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RESPONSE



Poor picking: a response to Keyan Tomaselli and a plea for critical research in neo-liberal times

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In *Picking on the Poor*, Keyan Tomaselli (2017) raises some important points that concern all researchers studying sustainable tourism. He does so in response to a recent paper of mine in this journal (Koot, 2016), in which I argued that sustainable tourism, when implemented as a joint venture between a private sector partner and a marginalised South African Bushmen community, can run into trouble achieving its development objectives for the community. Based on two “contradictions of capitalism” in tourism, I argue that, first, based on “authenticity”, the commodified image of marginalised Bushmen becomes like a brand that creates revenue for others but not for the Bushmen themselves. Second, based on paternalist, post-colonial relations between white managers and the “submissive” Bushmen, “development” becomes defined too much in terms of financial success only. As a result, I showed that the assumed economic and educational trickle-down effects hardly take place. Using a lodge (the !Xaus Lodge managed by Transfrontier Parks Destinations, TFPD) as a case study, I show how problematic the joint venture concept can be, in that it becomes mainly a further spread of neo-liberal capitalism instead of a “solution” for the Bushmen’s marginalised status.

In disagreement, Tomaselli raises many points, most of which I do not have the space to respond to in detail here. I therefore highlight his two, in my opinion, most important points; points that I hope are also of interest to a broader audience. These are first, Tomaselli’s objection to my analysis of the !Xaus Lodge – and joint venture initiatives more generally – as neo-liberal capitalist, and second, his critique of my researcher position. I do want to note, however, that writing this reply was not easy, principally because Tomaselli evidently and often bluntly misinterprets my paper in many ways, while at the same time trying to explain theory that he does not himself seem to understand. This leads to numerous unsubstantiated claims about my work, faulty statements and ill-conceived inferences that, for the sake of debate, I will not go into here: it would not be helpful for the reader. When I, therefore, say that I am responding to what I believe are his most important arguments, I want to stress that I have interpreted these in a way that I believe does justice to broader debates on the connections between neo-liberal capitalism and sustainable tourism in Indigenous settings, not necessarily what I see as a perhaps confused response by Tomaselli.

On tourism joint ventures and neo-liberal capitalism

A key point of difference between Tomaselli and myself concerns our approach to research, and specifically to research on the use of joint partnerships with the private sector and Indigenous people. Whereas Tomaselli (and his research group) focuses on consultancy-style solutions for the !Xaus Lodge through “action research” – with a focus on improving the Lodge’s marketing – he does not significantly scrutinise the concept of public–private community partnerships in tourism involving marginalised Indigenous people. Indeed, his work does not problematise the concept, either in research or in writing. In contrast, my paper explicitly theorised the public–private community

concept within the broader political economy of neo-liberal capitalism, while linking this to the consequences of post-colonial power relations in “sustainable” tourism. This makes my paper mostly an example of critical or fundamental research (as opposed to Tomaselli’s positivist interpretation).

One key disagreement in these different approaches concerns the role of the state in neo-liberal capitalism. Tomaselli repeatedly stresses that the !Xaus Lodge is first and foremost a state failure – a history that has been written various times before by him and his colleagues; see, for example, Dyll, 2009; Tomaselli, 2012a – whereas my paper focuses on the *contemporary* relation between the private sector and the local Bushmen. A returning idea in *Picking on the Poor* is that national governments do not, or cannot, implement and/or spread a neo-liberal ideology. This, however, is an example of his incorrect understanding of the workings of neo-liberalism. In reality, the state is a crucial player in contemporary neo-liberal capitalism, in South Africa more generally (Peet, 2002) and in the enablement of an environment in which southern African trans-frontier conservation and its neo-liberal developments – such as public–private community tourism initiatives – can take place more specifically (Büscher, 2010). Therefore, Tomaselli’s basic assumption that the !Xaus Lodge cannot be a neo-liberal project does not hold. Quite the opposite: state implementation of market-friendly business models as *the* path to develop the marginalised areas and peoples shows the expansion of neo-liberal ideology through state involvement. Furthermore, regardless of the failure of the state’s initial project, TFPD – a commercial, for profit, operator – intervened in the process after the state had pulled out, further intensifying neo-liberal capitalist development ideologies, and making them “work” according to this logic. And while this may have led to *financial* “success”, as Dyll-Myklebust & Finlay (2012) argue, it does not necessarily warrant any broader conclusions about development of Indigenous peoples. Numbers can easily be used to hide particular shortcomings.

Next, I link the contradictions of capitalism in my paper with branding and the perpetuation of post-colonial paternalism. In relation to branding, I do not doubt that TFPD is “feeding significant financial returns to stakeholders and local services and suppliers”. Yet I explained that it is ironic that such revenues hardly reach those who *are* the brand, the Bushmen, who thereby play a crucial role in attracting these revenues. Although Tomaselli tries to provide a counter-argument using financial statistics, none of those numbers are about the Bushmen specifically, who are the focus of my case. Moreover, what is even more worrying is that he writes off paternalism as something from “earlier times in an Afrikaner nationalist ethnic apartheid economy when this form of boss-labour behaviour did indeed occur”, thereby disregarding many contemporary Bushmen complaints that I encountered and the problematic issue of white domination in a post-apartheid (tourism) economy. Assumptions about power and white supremacy – arguably more relevant today than ever – continually influence development processes and the Bushmen’s agency. Such paternalism, as a post-colonial power construct, provides for the further spreading of neo-liberal ideologies since the white “bosses” – in the role of tourism manager/operator *and* community development worker – tend to partake in and stimulate this ideology, often as the only way to develop “their” Bushmen.

The critical researcher position

The second main point concerns the researcher’s position. Basically, what is at stake here is a danger for researchers of getting too close to private sector partners – or any other actors – and by doing so losing their ability to maintain a critical distance. Of course, maintaining critical distance is very hard, and personal involvement with our subjects of research is inevitable, but I argue that it is important not to give up on this altogether. Whereas “independence” might be impossible to achieve, it always remains important to keep a certain critical distance based on theoretical and methodological reflection. But it seems as if Tomaselli does not allow for any other researchers to do so, since he believes that Bushmen are “playing with academics, sending them on wild goose chases”. According to him, Bushmen tend to “manipulate researchers to make particular observations while scoring points against other researchers”. While obviously this may sometimes be the case (as any other research subjects may also do), to base one’s argument on this is derogatory to both Bushmen and to other

researchers: such general assumptions do not necessarily apply to all. Furthermore, it raises the question who precisely were “fooled” and how. Tomaselli and most of his research colleagues, for example, either do not speak Afrikaans, or do not speak it well (Afrikaans is the first language of the area), which means the role of a translator/interpreter becomes crucial in order to avoid being “fooled”. In other words, how can Tomaselli, if he hardly speaks the main language of the area, ascertain that only others are fooled, and not himself?

Unfortunately, this is hardly elaborated upon in his preferred “auto-ethnographic” accounts (based on rather short trips to the Kalahari, in which he and his colleagues have mostly engaged with a particular minority section of the Bushmen called the “traditionalists”). Auto-ethnography is an important methodology, but it should never be used as an excuse to refrain from self-reflexivity and explanations of one’s own researcher position, especially one’s relation to research subjects. And making statements about “scoring points” and “wild goose chases” without giving examples not only disregards the different experiences and qualities of many researchers, it also silences the Bushmen (see Biesele & Hitchcock, 2008, for a similar critique) who apparently “tell every researcher the same stories”. This would imply that only Tomaselli understands and knows (how to interpret) the Bushmen. Moreover, a further specification of the Bushmen’s “hidden interests” was not provided. Even more important, it implies that we should not believe, or at least not take seriously, what the Bushmen tell us and what their feelings and perceptions are about developments in the area. So by stating that “[w]hat they [the Bushmen] say should be checked, cross-referenced, triangulated and consistently interrogated and treated with scepticism until corroborated”, shows Tomaselli’s distrust of the Bushmen and it also raises the question why he needs to say this so explicitly about the Bushmen, and not make it a general point including TFPD and other actors? Moreover, it does not make sense with regard to my ethnographic fieldwork, in which my main aim was to capture the Bushmen’s perceptions of tourism developments. To this aim, I interviewed most of the Bushmen !Xaus employees, most of the former employees and various others who have not been directly involved in the lodge. Additionally, I have interviewed and spoken to various of the white management staff of !Xaus and TFPD and I have been in a position to observe employer–employee interactions. So if my triangulation is incomplete, I would have preferred to hear more directly exactly who and what was lacking in my triangulation and why these actors would be so crucial in my analysis. The mentioning of tourists, for example, is of no concern to my argument at all.

Overall, the impression that I get from *Picking on the Poor* – a rather harsh title that remains unexplained – is that Tomaselli’s critical research stance in relation to a private sector partner has not been thought through thoroughly, and this essentially problematic relation does not come with the in-depth self-reflection in his writings that it needs. This relates to a broader global phenomenon in which collaboration with the private sector by researchers can compromise researchers’ impartiality and thereby their critical distance. I find this very worrying, and, therefore, I believe scholars in (sustainable) tourism, largely a for-profit sector, need to be aware of such potential dependencies and try their best to keep an independent and critical stance. I appreciate the “action research” approach by Tomaselli and colleagues – something he wrongly credits me for doing previously in Namibia – and I appreciate how they have worked with the Bushmen “in a strategic partnership with TFPD to help rescue the lodge on their (and the co-owner, the Mier’s) behalf”. But this immediately relates to his own statement about “the researchers’ Self-Other relationship with O’Leary [the TFPD director] and his company” that Tomaselli has experienced and the “pull” this has created “to take sides” (Tomaselli, 2012a, p. 6). Although Tomaselli – himself a good friend of O’Leary – is open about this methodological problem that he and colleagues have encountered, he does not further explain how they have handled the problem (apart from some formalities) or what the consequences of this relationship might be. Quite the contrary, their research “was actively applied to shape business decisions” (Tomaselli, 2012b, p. 45), and Tomaselli and colleagues have been “searching for solutions to make the lodge viable and to enable multiplier effects for the local communities”, never doubting whether the concept of the lodge as such was a good idea in the first place, thereby seemingly positioning themselves as uncritical consultants.

In conclusion, my paper and Tomaselli's response together highlight one of the biggest current threats to critical academia and raises issues far beyond South Africa. Those issues include the crucial need for self-reflexivity amongst researchers (see Salazar, 2017) and the special dangers, opportunities and requirements of being able to work closely with the subjects being researched (see Higuchi & Yamanaka, 2017). But if we forget to engage with important theory, get too close with the private sector and their interests – or any other stakeholder – and neglect the necessary reflection on our own position, we put at risk our critical voice as intellectuals. By doing so, pieces of work such as *Picking on the Poor* can become mainly works of “poor picking”.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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