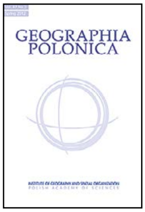

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THE ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TOURISM GEOGRAPHY: CHOSEN ASPECTS OF ITS EMPIRICAL FIELD OF RESEARCH

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Abstract

The article addresses a noteworthy gap in the consideration of philosophical dimensions within the methodological discourse of geography. Specifically, the domain of tourism geography, as a “young” sub-discipline, requires a more profound analysis of its subject matter, particularly the empirical field. Consequently, the primary objective of this study is to explore ontological and epistemic questions concerning the nature of the empirical field in tourism geography and the status of knowledge generated within it. Employing an analytic philosophy approach and leveraging J. Searle’s new-realist social ontology, the investigation seeks to shed light on the vital interplay between philosophy and geography. By illuminating the unexplored philosophical aspects, this research contributes to the broader understanding of geographical methodologies, making it an essential step toward advancing the theoretical field of tourism geography.

Key words

human geography • tourism geography • ontology • epistemology • empirical field • Searle’s social ontology

Introduction

Philosophical considerations still have not been taken properly into account in the discussion on in-depth methodological aspects of geography. According to Chojnicki (2010) what is i.a. needed is a deeper analysis of methodological problems related to the nature of subject matter of geographical research. Difficulties related to defining a relatively uniform concept of the subject of geography (geographical sciences) appear to be one of the most important methodological problems and weaknesses of the discipline (Johnston, 1984; Lisowski, 1996; Maik, 2004). This general statement concerning geographical sciences as a whole seems to be justified also, and perhaps above all, in relation to those sub-disciplines that developed comparatively late. Certainly, the geography of tourism is one of them (Warszyńska & Jackowski, 1978; Kowalczyk, 2001; Butowski, 2020a).

The sub-discipline is in a particularly difficult position because it deals with tourism, which is a very complex phenomenon. At the same time, the phenomenon is seen as uniquely "under-theorized, eclectic and disparate" (Meethan, 2001: 2). This opinion is quite commonly shared by many authors (e.g. Franklin & Crang, 2001; Tribe, 2006). Some of them also postulate the need to discover the ontological foundations of tourism (Coles et al., 2005, 2009), which are poorly understood.

Accepting these quite critical but, nevertheless, true statements, one can assume that defining the ontological and epistemological foundations of the empirical field of tourism geography will be a compelling contribution to its theoretical development. At the same time, the results of such an analysis should also contribute to the development of the methodological foundations of geographical sciences as a whole, as well as the studies of tourism themselves. Therefore, it was considered that if the results of the reasoning and inference presented in the article in the form of acceptable methodological conclusions are justifiable, both the immediate and strategic goals of this work will be achieved.

The article consists of several parts. It first introduces the selected ontological and epistemic problems concerning the geography of tourism that will be subsequently addressed. The current methodological status of tourism geography is then briefly presented, followed by an explanation of the conceptual apparatus and the applied methodological procedure. This leads to the central point of the article: a discussion of the proper ontological and epistemic analysis of empirical entities that make up the tourism realm. The final section of the article summarizes a number of conclusions regarding the ontological and epistemic foundations of entities and is an attempt to answer the questions formulated at the beginning of the article. The whole account is embedded in the new-realist social ontology (Searle, 1995, 2011) and conducted from the perspective of analytic philosophy and general methodology, going beyond any specific disciplinary methodology. Such an external approach, situated outside the geographic sciences themselves, seems to be necessary in order to deal with the topic objectively as much as possible, even going beyond the local disputes of geographers.

Ontological and epistemic problems to consider

Given the above assumptions, it was concluded that the aim of the article will be achieved by searching for answers to a number of questions regarding the nature of the empirical field of tourism geography. Included are ontological questions such as: (1) What entities make up the empirical field of this sub-discipline? (2) How are they formed? (3) How do they exist in the world? and (4) What are their characteristics? They are supplemented by two epistemic questions, namely: (1) to what extent are these entities knowable and (2) what is the epistemic justification of the knowledge produced within the geography of tourism. The examination of the aforementioned issues is conducted within the framework of "innocent realism," as posited by Haack (2003, 2016). This conceptual construct revolves around the fundamental supposition that a single, albeit highly diverse, world exists, encompassing a wide array of elements, including both natural and anthropogenic (social) as well as material and immaterial components. Furthermore, this world is perceived as external and relatively autonomous in relation to the cognizant subject (i.e., the observer or researcher). This particular conception of reality proves to be particularly valuable when investigating the domain of tourism due to its intrinsic diversity and heterogeneity. Embracing such a perspective facilitates a more comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of the tourism realm, offering deeper insights into its intricate dynamics.

The concept of innocent realism is consistent with the new realist social ontology proposed by Searle (1995, 2011), who applies three criteria to the ontological and epistemological analysis of the world. They include:

(1) an intrinsic versus observer-relative features of entities; (2) their ontologically objective or subjective moods of existence; as well as (3) epistemic objectivity and subjectivity of claims describing the entities. Based on the results of analysis against these criteria, a series of ontological and epistemological conclusions are formulated. In accordance with the first criterion, the division into physical (natural) and human (socio-economic)[1] geography is ontologically justified. Then, applying the same condition, the position of tourism geography as part of human (socio-economic) geography was determined. Referring to the nature of entities that make up the empirical domain of tourism geography research, their dual ontological mode of existence was pointed out (criterion 2). And finally, based on the 3rd criterion, the epistemic status of various claims describing the empirical field of tourism geography has been determined.

The current methodological status of geography of tourism

The geography of tourism is one of the youngest geographical sub-disciplines. Its development was associated with the growing importance of tourism as a new social phenomenon entailing various socio-economic, cultural, spatial, and environmental consequences. Butler (2004) suggests that three distinct eras of geographical approaches to the study of tourism may be discerned: pre-1950 'descriptive period'; 1950 to circa 1980 'thematic period', and after-1980 to present 'diversity period'. The sub-discipline began to develop after World War I mostly in continental Europe, primarily in France (i.a. Blanchard, 1925; Borrel, 1933) and Germany together with German-speaking Austria and Switzerland (i.a. Grünthal, 1934; Poser, 1939). In Poland, the first institution carrying out regular geographical research and academic education on tourism was established in the 1930s at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Jackowski et al., 2016). Somewhat surprisingly, Anglo-Saxon geographers became interested in tourism on a larger scale only in Butler's 'thematic' period, i.e., at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s (Cazes, 1992). In a short time, however, they achieved quite a dominant position in tourism research, including geographical studies (Williams, 2009).

The fact that the geography of tourism has been from the beginning considered a socio-economic geographical sub-discipline is implicitly or explicitly demonstrated in the works of many authors (i.a. Warszyńska & Jackowski, 1974; Lijewski, Mikułowski & Wyrzykowski, 2002). It is also readily apparent in Warszyńska's and Jackowski's (1978: 15-16) "classic" definition, according to which the geography of tourism explores: (1) the suitability of geographical space for the needs of tourism, taking into account its forms and seasonality; (2) the influence of tourist phenomena on this space; and (3) processes caused by tourism, occurring in geographical space. Mitchell (1991) draws attention to the links between tourism and geography, emphasizing that spatial considerations of tourism focus mainly on the following topics:

> "Paradigms of land-use and spatial behavior, perception and images, location and spatial organization, resource allocation and user conflict, distribution and distance, planning and resource management, environment, descriptive, predictive and normative models..." (after Cazes, 1992: 10).

Kowalczyk (2001, 16) details this rather a large and vague area of study, pointing to its individual research fields, such as: (1) assessment of factors and conditions determining the importance of tourism in a given geographical area; (2) analysis of tourist traffic understood as a specific form of migration between emission and reception areas (destinations); (3) assessment of the impact of tourism on changes in the structure and spatial distribution of the economy in regions

[1] For the purposes of this article the terms "human geography" and "socio-economic geography" are treated as synonyms, although subtle distinctions can be found in the literature on the subject (Lisowski, 2004).

receiving tourists; (4) assessment of areas for the development of tourism, based on their natural and man-made resources; (5) identifying regions that should develop tourist functions for economic reasons. More specifically, this author proposes a synthetic definition of tourism geography as one of geographical sub-discipline that studies "the spatial differentiation of socio-cultural, economic, legal, political and environmental conditionings of tourism" (Kowalczyk, 2001: 20). Summing up these considerations at the most general level, it can be assumed that the geography of tourism deals with the spatial manifestations (determinants, consequences, impacts) of tourism (Knafou, 2011), similarly to the economics of tourism (dealing with economic factors), the sociology of tourism (dealing with social factors), and the psychology of tourism (dealing with the psychological aspects of tourism).

The theoretical output of tourism geography is characterized by a number of more or less complex and theorized concepts. Among them, the most characteristic are the concepts of tourist assets (attractions, resources), tourist attractiveness, tourist space (area, region, locality), tourist functions, tourist capacity, and tourist flow. They have been initially used to build first models, pre-theories and theories, quite often borrowed from other geographical and non-geographical disciplines. The most advanced among them are: i.a. Christaller's (1955) theory of peripheral areas (as a kind of development and complement to his basic central place theory), the tourist space theories proposed separately by Miossec (1977) and Liszewski (1995) as well as Butler's famous (1980) model of tourist area life cycle, or the concept of tourist urbanization introduced by Mullins (1991). They are examples of the theoretical achievements of geographers dealing with tourism. Most of them are characterized by a different level of theorizing and should rather be treated as loose theoretical concepts or pre-theories at most. Only a few (including i.a. the proposals of Christaller, Liszewski and Miossec, and primarily Butler) can be considered as relatively well-founded theories (or at least generalizations) that are able to explain and predict the development of tourism phenomena and processes.

Taking into account the above concepts, which belong to the achievements of socio-economic geography, one may confidently conclude, then, that the geography of tourism, which deals with various tourist phenomena from the spatial aspect, should be classified as one of the sub-divisions of socio-economic (human) geography. At the same time, it is quite obvious that tourism geographers (depending on the current research needs) use the achievements of other geographical sub-disciplines, primarily such as: geography of services, transportation geography, population geography, or cultural geography (Kowalczyk, 2001).

The methodological characteristics of tourism geography

In order to analyze the methodological characteristics of each empirical discipline it is necessary to indicate their particular components. This general statement should be applied to the geography of tourism. This will facilitate the determination of the scope of further analysis and the positioning of its results within the methodological characteristics of tourism geography. According to Chojnicki (2010), the methodological characteristics of each empirical discipline include its subject matter domain along with corresponding research problems and methods that are used to solve them. Whereby, the subject matter domain itself consists of two parts of different nature: empirical (material) and theoretical (abstract), (Fig. 1). The first corresponds to all entities (i.e. objects and their observable relations). The second is related to the knowledge about entities that is produced within a given discipline.

Given the significance of the above mentioned Chojnicki's classification all entities that make up the tourism realm will be analyzed from the ontological perspective. In turn, the knowledge about entities, that includes simple observed claims (i.e. claims that refer

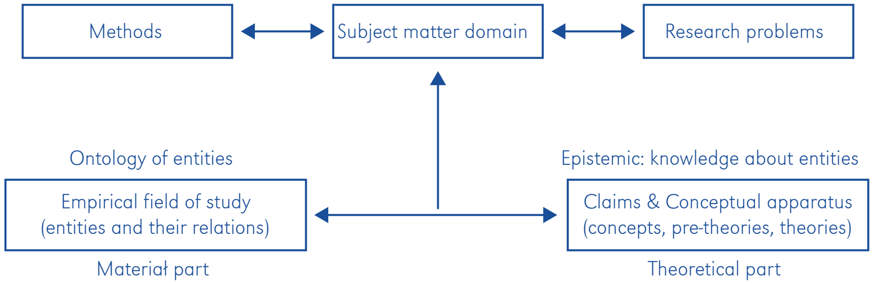

Figure 1. The methodological characteristics of any empirical scientific discipline (including geography)

to observable phenomena and facts) as well as their theoretical conceptualizations, will be subjected to an epistemic analysis.

With this distinction in mind, it should be also mentioned that many disciplines share the same empirical field of study, called also the material object of research. But what distinguishes them is the proper disciplinary aspect (called also the formal object of research) through which individual disciplines explore the same empirical entities (Maryniarczyk, 1998; Maciołek 2002). In this sense, all empirical entities that make up the domain of tourism can be explored by various disciplines in their specific aspects (Jafari & Brent Ritchie, 1981; Brent Ritchie, Sheehan & Timur 2008), also in the interdisciplinary approaches (Fig. 2). Among them, the geographical aspects of tourism will be studied by tourism geography.

The empirical field of tourism geography

Accepting the claim that the geography of tourism is one of the sub-disciplines of human (socio-economic) geography, one should ask about the deep ontology of entities that make up its empirical field of research. It seems that this important methodological problem has not been comprehensively addressed in the previous methodological works devoted

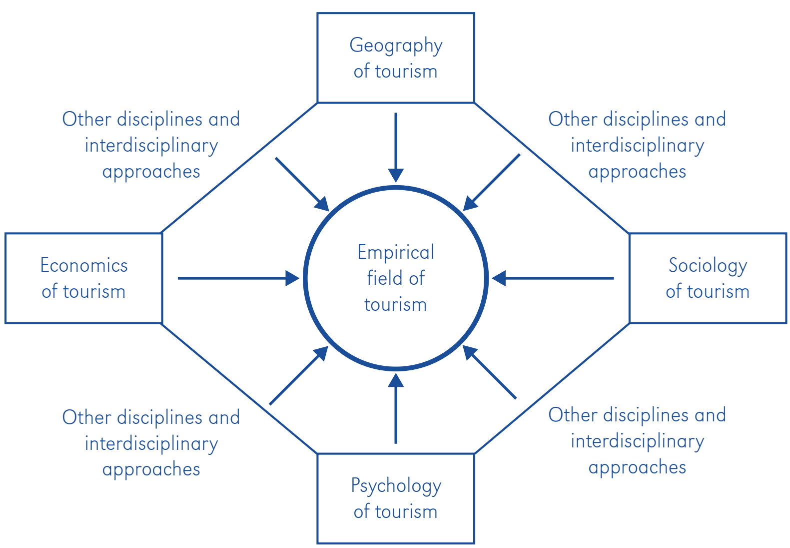

Figure 2. Tourism reality as the empirical field of research of various disciplines

to the geography of tourism—neither in Poland nor (probably) in the world geographical literature. In addition, the issue that is ontological in nature generates another question—the epistemic status of statements about these entities. The first step in tackling such challenges in the geographic aspect is to identify the different types of these entities.

When attempting to distinguish the empirical field of tourism geography, it should be noted that many authors (geographers and non-geographers) intuitively and implicitly carry out a similar operation at various levels of theoretical aggregation of empirical sets (with their individual elements) when defining their particular empirical fields of research. They do that from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives. For example, Kostrowicki (1975), Leiper (1979, 1990), Krzymowska-Kostrowicka (1980), Jafari (1987), Tribe (2006) and Butowski (2007) treated the empirical sets of tourism as subsystems of the tourism system, which, in turn, is part of higher-order systems. Lipiec (2008) distinguished within the empirical field of tourism its two main parts: tourists and objects (areas) spatially distant from them. In turn, Butowski (2019), dealing with tourism from the perspective of sustainability, points to three main groups of sets of empirical entities, i.e. tourists, local communities and the environment. None of them however aimed at carrying out an ontological analysis of the individual components recognized as those that make up the empirical field of tourism. On the other hand, the measures they used are good examples of subject conceptualizations of particular parts of the empirical domain. They are applied precisely to avoid problems with the direct indication of individual (groups of) objects, their properties and relations (Chojnicki, 1999).

One of the first who purposefully and explicitly presented such an attempt in the Polish literature was Mazurkiewicz (2009, 2012). He distinguished two main groups of entities (human and non-human) that make up the tourism reality. More specifically, he listed a series of empirical sets, such as: (1) tourists; (2) people running tourist businesses in the emitting areas; (3) people, living in receiving areas but not involved in tourism; (4) people working in institutions used by local communities and tourists; (5) people serving tourists commercially; (6) investors involved in the tourism industry; (7) people running non-commercial tourist attractions; 8) public authorities responsible for the development of tourism. They are supplemented by two groups of non-human and very heterogenous sets of entities that include: (1) natural objects with areas where they are located, used for the purposes of tourism; and (2) man-made objects, attractions, facilities and equipment of various kinds, without which tourism could not exist. As it is clearly seen, the list is neither complete nor disjoint. Additionally, the distinguished empirical sets are constructed at different levels of aggregation. Nevertheless, this is one of the first deliberate attempt in the Polish literature to explicitly and purposefully isolate the empirical sets of tourism. Regrettably, Mazurkiewicz failed to contextualize his typology within a more expansive framework of human geography, particularly within the conceptual structure of tourist space as elucidated by Lisowski (2003), which posits it as a type of ecological space.

It was preceded by implicitly conducted distinction of aggregated empirical tourists sets that was proposed by Chudoba (1999). On their basis, he distinguished four main tourist systems mapping the relationships between particular types of sets (or their groups) of entities. These are: (1) tourism practice system, (2) tourism organization system, (3) direct tourism service system, (4) indirect tourism service system. However, none of them makes an attempt to determine the ontological foundations of the entities they distinguished, those that make up the empirical domain of tourism.

In turn, the discussion on the nature of empirical objects that make up the tourism realm has been conducted (unfortunately rather without the participation of tourism geographers) among a few foreign social scholars. It primarily engages supporters of the constructionist approach in tourism studies (Pernecky, 2007, 2012) and critical realists (Botterill, 2014). Both parties, standing on opposite sides, have analyzed the ontological foundations of entities that create the tourism realm from their methodological perspectives. Finally, another point of view concerning the issue in question is worth mentioning. This is Ren's (2010, 2011) concept of radical ontology of tourism reality. It has been embedded in the concept of non-human agency and the Actor-Network theory. The radical nature of this concept consists in the fact that it proposes to equate at the same level all human and non-human actors (objects) of tourism reality.

Entities that make up the empirical field of tourism

In the broadest context, one should agree (on the basis of cognitive realism) that the empirical field of tourism is a certain fragment of directly or indirectly observable reality in which tourism phenomena occur. However, for the purposes of this article, and dealing with the geography of tourism, it would be better to replace the very vague concept of reality with a narrower concept of the geographical environment (Degórski, 2004) or space in which these phenomena occur. They are represented by directly or indirectly observable (or at least identifiable) entities, composed of sets of elements (objects) as well as visible manifestations of their behaviors, changes and relations between them (Fig. 3). The latter are observable in the form of social facts, such as e.g. tourist trips, stays in hotels, buying tickets and so on.

In a formal notation the empirical field (domain) of tourism geography can be defined as a certain universe that is composed of sets of entities (elements with their properties and relations) of various kinds (based on Grzegorczyk, 1963; Nowak, 1977; Chojnicki, 2010):

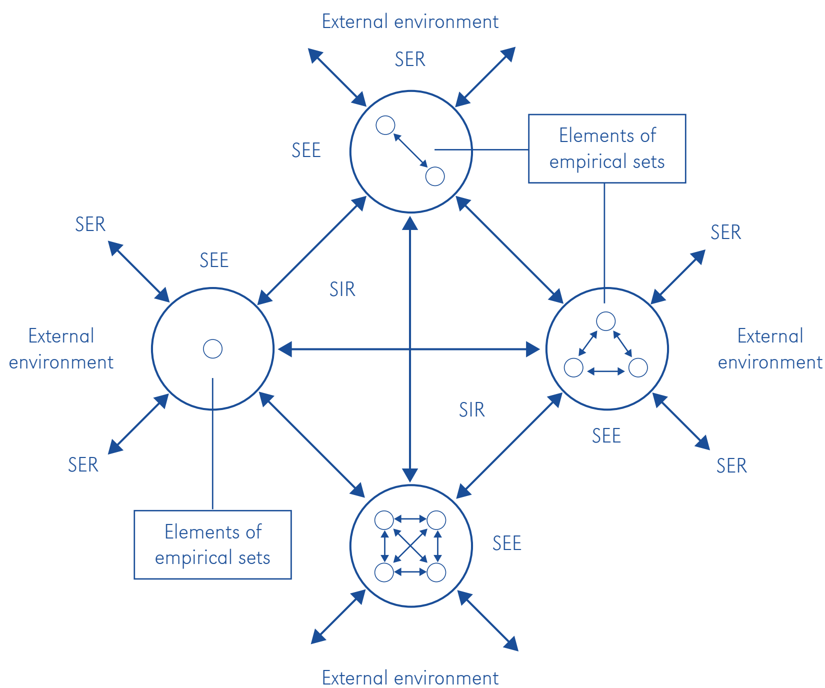

Figure 3. The empirical field of tourism geography as a network of empirical "tourist" sets with their relations, where: SEE – sets of empirical elements; SIR – sets of internal relations of SEE; SER – sets of external relations of SEE

$$D_{TG} = [U_{TG}: E_1,...E_n; P_1,...P_n; R_1,...R_n] \quad (1)$$

where:

D_{TG} – the empirical domain of tourism geography
U_{TG} – the universe of D_{TG}
$E_1,...E_n$ – sets of elements as subsets of U_{TG}
$P_1,...P_n$ – sets of properties of $E_1,...E_n$ as subsets of U_{TG}
$R_1...R_n$ – sets of relations of $E_1,...E_n$ as subsets of U_{TG}

In practice, we deal with empirical elements through their immanent properties. Therefore, Formula 1 can be simplified as follows:

$$D_{TG} = [U_{TG}: E_1,...E_n; R_1,...R_n] \quad (2)$$

where:

D_{TG} – the empirical domain of tourism geography
U_{TG} – the universe of D_{TG}
$E_1,...E_n$ – sets of elements with their properties as subsets of U_{TG}
$R_1...R_n$ – sets of relations of $E_1,...E_n$ as subsets of U_{TG}

Searle's social ontology as a tool to organize the tourism realm

The primary categories and conceptual framework advanced by Searle (1995, 2011) in his social ontology have been utilized to establish a sense of "order" and instill a logical hierarchy within the previously presented, somewhat disordered, empirical field of tourism. The following are the key categories:

1. Regulative and constitutive rules: These rules govern and give rise to human activities that would not be possible without their presence (Searle, 2018).
2. Functions: understood as the manifestation of human intentionality. They are attributed consciously by (human) users to natural objects and artifacts (Searle, 1995).
3. Status functions: This category pertains to a distinct type of functions assigned to both human individuals and objects, necessitating a collectively-recognized symbolic status for their performance, beyond their physical characteristics (Searle, 2017).
4. Human collective intentionality: this element is fundamental for the collective acceptance of constitutive rules and the recognition of functions, including status functions (Searle, 1990).
5. Deontic powers: encompassing various rights, duties, obligations, requirements, permits, authorizations, and entitlements; deontic powers are intrinsically linked to status functions
6. Desire-independent reasons for action: The recognition of deontic powers logically leads to the existence of reasons for action that are independent of individuals' inclinations and desires
7. Human institutions: Institutions emerge as the culmination of the aforementioned process, starting from the establishment of constitutive rules and the collective assignment of status functions to objects and individuals. Institutions comprise individuals who hold deontic powers (Searle, 2005).
8. Institutional facts: created within institutions. They are indispensable for the very existence of institutions (Searle, 2005).

Employing the aforementioned Searle's general categories, the logical process of constructing the tourism realm has been established and visually depicted in Figure 4, in which observable components of the empirical field of tourism are exposed.

According to Butowski and Butowski (2023), Figure 4 illustrates the following step-by-step process: Initially, human beings establish constitutive and regulative rules that are specific to tourism. Subsequently, these rules are put into action through the assignment of tourist functions, which encompass both ordinary and status functions attributed by individuals to objects and other human beings. As a consequence of these assigned functions, the individuals and objects are vested with tourism deontic powers. Based on these powers, the construction of tourism institutions takes place, within which tourism institutional facts are generated.

It is important to note that this process exhibits a structured and hierarchical nature, displaying a direction that accentuates the pivotal role of human beings as the participants, creators and orchestrators of the entire

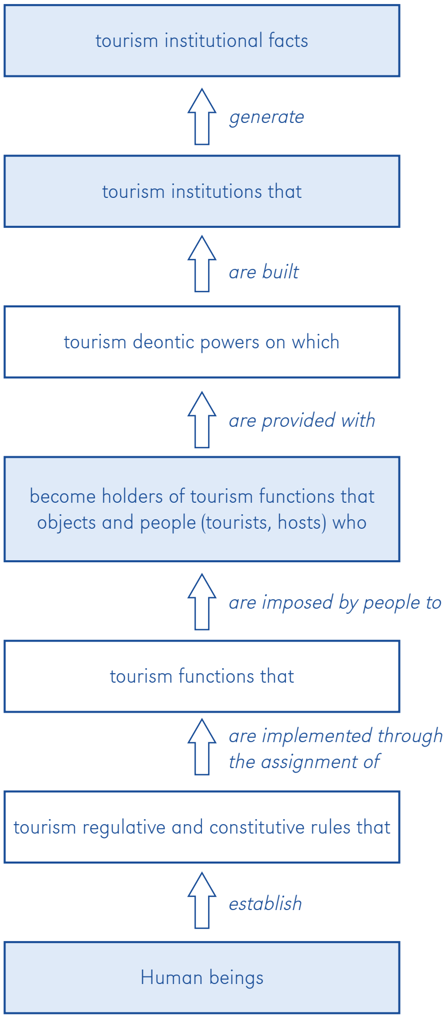

Figure 4. Perceptible components of the empirical field of tourism real in the process of its construction (flows from the bottom up), (adapted from Butowski & Butowski, 2023:725)

framework. In this sense we deal with social constructionism that is applied to build the reality of tourism (Pernecky, 2007, 2012).

The ontology of entities that make up the tourism realm

The ontological analysis of entities that make up the structured empirical field of tourism and, consequently, tourism geography is carried out by applying Searle's two criteria i.e., (1) intrinsic versus observer-dependent features of entities; and (2) ontologically subjective versus ontologically objective modes of their existence. Intrinsic or observer-independent features of entities are simply those that exist independently of humans. Observer-dependent (called also observer-relative and understood as human-relative), in turn, are those features of entities which are dependent on us for their existence. According to this distinction, physical characteristics (e.g. size, mass, weight, velocity, quantity) of a given object are its intrinsic features. On the other hand, all functions (including i.a. a tourist function) assigned by people to objects (and to other people) are their observer-relative features. A good test to distinguish between observer-independent and observer-dependent features of a given entity is to ask: Would they exist if human beings disappeared? In this sense, if we explore physical characteristics of Niagara Falls or The Great Pyramid of Giza, we are dealing with intrinsic features of these objects. On the other hand, when we analyze the same objects from the perspective of the functions we have assigned to them, we treat them as entities relative (dependent) to us as observers. Therefore, in the first case, Niagara Falls and the Great Pyramid of Giza are represented through their physical entities, and in the second case, we can treat them, e.g., as tourist attractions or economic assets.

Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of the aforementioned status functions. As previously elucidated, these functions distinguish themselves from "ordinary" functions as they are not attributed to objects or individuals based on their inherent physical characteristics. Instead, they derive their meaning and relevance from the widely accepted social recognition bestowed upon them. Many types of objects that perform status functions fill the empirical field of tourism. The simplest examples are: money, property, passports, visas, passenger tickets; another group includes tourist institutions or organizations. They are supplemented by people assigned status functions, which include, among others: local (regional) authorities responsible for the development of tourism, or various groups of persons performing tourism professions (tourist guides, hotel employees, souvenir sellers etc.). In general, tourist attractions fulfill their functions through physical features (e.g., Niagara Falls). However, there are instances where these attractions gain their status and recognition as tourist destinations by virtue of status functions. Such cases are often observed in trendy destinations frequented by celebrities, subsequently drawing the attention of tourists.

All of these entities, as components of empirical domain of tourism, are also the subject of geographers' research.

The second Searle's criterion concerns the distinction on ontologically subjective and ontologically objective modes of existence of entities. In this sense, people's desire to visit a given object or destination (e.g., Niagara Falls, Egyptian Pyramids, the Royal Castle in Krakow, or Côte d'Azur) is ontologically subjective, because the way it exists depends on people's emotional feelings. But all these objects (Niagara Falls, Egyptian Pyramids, the Royal Caste, and Côte d'Azur) themselves, unlike the desire to visit them, are ontologically objective, since their existence is independent of any mental state.

The epistemic status of claims about the tourism realm

Apart from the above mentioned ontological criteria, Searle (1995, 2011) proposes an epistemic criterion that refers to the status of claims. According to it, a given judgment is epistemically subjective when its truth or falsity depends on someone's feelings, emotions, believes, points of views, etc. On the other hand, a claim is epistemically objective when its truth or falsehood is independent of anybody's attitudes or feelings. An example of the first type of statement is the judgment that "Niagara Falls is more beautiful than Iguazú Falls", or that "French Riviera is more attractive than Italian Riviera". On the other hand, the following statements may be examples of epistemically objective claims: "Angel Falls is the tallest waterfall in the world" or "Casinos in Monte Carlo are visited by such and such number of guests". These two last sentences concern observable facts that can be verified or falsified.

Assuming the above assumptions to be true, it should be emphasized that when talking about subjective judgments, it is necessary to distinguish between their epistemically subjective content that, for example, Niagara Falls is more beautiful than Iguazú Falls, and the fact that this content refers to an ontologically subjective entity i.e. the belief that Niagara Falls is more beautiful than Iguazú Falls. According to Searle's postulate, it is possible to objectively study entities that are ontologically subjective. This means that when, for example, a group of people expresses their opinions in the form of epistemically subjective sentences ("Niagara Falls is more beautiful than Iguazú Falls"), the content of these sentences should be treated as an ontologically subjective entity and examined in an epistemically objective manner. This is one of the most important postulates of Searle's social ontology and its epistemological consequences.

Why is this conclusion so important from a methodological point of view? First of all, because it justifies the methodological status of those social sciences that use the so-called humanistic research model. This is also true in relation to humanistic geography, which refers to a wide-ranging body of research emphasizing the importance of human experience and meaning in understanding people's relationship with places and geographical environments (Seamon & Larsen, 2020). And consequently, to the geography of tourism, which also applies a humanistic approach in its research (apart from the naturalistic stand).

Results of analysis and their discussion

Bearing in mind the conceptual apparatus and adopted criteria, one can begin to ontologically and epistemologically analyze the entities that make up the empirical field of tourism geography. For the purpose of this article the following main sets of entities have been accepted:

1. tourist attractions, divided into natural and man-made, the latter divided into historical and contemporary artifacts; they are spatially distributed and located in individual destinations (receiving areas);
2. tourist destinations, understood as geographical areas of various kinds (sizes, characteristics etc.);
3. tourist and other infrastructure, facilities and equipment, understood as man-made material objects located in emitting and receiving areas and sometimes joining them (e.g. passenger transportation infrastructure);
4. people related to tourism in divers ways; they include three main sub-groups:
   - tourists (with their particular groups of various types and characteristics);
   - host communities, including: local authorities & businesses with their employees, NGOs representatives, people running commercially and non-commercially tourist attractions and infrastructure;
   - people running businesses (with their employees) located outside of destinations;
5. people not involved in tourism, but inhabiting tourist destinations;
6. tourists' and host communities' wills, feelings, motives, beliefs, experiences, perceptions; all of them represented by observable people's behaviors;
7. tourist & non-tourist social institutions performing status functions (e.g. money, property, tourist market(s), passports, visas, booking systems, hotel chains, tour operators, tourist guides etc.).

All of the above groups of entities have been purposefully chosen due to their different ontological positions and the epistemic status of claims describing them. The synthetic results of their analysis according to all three criteria are presented in Table 1.

Conclusions and discussion

The findings derived from the analysis of entities constituting the empirical field of tourism, and consequently, the geography of tourism, form the fundamental basis for direct ontological and epistemic inferences. The former entails exploring the mode of existence of these entities, while the latter pertains to the epistemic status of statements concerning them. As such, these conclusions address the underlying ontological and epistemic underpinnings of the entities, providing a concerted effort to respond to the questions posited at the onset of this article. The most important of them are presented below.

In the context of tourism, all entities, whether natural or man-made, inherently rely on the human observers for their conceptualization and significance. As integral components of the tourism realm, these entities are perpetually perceived and evaluated through the lens of their respective tourist functions. Consequently, it can be asserted that as tourist entities, they are intrinsically interwoven with the observers and cannot sustain an independent existence outside of this relational context. The above mentioned conclusion is of great importance on several levels of reference. Firstly, it can be treated as a kind of ontological proof justifying the division of the research field of geography into two parts: (1) natural, dealing with intrinsic, human-independent characteristics of objects; and (2) human-related, focusing on human-dependent features of objects. Secondly, in the light of the aforementioned reasoning, the geography of tourism, which deals with human-related components of geographical environment, must be consequently qualified as a sub-discipline of socio-economic (human) geography.

The functions assigned to entities that make up the empirical domain of tourism are of a twofold nature. Some of them, called ordinary functions, are assigned by virtue of physical characteristics of objects that are their bearers (e.g. most tourist attractions, technical infrastructure of various kinds).

Table 1. Ontological and epistemic status of entities that make up the empirical domain of tourism geography

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3" rowspan="5">Groups of entities that make up the tourism realm
(explored from the geographical aspect)</th><th colspan="3" rowspan="2">Features of entities:
Observer-</th><th colspan="2">Existence of entities</th><th colspan="2">Claims about entities</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">ontologically:</th><th colspan="2">epistemologically:</th></tr>
<tr><th rowspan="3">independent</th><th colspan="2">dependent</th><th rowspan="3">objective</th><th rowspan="3">subjective</th><th rowspan="3">objective</th><th rowspan="3">subjective</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">functions assigned
to entities</th></tr>
<tr><th>ordinary</th><th>status</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Tourist attractions (located in destinations)</td><td colspan="2">natural</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">man-made</td><td>historical</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td>contemporary</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Tourist infrastructure, facilities & equipment
(located in emitting areas and tourist destinations)</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Tourist areas as a separate kind of empirical entities</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">People</td><td colspan="2">involved in tourism:
tourists & hosts</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td rowspan="2"></td><td rowspan="2">X</td><td rowspan="2">X</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td rowspan="2">X</td><td rowspan="2">X</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">living in destinations but not involved in tourism</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">people’s will, perceptions, feelings, motives, beliefs, experiences etc.</td><td></td><td>n/a</td><td>n/a</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Human, social (tourist) institutions: e.g. (tourist) markets, money, property, visas, passports, tickets, guides etc.</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3"></td><td></td><td colspan="2"></td><td></td><td></td><td>Domain of geography of tourism (and other disciplines dealing with tourism)</td><td>Domain of beaux-art: belles-lettres, poetry, etc.</td></tr>
</table>

However, they are supplemented by another significant group of functions i.e. status functions that are assigned to entities (human and non-human) not because of their physical characteristics, but due to commonly accepted social recognition (e.g. passports, visas, hotel reservations etc.). The geography of tourism deals with both types of objects listed in point 3, to which ordinary or status functions have been assigned. While the first group does not raise any doubts, the second group of entities should be brought closer. In addition to the simplest examples of bearers of status functions indicated above, this group also includes more complex structures that exist in the form of various social, tourist institutions and institutional facts generated within them. Good examples of such facts can be various types of tourist behavior such as tourist trips, hotel stays, car rental, etc. Most of them are created within social (tourism) institutions that run their activity on the basis of status functions.

Most types of entities that make up the empirical field of tourism geography exist objectively in a sense that their existence does not depend on any human mental state. However, there is a group of entities within the empirical field of tourism that depend on people's emotional feelings. These are entities such as human wills, motives, perceptions, beliefs, experiences, etc. The way they exist makes them qualify as ontologically subjective. Ontologically subjective entities are the subject matter of the geography of tourism because they influence the behavior of people in general and the behavior of tourists and hosts in particular. These behaviors are represented primarily by various forms of tourist actions and practices e.g. people's choice of places visited, the way they spend their time and so on. They are all observable social facts that occur in geographical space, and therefore arouse the interest of geographers.

All of the above outcomes concern the way in which the entities that make up the empirical field of tourism geography exist in the world. They therefore refer to their ontological status. The next conclusions are in turn devoted to the epistemic status of claims about these entities.

Bearing in mind Searle's assumption that a given proposition (claim, statement) is epistemically subjective or objective, when its truth or falsity depends or does not depend on someone's feelings, it may be said that statements about entities that make up the empirical domain of tourism can be both subjective and objective. Nevertheless, a crucial inquiry arises as to whether subjective and objective statements can be regarded with equal scientific validity (considering its broad interpretation that encompasses social sciences) within the above expounded context. This equivalence could be viewed as meeting the criterion of intersubjectivity. However, the principles of cognitive new realism rebut this notion, asserting a contrary stance. They posit the primacy of scientific objectivity, encompassing social sciences and even certain branches of humanities, as a defining characteristic that sets scientific inquiry apart from alternative approaches to understanding the world. What should be emphasized at this point, however, is the fact that also entities that exist as ontologically subjective (with their empirical representations in the form of social facts) can (and should) be scientifically studied in an epistemically objective way. This means that we (as scholars) can explore objectively such things as the empirical representations of human subjective beliefs, experiences, perceptions, desires and motives. This is one of the most important postulate of Searle's concept of new realism (at least in its epistemic part).

The aforementioned conclusions are fully valid also in relation to geographical sciences as a whole and the geography of tourism as one of their socio-economic sub-disciplines. In practice, this means that both in the naturalistic and humanistic models of socio-economic geography, the knowledge produced should be objective (intersubjective), as presented in Table 2.

Considering the implications derived from the objective nature of scientific knowledge, which encompasses geographical knowledge, it becomes pertinent to explore

Table 2. The methodological position of tourism geography in the light of ontological and epistemic subjectivity/objectivity

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="5">Geography of tourism (as part of socio-econom-ic geography)</td><td colspan="3" rowspan="2">Features of entities (that form the empirical field of tourism geography) Ontologically</td><td colspan="2">Existence of entities</td><td colspan="2">Claims about entities</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">epistemologically</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">observer-independent</td><td colspan="2">observer-dependent</td><td rowspan="3">objective</td><td rowspan="3">subjective</td><td rowspan="3">objective</td><td rowspan="3">subjective</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">assigned functions</td></tr>
<tr><td>ordinary</td><td>status</td></tr>
<tr><td>Naturalistic model</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td rowspan="2">Non-scientific approaches</td></tr>
<tr><td>Humanistic model</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td></tr>
</table>

the significance of epistemically subjective statements concerning reality, including the realm of tourism. While these statements undeniably exist, their value should not be dismissed. On the contrary, they occupy a distinct domain associated with artistic expression (in its broadest sense), spirituality, and even religion. These subjective narratives contribute to a comprehensive portrayal of the world and assume an equally crucial role in the pursuit of understanding, as depicted in Figure 5. To accommodate this insight, the rightmost columns of Table 1 and Table 2 have also been appended.

Finally, it should be emphasized that when dealing with epistemically different types of statements about the world, they should not be assessed as better (more credible, convincing, etc.) or worse. They simply belong to different epistemic groups of statements, and it makes no sense to compare them in this way.

Final considerations

Perhaps at the end of these considerations it is worth asking the fundamental question whether they are needed at all. Admittedly, various authors referred to at the beginning of the article emphasize the need to deepen the philosophical and theoretical foundations of science, including geography and research on tourism. Some of them even lamented that:

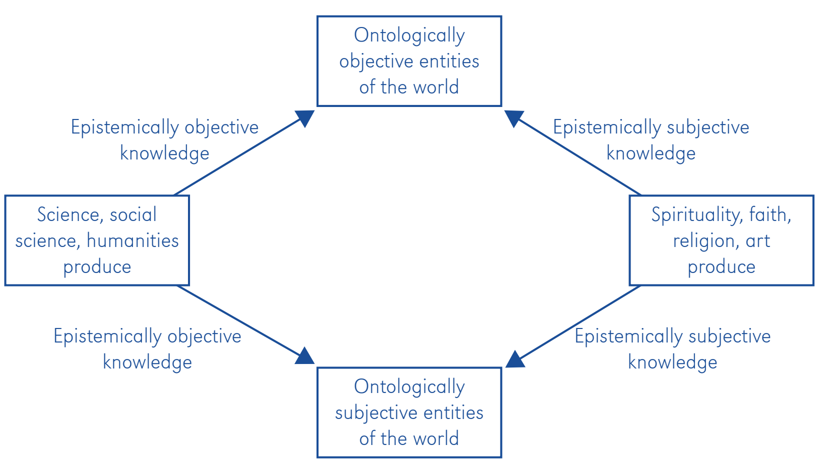

Figure 5. Epistemic objectivity and subjectivity in the process of producing knowledge about the world

> "Scholars interested in tourism have been criticized for a lack of interest in the ontological and epistemological [...] foundations of their work, including the notion that some tourism knowledges are created for tourism knowledges' sake in a fragmented, incoherent and unsystematic manner". (Coles et al., 2009: 81).

On the other hand, certainly many geographers and other tourism researchers successfully conduct their empirical investigations and do not see much need to reflect on issues that do not have a direct impact on their research activity. So, the answer is by no means unambiguous. This is also evidenced by the dilemmas of Searle himself, who shares them in one of his works:

> "It is impossible to tell in advance what is going to be useful for actual research. [...] My instinct, though, is to think that it is always a good idea to understand the foundational issues. It is much more plausible to me to think that an understanding of the basic ontology of any discipline will deepen the understanding of issues within that discipline." (Searle, 2011: 200).

Bearing in mind these opinions and the doubts that arise from them, the author of this article favors Searle's contention that it is always better to understand some basic ontological foundations of any discipline, as this should make it easier to understand the issues within that discipline. In the case of socio-economic geography, and especially the geography of tourism, defining these foundations seems particularly important due to their actual underdevelopment.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the article's idea that science (in its broadest sense) can objectively deal not only with entities that are ontologically objective, but also with those that are ontologically subjective, seems fundamental. This applies in particular to the humanistic model used in the social sciences, including socio-economic geography (and tourism research conducted within it). This model deserves to be considered fully scientific, provided that it accepts the postulate that scientific statements should by definition be objective (intersubjective). If this were not the case, they would be no different from other forms of describing the world that belong to art, spirituality or even religion.

And finally, the broad implications of this discussion should be noted. The reasoning, inferences, and conclusions presented in the article regarding the geography of tourism can be successfully referred to and applied to other geographical sub-disciplines. In this sense, the analysis of the ontological and epistemic principles underlying the geography of tourism serves as a model for all geographical sciences (especially from socio-economic geography) and perhaps even all other social sciences.

Editors' note:
Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the author's, on the basis of their own research.

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