causing considerable negative impacts. In fact, a glance at the societal debate, channelled through the media and academic scholarship in the field, shows that a much larger number of places around the world and a wider range of destinations, already subject of previous discussions on the 'excesses of tourism', have become entrenched with strategic prioritisation for capital accumulation through *mass tourism* promotion, with



Figure 1. Mass tourism, overcrowding, touristification and overtourism—the iceberg effect.

the ensuing strain of wealth extraction and redistribution. The consequent *touristification* process of places has also been laying the grounds for what is known as *overtourism* which, as discussed later, is not about only the excessive number of visitors in a certain place in a certain moment, but rather the cause of much deeper consequences (see [Figure 1](#)).

The debate on tourism has become remarkably polarised, with some viewing tourism as the stalwart of neoliberal capitalism, nested in strongly skewed power relations, characterize by exclusionary and resource-degrading agency, which need taming. For others it remains genuinely coherent with its original promise to be a 'force for good' (i.e. through job creation). Meanwhile, while the stances on mass tourism as the result of the democratization of travel, tourism still remain a privilege of few—more than 38 million people in Europe can't afford a week's holiday despite being in work (European Trade Union Confederation, [2022](#)).

Pressure, congestion and overcrowding at sites of high tourist interest are only the tip of the iceberg, that hides different manifestations of inequalities and asymmetrical power relations, very often affecting the most vulnerable in a community. Focusing solely on the influx of people (volume and crowds) and capital generation overlooks the complexity of how the tourism sector operates. The risk is that the only proposed solution will be to reduce flows, which could lead to the elitization of consumption and inflationary processes that would further widen socioeconomic inequalities (Cañada & Murray, [2019](#)).

The global problem with overtourism is as much about the sheer pressure of economy overreliance on local resources extraction, articulated through a wide range of disturbances to social ecosystems, as about the consequences this has on places, communities, labour regimes, discourses and policy frames. Thereupon, while acknowledging the existence of destinations which may be in much need of tourism development, the misuse of the term overtourism has emerged to just simply define the events associated with too many tourists visiting places and/or the increasing negative externalities overtaking the benefits for local communities. Indeed, this has been a concern that had driven tourism studies research on destination development for a long time (see for example: Butler, [1974](#); Mandy Robles, [1977](#); Krippendorf, [1987](#); Turner & Ash, [1975](#)), but a rigorous analysis of the mass tourism, touristification and overtourism phenomena within the radical political economy of tourism framework have to take into account the structural dynamics of exploitation and expropriation (Fraser, [2022](#)), expulsion (Sassen, [2014](#)) and extraction (Milano et al., [2019a](#)) and rent seeking tendency within the tourism capital accumulation dynamics (Fitchett et al., [2021](#)). Particularly in investigating the role of tourism as a fundamental element within a complex web of interconnected events in times of polycrisis—intended as a 'sets of interwoven and overlapping crises' (Morin & Kern, [1999](#), p. 73) such as sanitary, environmental, financial, geopolitical ones, this analysis is crucial to understand the role of tourism, and mass tourism in particular, as a primary driver of crises, often fuelling the mechanisms of capital accumulation that contribute significantly to the onset of these crises (Bianchi & Milano, [2024](#)). Examining the complex interplay between tourism, political economy, and crises will provide valuable insights into the intricate fabric of our extractive socio-economic structure.

During the 2020–2022 Covid-19 pandemic, the debate had shifted away from the growing preoccupations with rising environmental and social effects of growing mass tourism pressure towards the imperative of restoring international mobility and implementing travel protocols to enable a safe return to travel. In academia, efforts have been dedicated in this period to develop and operationalize the concept of new concepts such as ‘regenerative tourism’ (Bellato et al., 2023; Dredge, 2022), which should represent a model of value relations within the industry-social-environmental ecosystems that is more resilient to external shocks and preserves the reproductive capacity of places. A turn that supposedly the pandemic disruption could have allowed to configure and embrace but did not in most instances.

In fact, the data and consistent debates portraying the return of tourism to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2024 (UN Tourism, 2024), accessible on mainstream and social media support the view that very little has changed. If anything, local communities weakened by the COVID-19 induced global crisis are today at even greater hardships in conserving their way of life in the face of tourism pressures and inflationary processes that is arguably overcoming pre-pandemic levels (European Travel Commission [ETC], 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024). The debate on overtourism is especially intense in Mediterranean cities and coastal areas, where mass tourism and touristification are back with a vengeance, discounting the over-dependency crisis and vulnerability revealed by the pandemic, through the patched-up efforts to ‘bring tourism back’ whatever the cost and with little attention to the situation of local communities or the disastrous implications for the on-going climate challenge crisis. Such debate is paralleled by a reprise of activism, frequently tagged (and reified) as ‘anti-tourism’, yet less so by fresh attempts in the academia to disentangle mass tourism, touristification and overtourism main dimensions, drivers and political incrustations. In scholarly debates, the gap between reductionist positions—bordering negationism, for instance on the role of the expansion of airline and cruise activity as triggers of local social disruptions, and concerns for a nightmarish post-pandemic panorama for cities and regions under extreme pressure is as severe as ever.

By offering a bird’s eye view on the well traversed mass tourism, touristification and overtourism debates, the purpose of this paper is to stimulate further critical considerations on the uneven dynamics of tourism capital accumulation around tourism production settings, the deep-rooted inequalities associated with it and the effects of tourism excesses. It provides a set of critical reflections on the ‘inconvenient truths’ about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism paying specific attention to anti-tourism activism. It is essential to highlight that the grassroots organizations involved in such activism claim their role as an anti-touristification movement. The focus of their critique is not the tourists themselves, but rather the policies implemented at various levels by governments (Petit, 2024). In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that while the term ‘overtourism’ is not typically translated into Spanish as *sobreturismo*, concepts like ‘touristification’ and ‘massification’ are commonly used to describe the changes brought about by tourism.

This paper emerges from a three stages research approach including: *Stage 1*—critical review of academic and grey literature including government documents, social movements manifestos and websites, city council reports and plans, press releases, social media network discourses. Insights from two EU projects (Peeters et al., 2019 and EU-funded H2020 research project—SMARTDEST Grant Agreement no. 870753)

provided further foundation for the conceptualisation and analysis of findings. *Stage 2*—empirical data collected over a period of 8 years (between July 2016 and July 2024), through longitudinal participatory qualitative ethnographical fieldwork including in depth semi-structured interviews (conducted in Catalan, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese) with Barcelona social movement activists as well as with social movement activists from Madrid, Venice and Lisbon during a neighbours' forum hosted in Barcelona (10), residents across different Barcelona neighbourhoods (23). In addition to this, overt participant observations took place during workshops and social movement forums in Barcelona, Majorca, San Sebastian and Naples, and informal conversations occurred with community members at neighbours' forum, protests, stakeholder consultations, governmental meetings, and activist organisation meetings. *Stage 3*—Retrospective review and analysis of fieldwork data collected during in Stage 2.

The research was conducted and co-authored by two 'insiders' with extensive experience of the destination under investigation, one of which was also field researcher (first author of this paper), who lives in Barcelona, thus providing a high level of trust with local communities, giving unique access to key stakeholders and facilitating an inclusive exchange of ideas with the research participants, recruited through his local network and a snowballing approach. The research team include also one 'outsider' (see Beebe, 2001) co-author, who has extensive research experience on the topic. The critical reflections on the evolution of the events since the first phase of the ethnographic research in 2017 by the 'insiders' were instrumental in identifying key issues related to the impact of mass tourism, touristification and overtourism. These reflections were mediated and reviewed by the 'outsider' co-author (i.e. through probing questions), who had more 'distance' from the research context and participants.

A historical overview of mass tourism, touristification and overtourism: roots, conceptualizations and controversies

The last decades have broadly been characterized by high carbon and fossil-fuelled production and consumption patterns across all economic sector, broadly embracing a no 'limits to growth' vision. Tourism is not different, and a set of complex problems and tensions associated with the exponential growth of urban and leisure mobility and the voraciousness of the extractive nature of tourism had already been identified since the 1970s (Boissevain, 1979; Gaviria, 1974; Greenwood, 1976; Mishan, 1967; Nunez, 1963). In the context of a rising understanding of the importance of preserving global limited resources, the social and environmental impacts of unbridled growth of tourism at destination level may be seen as another type of crisis caused by overproduction within the framework of late Fordist capitalism. Alongside, but not limited to crises such as overfishing, monoculture farming, intensive livestock production, overtourism was conceptualised and used for the first time in the academic literature in the 1980s, drawing parallels with the hidden costs of overfishing crises (see Börlin, 1986, p. 232).

The term overtourism was first used in the media at the beginning of the millennium with an article on the externalities of tourism in the world heritage site Pompeii

(Petersen, 2001), but it was not until the 2010s that the term gained widespread usage in scholarly discourse. While the Skift agency (Ali, 2016) claimed ownership of the term, they only contributed to sensationalizing the term, with some positive outcomes in merit to alerting readers about a problem too often ignored. Surprisingly, Skift recently made a questionable U-turn on its previous claims about the importance of recognizing and addressing the overtourism problem, by suggesting that the disuse of the term would grant more 'nuanced solutions' (Ali, 2023).

Yet, advances in the problematization and conceptualization of overtourism suggest that it extends beyond mere numbers of visitors in a given space and time and points towards the consequences of excessive tourism pressure on socio-economic fabrics, such as social cohesion, diversity, inclusion. Overtourism subverts the very promise of democratising tourism through the facilitation of mass tourism flows and as an easy way to bring prosperity to destinations' communities. Yet, as many tourism development theorists have suggested (Ma & Hassink, 2013; Nilsson, 2020; Toomey, 2022; Yrigoy, 2014), the end result is nothing but the last bit of a long tail of place transformation and adaptations that are deeply rooted in the capital accumulation strategies pertinent to a mobile society. In this sense, overtourism can be better described as a *regime*, meaning a complex and deeply entrenched system that exerts control over urban landscapes, economies, and social dynamics in which tourism economics start to be the main source of income, transforming cities into perpetual holiday destinations. More specifically, the overtourism regime can be understood as a multifaceted and self-perpetuating system, that prioritizes economic growth through mass tourism and a visitor economy gradually replacing existing economic activities. In such context, the touristification processes unleash questionable unfair practices, such as rent expropriation, labour exploitation, indigenous community displacement and expulsion and natural resources extraction, to name just a few.

Although research has articulated the concept and specific circumstances of the rise and consequences of overtourism in islands (e.g. Armas-Díaz et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020), coastal destinations (e.g. Benner, 2019; Mejjad et al., 2022), and more recently rural areas (Lorenzen, 2021; Randelli & Martellozzo, 2019; Sæþórsdóttir & Hall, 2020), as a concept, it primarily emerged from the analysis of events occurring in urban environments. These are characterized by extreme ecosystemic complexity (Bramwell & Lane, 2011) and a multiplicity of stakeholders crafting and diffusing discursive characterizations and de-politicized approaches to the 'management' of tourism pressure (Novy & Colomb, 2021). In relation to urban settings, the overtourism debate has served as a platform for addressing concerns related to over-reliance on the tourism sector, tackling the question of whether the development of cities as (over)touristed spaces is inherent to globalization and (neo)liberalisation (Colomb & Novy, 2017). Tourism planning in this new context has been described as increasingly focusing on place marketing and image-making and retracting from its traditional overarching objectives of fostering social cohesion and wellbeing (Taşan-Kok & Baeten, 2011). In processes of urban regeneration, adhering to the 'fifth-wave gentrification' whose main drivers have been identified in the extreme mobility of capital and people, facilitating a spatial fix (Aalbers, 2019; Clancy, 2022; López-Gay et al., 2021), the re-functionalization of city spaces and resources gained prominence in city fabrics.

In relation to housing, it has spread geographically from 'tourist cores' to other areas that lack conventional tourist attractions.

In this context, it is crucial to clarify concepts that have often been used in academic settings, causing some confusion regarding their meanings. On the one hand, the concept of mass tourism emerged as a democratized form of leisure generally associated with beach destinations and activities involving the 3Ss—*Sea, Sun and Sand*, and in some instances involving a fourth 'S'—*Sex*. Since the 1970s, mass tourism has been increasingly studied as mass commodified experiential market adapted for a larger audience (see Cohen, 1972; Turner & Ash, 1975). On the other hand, advancements in transportation technologies and reduced mobility costs contributed to the increase in travel and the economic and social transformation of places into tourism-oriented economies. This led to a process of touristification, a term widely utilized in the 1990s particularly in the Francophone literature (Knafou, 1996; Lanfant, 1994), involving symbolic and physical appropriation and commodification of urban assets with considerable consequences for host communities (Bianchi, 2003; Fitchett et al., 2021). The concept of overtourism has gained prominence more recently, (often wrongly used as a synonymous of overcrowding), as a complex interaction of issues leading to a variety of consequences (see Figure 1). In sum, in order to gain a better understanding of implications associated with the way tourism has been evolving over the last few decades, it is suggested that mass tourism should be investigated as phenomenon, touristification as a process and overtourism as a regime.

The need to address the negative impacts of an unfolding fast-paced mass tourism induced crisis by overproduction—intended as hyper-specialisation and excessive reliance on a tourism-based economy, has become a priority for many destinations. Meanwhile, from an institutional perspective, persistently advocating for the resolution of mass tourism-related concerns through strategies based on spatial fixes, management approaches and/or smart solutions, has neglected the intrinsic extractive nature and the regimes of socio-ecological accumulation (Fraser, 2022). Concurrently, a reliance on lowering the costs and exploitation of the four 'cheaps'—labour power, food, energy, and raw materials (Moore, 2015)—have become symptomatic of the predominant capitalist tourism model.

Both academic and industry players have been active in this debate, with polarized views giving way to a surge in studies on overtourism of variable nature, quality and reliability. The scholarly debate about overtourism echoes some of the discursive entrenchments deployed by the global travel and place promotion industry, ranging from sheer negationism (excessive tourism pressure is just a problem of a few places, and in those places it reflects shortcomings in the capacity to manage destinations), to the emphasis on the right to travel and freedom of movement as democratic gain, to reference to development needs for the unprivileged global south (this is the only way they have to develop their economy and northern agents do not have the right to question the expansion of the tourist economy, or northern decision-makers to curb it).

Much of the extant literature often lacks in first-hand empirical grounding and reflects the broad generalizations and misunderstandings that plague an honest confrontation on the 'inconvenient truths' about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism (see for example: Butcher, 2020; O'Regan et al., 2022). Yet, a growing

number of academics have taken on to both provide an epistemology of overtourism within critical tourism studies, triggering a growing production of data and analytics that support its operationalization in policy design—data on drivers, impacts, scales, subjects, indicators and potential solutions (see Bei & Celata, 2023; Bolzoni & Semi, 2023; Clancy, 2022; Dogru & Bulut, 2018; García-López et al., 2020; López-Gay et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2021; Valente et al., 2023), future development scenarios (see: Peeters et al., 2019; Milano & Koens, 2022; Peeters & Papp, 2024) and to deconstruct opposite claims within a broader geopolitically uneven tourism constellations (see Sheller, 2024). Recent research has placed a focus on some of the drivers through which excess tourism pressure becomes an issue for local communities: the effects of short-term rental and the conversion of residential housing into tourist apartments (Celata & Romano, 2020; Sequera & Nofre, 2020), the reorientation of commercial supply to meet the demand of visitors (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019), the precarious working conditions in an hypercompetitive tourist market (Azcárate, 2020; González-Domingo et al., 2023), and the climatic impact of the growing cruise tourism segment in coastal cities (Baumann, 2021; González, 2018). Nevertheless, media coverage and a significant portion of research have focused on aspects related to the volume of tourist arrivals, analysing them in terms of carrying capacity and spatial solutions to alleviate the pressure on the most crowded iconic destinations attractions (see Tokarchuk et al., 2022). These analyses often overlook the structural conditions that shape the inclusiveness of tourist space, and the politics behind the steady growth of visitors (e.g. the expansion of tourism infrastructure and the promotion of new events).

Before COVID-19, the debate on tourism externalities and ‘excessive’ growth had gained significant momentum (Koens et al., 2018). The new strategies of capital fix in the wake of the mortgage crisis of 2008 as well as the emerging avenues of touristification of everyday life, largely mediated by the widespread integration of the digital (as navigation systems and hospitality platform) as mobility infrastructure, have since become prominent drivers of place change, directly interfering with the welfare of local communities, reflected also in new policy turns (Russo & Scarnato, 2018) and social movements activism (Milano et al., 2019b), as well as a new surge of critical research on places and communities—i.e. in planning studies, tourism geographies and anthropology (see Azcárate, 2020; Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2022; Morell, 2018).

The COVID-19-induced ‘immobility’ crisis has exacerbated some of the pre-existing characteristics of tourism monoculture and in terms of its most disruptive effects, has emphasised among other things the precarious nature of labour relations in the tourism sector (Robinson et al., 2019; Valente et al., 2023) and the shortcomings of welfare regimes in a mobile society (Bianchi et al., 2020). The pandemic has also been a watershed moment of opportunity of rentier capitalism (Müller et al., 2021; Wijburg et al., 2024), predating on idle businesses and properties and resulting in the worsening of structural inequalities associated with tourism growth. The most recent academic literature on overtourism possibly builds upon such events and as a response to the trail of the previous series of interconnected crises. Resident communities and social movements have taken stock of the excesses of tourism (Russo & Scarnato,

2018) and have been advocating for a radical turn from a tourism growth (and dependency) paradigm to one in line with global critical voices and activism in favour of degrowth and decarbonization, thus calling for a fundamental revision of the tourism mobilities system (Fletcher et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2023; Peeters & Papp, 2024).

Anti-tourism activism: objects of concern, new discourses and strategies

Over the past 20 years, in response to the limited empirically grounded conceptualization of overtourism and scarce understanding of its main impacts, policies responses have been mainly relegated to adjustments in destination management and the introduction of smart solutions. These have primarily involved spatial fix solutions, including decongestion, dispersion and decentralization policies, product and market diversification, and targeting 'elite' niche markets with stronger purchasing power (Cheer & Novelli 2023; Milano, 2018). Examples include the promotion of luxury tourism, elevating the standards of tourist consumption, and encouraging alternative forms of consumption and secondary destinations at the edge of major tourist hubs. Yet these endeavours, though successful on the short-term (and there is plenty of doubt about that), did not address the structural causes of overtourism problems and externalities. The underlying rationale continues to be fixing transnational capital for fresh processes of accumulation through geographical expansion, capital switching and exporting investment (Eisenschitz, 2016; Yrigoy, 2014). This ideological and technical continuity in the wake of the intensification of the agency of tourism growth on the social reproduction of local communities and the reconstitution of local resources in the post-pandemic period may well be at the basis of the recent emergence of anti-tourism activism.

A timely and representative example of the inadequacy of quantitative based measures and solutions is the recently introduced 'tourist entrance fee' of 5€ per day/person in Venice, one of the most overtouristed destination of the world. While advocates of this measure claim that it would reduce tourism pressure primarily related to daily visitors, an increasing number of experts and community organisation have defaced this as a viable solution to contain visitation on the basis of its scarce impacts in the first months of implementation (during its first year Venice received more tourists than the previous year without the 5 euro tax), as well as the questionable costs involved and implementation procedures. By focusing on the demand side only without qualifying and disentangling what drives touristification processes from what allows the Venetian economy to continue thrive, and by ignoring the supply-side, the housing affordability crisis, and wider environmental concerns (Jockims, 2024; Povoledo, 2024), the problem of overtourism in Venice is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. In addition to this, it will be interesting to see what will happen with the controversial announcement of a ban on short-term rentals by 2028 proposed by mayor Jaume Collboni of Barcelona on the 21 June 2024, which came as a reactive response to the mounting protests related to the city struggle with soaring housing costs, large scale events and excessive tourism growth.

Anti-tourism activism and the specialization of social movements in tourism-related struggles are not a new phenomenon. Historically, grassroots organizations have

occasionally mobilized to oppose the construction of tourism infrastructure, often revealing a reality of resource extraction and exploitation (see for example the pioneering work of *Tourism Concern* in the 1990s and 2000s). For instance, on a notable occasion in 1977, amid Majorca touristification boom, a group of young members of the libertarian groups called *Terra i Llibertat i Talaiot Corcat* occupied the island of *Sa Dragonera* located at the extreme west of Majorca to avoid urbanization developments. These movements have played a crucial role on the island declaration as Natural Park in 1995 to ensure its environmental protection. The sociologist Maria Kousis (2000) examined the *Sa Dragonera* case, comparing it to two other instances where citizen organizations environmental activism in *Zakynthos* (Greece) opposed the impacts produced by tourism activities in 1981 and the struggle in the rural community of *Aldeia de Meco* in the province of *Setubal* in the early 1990s, which claimed how tourism plans led to environmental degradation. Fifty years later, the nature of these movements has evolved. They are no longer isolated cases targeting specific infrastructures, limited spaces or environmental struggles. Instead, grassroots organizations have become specialized in addressing the broader social and environmental tensions caused by tourism growth. This activism now encompasses and addresses a whole complex of socioeconomic dynamics of entire cities, islands, and coastal territories highly dependent on tourism economics.

The debate on overtourism has indeed gained significant attention among social movements theory scholars, primarily propelled by the claims of grassroots organizations advocating for tourism degrowth. These entities have emphasized the need to diversify national economies and reduce over reliance on tourism monoculture. Additionally, this form of tourism activism has been amplified by the academic discourse on the topic by authors such as Colomb and Novy (2017), Hughes (2018) and Milano & Mansilla (2018). Although tourism has recently powerfully entered the political agenda of social movement and grassroots organizations, this is not to be seen as a new phenomenon of resistance, counter power and/or resilience, but rather a long-standing critical approach addressing the economic growth paradigm (Boissevain, 1996; Kousis, 2000) as done by *Tourism Concern* (Botterill, 1991) in the past, and more recently by *Alba Sud* within the iberoamerican speaking countries. While most critical discourses have been generally associated with the unmanageable growth of the tourism sector—especially in urban settings, most of the claims and revindications to address measures have been linked to the housing rights, commercial specialization and privatization of public space and fair labour. Although not central to this paper, it is important to note that climate emergency activism has too begun to include the expansion of mobility infrastructure and major tourist events in its concerns and demands for change. In Barcelona, for example, citizen platforms and campaign like *Zeroport*, *Stop Creuers*, *No Copa America* are addressing these issues, while movements like *Stay Grounded* are doing similar work in the UK. In this sense, some of the governmental policies have addressed some of these issues through tactical urban greening planning projects (e.g. Barcelonian superblocks during former mayor Ada Colau's 2015–2019 and 2019–2023 mandates). What follows is a briefly reporting on key debates surrounding these issues and some of the claims made by social movements.

The tourism labour conundrum

Scholars in the field of labour studies have extensively examined the externalities and impacts of tourism on labour regimes (Ioannides & Zampoukos, 2018; Lashley, 2020; Valente, et al. 2023; Walmsley et al., 2022; Winchenbach et al., 2019). A key insight from this stream of the literature is that, in times of polycrisis, the more dependent on tourism an economy is, the more impactful a crisis could be, as small enterprises, employees, suppliers and state apparatus will rest on tourism revenues and tourist taxes as their main source of funding. This situation also shows the defencelessness and fragility of tourism monocultures, producing geographies of inequalities, such as those evidenced by the economic emergency caused by a structurally unstable tourism labour market, generally characterized by jobs of a temporary, precarious, and vulnerable nature (Robinson et al., 2019). Hence, advocating for tourism growth as an argument for job creation conceals (or worse may become complicit in) this alarming landscape of labour precarity in the tourism industry.

The relation between mass tourism growth, touristification processes, overtourism and precarious labour is sustained by cost-cutting strategies through externalisation and intermittent contracts, while pushing for high labour productivity (Bianchi & de Man, 2020). The precariousness of tourism jobs characterized by mobility of temporary workers and associated with labour settings and conditions, usually seasonal and flexible, relying on migrant workforce, low-pay, zero-hour and temporary contracts has been highlighted mainly in the hospitality sector (Cañada, 2018a), but is present along the entire mass tourism supply chain. A situation that appears to have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 'immobility' crisis and in need of an in-depth gaze is the relation between the ideology of tourism growth and social justice in labour. The demands of social movements in merit to addressing precarious working conditions in the tourism sector have united various groups and collectives, such as hotel housekeepers. This strength has been evident in the trade union efforts of various groups of hotel housekeepers known in Spain as '*Las Kellys*', which have successfully brought labour conditions in the hotel sector to the attention of broader tourism activist political agenda (Cañada, 2018b).

The housing crisis and commercial specialization of mobility hubs

Accelerated tourism growth has also implied dramatic changes in the commercial landscape and the transformation of residential housing into short term rental properties. In this context, urban, housing and demographic studies have exhibited a growing interest in delving into the realms of tourism research and related concerns, as well as exploring the intricacies inherent in touristification processes. An interdisciplinary approach might be useful to understand how diverse flows and place consumption practices induce place change. Spaces become tuned (in terms of services, design, regulation, communication) into places for digitally empowered mobilities (i.e. highly skilled workers, digital nomads and expats), but these qualities or amenities might not be needed, desirable, or even affordable by other citizens who live permanently in the destination; in other words, turning locations into destinations (Milano & Koens, 2022).

The transformation of residential areas into 'temporal dwelling' locations may clash with local 'permanent dwelling' culture, and consequently, the social structure of cities and neighbourhoods may be transformed by the presence of privilege mobilities. These phenomena have been radically accelerated by the touristification of housing and tourism-led rentier capitalism, enabled by the rise of short-term rental platform, itself a reflection of the digitization of the tourist economy and sustained by financialization of real estate or the 'cosmopolization' of urban fabrics (Clancy, 2022; Wijburg et al., 2024). The impacts on housing affordability, visitor economy-oriented businesses, residential displacement and the 'airbnbisation' of the housing market and other extra-urban settings, contrary to common narratives of dispersion and empowerment of local communities, have further contributed to overtourism in the most central but also increasingly peripheral areas (e.g., Cocola-Gant, 2018; Celata & Romano, 2020; Gutiérrez et al., 2017; Valente et al., 2022). Yet, within a high carbon emission economy, frequently emerging mobilities crowd out or affect critically the position of resident populations, especially the most vulnerable groups that have little negotiating power. Such touristification of housing has not been confined to urban settings, but rather it has extended to other geographical locations, evidenced by the urbanization of coastal, islands and mountainous regions.

The struggles of grassroots movements and organizations for housing rights and against landlordism and rentier capitalism have consequently converged in anti-tourism activism grounded into longstanding efforts by other groups, such as tenants' unions, which have been active in these field for decades. In Barcelona, organizations such as *Sindicat de Llogateres*, the *Plataforma de Afectats per la Hipoteca (PAH)* and *La Hidra Cooperativa* have identified the touristification process as significant drivers to the housing crisis.

Such domains (labour and housing) are remarkably intertwined in the examination of how destination communities are becoming 'risk societies' (Valente et al., 2023), precarity in work feeding into a broader risk of social exclusion through marginalisation and displacement as key dimension of life precarity. In any case, it is noteworthy that they are both affiliated to structural critiques of neoliberal accumulation, which operate independently from tourism, but to which tourism growth has provided new operational conditions. The material hindrances to upwards social mobility in contexts where employment conditions hardly provide access to housing, and vice-versa and where life support mechanisms, be it neighbours' solidarity or reproduction spaces, are being disrupted by the uneven negotiation with the tourist population, is what a sizeable share of destination communities picks as their greatest areas of concern. Put is simply, they do not care about the mere tourist numbers or meaningless announcements of the rising contribution of tourism to GDP.

The new landscape of activism in Barcelona

To analyse the coping tactics and discursive struggles of social movements and grassroots organizations in the face of such controversial developments, this section of the paper examines the post-pandemic rise of tourism activism in Barcelona. While tourism activism received considerable attention before the pandemic, there has been a significant on-going resurgence of protests since the post-pandemic recovery period, primarily



Figure 2. Protest and action against the sightseeing buses in Barcelona (19 July 2022). Source: Author 1 collection, 2022.

related with the housing rights, climate justice, and the fair jobs claims. In the early days of the Socialist Party of Catalonia's mandate in the municipality (July 2023), a series of converging factors set the stage for a renewed wave of anti-tourism activism

BOX 1. The 6th July protest 'Posem límits al turisme'

On the 6th of July, more than 100 grassroots organizations from across the metropolitan area converged for a demonstration scheduled to start at six o'clock at Drassanes. Yet, even before the official kickoff, there was a palpable buzz of anticipation in the air. Local organizations at the neighborhood level had mobilized demonstrators to assemble hours earlier at various locations throughout the city (see Figure 2). By five o'clock, nearly 50–60 residents from Vila de Gràcia were already gathering at the Jardinetes de Gràcia. The crowd patiently awaited reinforcements until a contingent of 20–30 people arrived from the Vallcarca neighborhood, having come down from Gran de Gràcia. Across social media, there was a flurry of support from grassroots organizations, including those from other Spanish cities. This was undoubtedly the largest demonstration against tourism ever seen in Barcelona. The iconic 2014 protest in the Barceloneta neighborhood against real estate speculation, while significant, did not reach the scale of today's event, though it marked the beginning of an era of activism that has culminated in the current wave of social unrest. While the police estimated the crowd size at 2800, organizers claimed a turnout of 20,000, with on-the-ground speculations placing the number between 6000 and 10,000.

As the march began, the focus was on criticizing the mayor's management of the city and the recent commodification of public spaces for tourism, such as the Louis Vuitton fashion show at Parc Güell, the Formula 1 event on Passeig de Gràcia, and the upcoming America's Cup, which threatens to restrict waterfront access. Protesters chanted slogans that cleverly played on the assonance in Catalan between the mayor's name, Jaume Collboni, and carbon dioxide (*diòxid de carboni*), highlighting their dissatisfaction with his policies. Since taking office, Collboni has revived urban promotion of large-scale events, raising concerns about their environmental impact and the ongoing climate emergency. In the postpandemic reactivation campaigns like 'Stop Cruise Ships' (Stop Creuers) and neighborhood organizations like Zeroport have regained force to challenge the expansion of infrastructure projects such as the airport and port, while others have targeted major events like the America's Cup (i.e. No Copa America). After the pandemic, there were already several protests, including the blockade of a tourist bus on 19 July 2022 (See Figure 1). Among the criticisms of his administration are policies that promote elitization of demand, a focus on luxury tourism, the sanitization of public spaces, and increased police control measures (Plan Endreça).

After marching two kilometers in about two hours from Drassanes station to Plaça del Mar in Platja de Barceloneta, where the Tourism Degrowth Manifesto was unveiled (see Figure 4), the procession was punctuated by chants and demands. I encountered a diverse group of activists from various citizen platforms, academics, students, and thousands of residents. In essence, they were predominantly neighbours. At the end of the day, the gathering was a powerful expression of reclaiming common spaces for social reproduction amidst the ongoing processes of making and unmaking the tourist city.

(Author 1's Fieldwork Diary Entry Extract, 6 of July 2024)



Figure 3. Demonstration call. Source: ADBT (2024).



Figure 4. *Posem limits al Turisme* Protest. 6 July. Source. Author 1 collection, 2024.

in response to the promotion of large-scale events (i.e. American's Cup 2024 and Formula One circuit) and corporate privatization initiatives (i.e. Louis Vuitton show parade), coupled with record-breaking levels of post-pandemic travel. The largest protest after the pandemic was before Jaume Collboni's mandate as mayor of Barcelona. On the 19th of July 2022, during a protest organized by the Neighbourhood Assembly for Tourism Degrowth (ABDT) [formally known as Neighbourhood Assembly for Sustainable

Tourism (ABTS) up to 2017], a symbolic action was made blocking a tourist bus at the *Plaça del Portal de la Pau* at the peak of the summer season (see [Figure 2](#)).

Since then, protest highlighting concerns about the reorganization of the tourism sector after the COVID-19 crisis, such as the demonstration on 6 July 2024 (see [Figure 3](#) and [4](#)) have gained momentum and have been the largest in Barcelona's recent history, denouncing the negative impacts of mass tourism. While [Figure 3](#) banner *Decreixment Turístic Ja* means *Tourism Degrowth Now* (translated from Catalan), [Box 1](#) provides a personal account of the first author observations during the protest, sharing a first-hand experience of what was at stake.

Since the early 2010s, various neighbourhoods and public spaces have been grappling with the multifaceted externalities and pressures exerted by tourism. While the first significant protest that marked a turning point for the city occurred in 2014 in the *Barceloneta* neighborhood, targeting the housing crisis (see: El Mundo, [2014](#)), as previously mentioned numerous citizen platforms and campaigns have since emerged to oppose public space privatization and policies supporting major events (i.e. *Zeroport*, *Stop Creuers*, *No Copa America*). In the aftermath of the pandemic, the revival of international mass tourism, along with inflationary dynamics, has substantially diminished the purchasing power of host communities. This has triggered a domino effect in Spanish cities such as Malaga, Cadiz, Alicante, and Mallorca leading to various demonstrations involving thousands of people during the summer of 2024.

Within the narrative of social movements and grassroots organizations, such as the Neighbourhood Assembly for Tourist Degrowth (ABDT) in Barcelona, which has played a pivotal role in shaping the political agenda of social movements in Southern European contexts (for instance, within the SET Southern European Cities facing Touristification Network), a preference towards the use of 'touristification' over 'overtourism' was observed. According to ABDT, while the notion of overtourism tends to depoliticize and side-line the intrinsic political intentions of tourism development and promotion, touristification provides a more substantial manifestation of the processes and dynamics associated with accumulation by dispossession (ABDT member personal communication). The protest of the 6th of July ended in the *Plaça del Mar* in *Platja de Barceloneta*, where several groups read a manifesto for tourism degrowth. This manifesto serves as a reference framework, offering diagnosis and proposals. It calls for measures to reduce mass tourism and advocates for an eco-social transition plan to transform the productive and economic model. The proposed measures cover 13 key areas ([Figure 5](#)):

Amidst numerous complaints and demands, there have been calls to ceasing the use of public funds for tourism promotion, eliminating subsidies and tax exemptions within the tourism sector, preventing the expansion of port and airport infrastructures and stopping large-scale events. Additionally, this call includes a request for the reduction of the availability of tourist accommodations by strictly regulating both tourist and seasonal rentals, a substantial cut of cruise ship traffic, and the improvement of working conditions for tourism sector employees by paying workforce fairer wages, eliminating hyperflexible schedules, and addressing irregular work practices. Furthermore, the measures emphasize diversifying and prioritizing non-carbon production activities, promoting employment agility through retracing programmes, and repurposing tourist facilities for alternative uses such as public



Figure 5. ABDT Tourism Degrowth Manifesto. *Source.* ABDT—Translated from: <https://assembleabarris.wordpress.com/2024/07/06/manifest-posemlimitsalturisme-a-la-manifestacio-6j/>

housing, geriatrics, socio-health and civic centres, and cooperative workspace. In a nutshell, the manifesto serves as an emblematic example of the transition from protest to proposal.

Furthermore, expressions of dissent in specific neighbourhoods, also on the outskirts of the city centre, have specifically focused their criticism on the housing crisis

(Morales-Pérez et al., 2022). These protests also address issues related to the loss of housing for residential use, specialization of tourist-oriented businesses, and conflicts over the coexistence of shared spaces (Crespi-Vallbona & López-Villanueva, 2024). Moreover, it is noteworthy that instances of tourism unrest and anti-tourism activism have predominantly surfaced within European urban settings, where numerous social movement sentiments have been labelled as NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) activism (Oskam, 2020). Given that many activists are those whose rights have been infringed, predominantly precarious workers (particularly migrants), tenants, and segments of the vulnerable population, characterized by those with the least purchasing power and/or negotiating influence, such label is rather inappropriate.

Final considerations and future research

At the time of completing this paper, some of Spain's most popular hotspots were experiencing the rocketing of protests against mass tourism and overtourism with thousands taking to the streets. Barcelona was in the news for an incident where few tourists were targeted with water pistol attacks, shifting the focus away from the protest's demands and instead emphasising an alleged conflict between locals and tourists. This empirically informed study is one of few to specifically focus on anti-tourism activism, in an attempt to provide a set of critical reflections on the inconvenient truths about mass tourism, touristification and overtourism.

While destinations over reliance on tourism have been widely analysed and have become an object of widespread societal contestation particularly during the post-pandemic recovery period, the protests and demonstrations in different Mediterranean destinations is symptomatic of local 'enough is enough' feeling that can no longer be ignored. It is indeed within urban social landscapes, especially their historical cores, that tourism excesses have acquired clear political connotations, with a new policy approach recognising the disruptive agency of tourism growth and supported by radical revisions of governance frameworks (Novy, 2018; Russo & Scarnato, 2018) being now more than ever needed.

While the scholarly exploration of mass tourism, touristification and overtourism is commendable, it is noteworthy that some purely theoretical elaborations, frequently missing direct empirical evidence and first-hand data, have somehow overlooked the inconvenient truths of concentration of tourism-related capital, emerging structural inequalities, unfair labour practices, the implicit class-related struggle inherent to the tourism capital accumulation and the complexities associated with operating in an era of interconnected crisis (Bianchi & Milano, 2024). For instance, the debate surrounding tourism gentrification-induced displacement and the generation of rent gap in tourist destinations heavily reliant on the travel sector needs an examination from a perspective that critically scrutinizes the fundamental essence of capitalist accumulation.

Moreover, while the flourishing production of research developing new methodologies of assessment and metrics of overtourism, using new digital data sources, such as those on spatial concentration of tourism activity, the 'geographies of airbnbisation', or the ecological footprint of tourism mobility, are variously poised to analyse how tourism flourishes in a specific place, more focused investigations are needed. For instance, these could include studies on the related 'poverty

production', disparities in terms of precarious employment, privatization of public spaces, housing shortages, climate justice, ecological degradation, and uneven redistribution of wealth.

Thus, empirically grounded research drawing on an intersectional perspective, of a systematic and longitudinal nature, ethnographic fieldworks supporting the different and diverging perspectives on tourism growth is indeed more than ever necessary, to further the depth of critical understandings of the structural inequalities associated with the extractive nature of tourism capitalism. For instance, building on research by Mihalic (2020) on the conceptualisation of overtourism, Sebrek et al. (2022) on the politics of overtourism, or Yrigoy et al. (2023) on tourism stakeholders' power struggles in addressing overtourism, anti-tourism activism would require further investigation too. For instance, the term overtourism is often co-opted to frame mass tourism as a class issue, promoting the elitization of consumption as solution at risk of exacerbating inequalities. This would lead to wider gaps in terms of rights and labour conditions, fuelling the urgency of a critical debate on the labour automation and basic income.

Moreover, despite recognising the potential positive impact of tourism on community cohesion and wellbeing, addressing the problem of overtourism is still in the first policy-cycle stage of agenda-setting in European cities, which has so far been primarily oriented on mobility and visitors' management strategies, with tourism growth management persistently remaining out of the EU agenda (Peeters et al., 2018). Overtourism keeps being addressed through polarised interventions placing tourism-related policies on one side and those addressing residents needs on the other side of the spectrum, or worse through the politization of individuals (e.g., the call for responsible tourist behaviour) leading to no evident structural change or benefit. Rather, all the stakeholders should be viewed as 'relational and constitutive', to collaboratively tackle the persisting structural inequalities, concentration of capital and asymmetric power relations associated with tourism.

The growing anti-tourism activism related to the inconvenient truth of mass tourism, touristification and overtourism research lies in the challenge posed by these as deeply rooted in a complex web of issues, notably looking at the fundamental factors of class struggle, social division of labour, gender inequalities, and the climate injustices within the touristification processes. It is not a surprise that, in Barcelona, many social movements that were initially focused on issues such as housing and fair work have begun to incorporate the impacts of tourism-driven transformations into their political agendas. Similarly, the climate emergency and the need for tactical urban greening planning projects have led to the emergence of community groups and organizations advocating for the rethinking of environmental policies in urban settings. Dismissing those approaches as 'capitalo-centric' and restricting the evaluation solely to its discursive aspects would lead to an incomplete and scientifically unsound understanding of the effects of mass tourism, touristification and overtourism.

In addition to what was previously indicated as future research priorities, delving into the intricate interplay of social classes, structural disparities, gender inequalities, and capital concentration would be necessary to enhance analytical rigor and enrich the academic discourse concerning the unequal dynamics of tourism capital

accumulation and ultimately touristification processes within overtourism regimes. Having said this, at this point, it is envisaged that further timely research will be needed on: the effect of population changes, housing displacement, visitors-oriented businesses and social exclusion in/from areas of high tourism pressure (giving voice to the voiceless); tourism labour in hyper-competitive destinations, with a focus on precarity and the gender division of labour; regulatory frameworks on urban governance and politics in tourism cities (i.e. who decides, in the name of whom, what are the co-optation tactics in deliberations on the tourist city policy and planning and how they should be reformed); and synergies and contradictions of the local struggles for tourism degrowth vs. the global fight for climate change.

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