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The complex geographies of inequality in contemporary slum tourism

Panel Organisers:

Tore E.H.M. Holst, Thomas Frisch, Fabian Frenzel, Malte Steinbrink, Ko Koens

The visitation of areas of urban poverty is a growing phenomenon in global tourism (Burgold & Rolfes, 2013; Dürr & Jaffe, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Frenzel, Koens, Steinbrink, & Rogerson, 2015). While it can be considered a standard tourism practise in some destinations, it remains a deeply controversial form of tourism that is greeted with much suspicion and scepticism (Freire-Medeiros, 2009). In the emerging research field of slum tourism, the practices are no longer only seen as a specific niche of tourism, but as empirical phenomena that bridge a number of interdisciplinary concerns, ranging from international development, political activism, mobility studies to urban regeneration (Frenzel, 2016).

Slum tourism is sometimes cast as a laboratory where the relationships and interactions between the global North and South appear as micro-sociological encounters framed by the apparent concern over inequality. Beyond questioning the ways in which participants shape the encounters in slum tourism, structural implications and conditions come to the fore. Thus spatial inequality influences opportunities and hinders governance solutions to manage slum tourism operations (Koens and Thomas, 2016). Slum tourism is found to be embedded into post-colonial patterns of discourse, in which 'North' and 'South' are specifically reproduced in practices of 'Othering' (Steinbrink, 2012). Evidence has been found for the use of slum tourism in urban development (Frenzel, 2014; Steinbrink, 2014) and more widely in the commodification of global care and humanitarian regimes (Becklake, 2014; Holst, 2015). Research has also pointed to the ethical implications of aestheticizing poverty in humanitarian aid performances and the troubles of on-the-ground political engagement in a seemingly post-ideological era (Holst 2016).

More recently a geographical shift has been observed regarding the occurrence of slum tourism. No longer a phenomenon restricted to the Global South, slum tourism now appears increasingly in the global North. Refugee camps such as Calais in the north of France have received high numbers of visitors who engage in charitable action and political interventions. Homeless tent cities have become the subject of a concerned tourist gaze in the several cities of the global north (Burgold, 2014). A broad range of stigmatised neighbourhoods in cities of the global North today show up on tourist maps as visitors venture to 'off the beaten track' areas. The resurfacing of slum tourism to the global North furthers reinforces the need to get a deeper, critical understanding of this global phenomena.

Mobility patterns of slum tourists also destabilise notions of what it means to be a tourist, as migrants from the Global North increasingly enter areas of urban poverty in the South beyond temporal leisurely visits, but as low level entry points into cities they intent to make their (temporal) home. Such new phenomena destabilise strict post-colonial framings of slum tourism, pointing to highly complex geographies of inequality.

In this session we aim to bring together research that casts the recent developments in slum tourism research. We aim specifically in advancing geographical research while retaining a broad interdisciplinary outlook.

Please send your abstract or expressions of interest of no more than 300 words to Tore E.H.M Holst (tehh@ruc.dk) and Thomas Frisch (Thomas.Frisch@wiso.uni-hamburg.de) by October 15th 2016

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