

THE ROLE OF THE TOURISM CLUSTERS IN THE DYNAMIC WORLD OF TOURISM

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Abstract: The tourism sector is taking up the issue of local growth dynamics and is banking on a territorial organization inspired by clusters to develop destination development policies. A cluster can be defined as a geographically close group of interrelated enterprises and associated institutions in a given field, between which there are common elements and complementarities. This concept is now the subject of much research in tourism and inspires experiences of tourism destination development around the world.

In scientific approaches, the concept of cluster highlights, on the one hand, the role of organizational proximities, built from spatial proximities in the dynamics of competitiveness of tourist destinations. On the other hand, tourism clusters are developing all over the world.

The challenge of this article is therefore to show that the simple transfer of a scientific tool developed in the industrial context to the management of tourist destinations poses a problem. It must be enriched to understand the dynamics of local tourism development and acquire more operational efficiency.

Special specific dimensions should in fact be taken into account, which will be addressed based on the process of co-production inherent in tourist activity, the dynamics of singular proximities in this field of tourism and the characteristics of the embeddedness of tourist activities in the territory. Finally, the authors propose a cluster model more suited to tourist destinations.

Keywords: Tourism, cluster, development, regional development, proximity.

JEL Classification: O13, R11, Z32.

Introduction

In line with the directions taken by industrial policy, the tourism sector is taking up the issue of local growth dynamics and is banking on a territorial organization inspired by clusters to develop destination development policies. Mikael Porter (1999) defines a cluster as “a geographically close group of interrelated enterprises and associated institutions in a given field, between which there are common elements and complementarities”. This concept, which has served as a model in the context

of many industrial development policies, in Europe and North America, is now the subject of much research in tourism and inspires experiences of tourism destination development around the world. The transfer of this concept, which emanates from the industrial economy and the spatial economy, to an activity with a high service content, however, calls for reflection, which this article takes up. The work of Porter (1999) essentially concerns the territorialized organization of a value chain intended to produce market goods, sold on a local or distant market and subsequently consumed without the customer having participated in the design and production of the good. The production of a tourist experience is quite different: it is the act of the tourist who mobilizes resources and services to live his tourist experience on the territory where they are co-invented and co-produced. To take into consideration the specificity of the tourist activity, research must integrate the co-creative and co-productive dimension of tourism, and in fact enrich the concept of cluster. The latter must in particular take into account a singular dynamic of proximity, tourism being mobile and perishable by its nature. It cannot, moreover, abstain from taking into account the diversity of the territorial socio-economic organizations generating the dynamics of growth, that is to say the methods of embedding tourist activities in the considered territories.

We thus propose to revisit the concept of cluster to understand the territorial organization of an activity of co-production of experience. Three entries are available:

- the intensity of co-production and co-creation;
- the quality and intensity of organized proximity;
- and the embedding of tourist activity in the socio-economic space.

This research is essentially conceptual. It finds its origin in a confrontation between management sciences and geography to understand the dynamics of development of tourist destinations.

We underline in particular that the association of the tourist with the co-creation of resources and the co-production of the tourist experience requires the integration at least partial of the latter within the network of constituent actors of the cluster. We question the dynamics of proximities at work and show that the question of proximities, organized and geographical, arises in a singular way: the otherness with which the tourist can be confronted calls for a differentiated intermediation according to his needs and his skills acquired in past experiences. Finally, we question the diversity of the forms of embeddedness of tourist activity. A last part summarizes our proposals in a model enriched with the concept of tourist cluster and underlines the consequences for the governance of these territories. We insist in particular on the fact that the tourism cluster is a place created by and for tourists that is to say by and for their confrontation with the world.

Limits to applying the dynamics of local industrial organizations to the dynamics of local tourism organizations

Torre (2006) observes that “clusters are today considered the basis of local, even national, policies in many countries”. Doesn't the massive use of this concept risk emptying it of its meaning? We propose to rediscover this concept by reducing it to simple elements which found it but also constitute its limit for the analysis of tourist activities. We recall that it is used to describe a productive dynamic linked to network externalities, the local dissemination of knowledge and the quasi-integration of firms. If these elements make it convincing for analyzing tourism, we note that it considers economic activity from a completely industrial perspective: a logic of supply and sequenced value chain. We then recall the proximities at stake in this dynamic of economic development. Research on the economy of proximities is of interest to tourism in the first place: if tourism is mobility, it results in temporary

collocation and a confrontation with otherness which questions the proximities and intermediations at work. Finally, we underline the socio-economic plasticity of the concept of cluster, used to study very diverse industrial organizations. This plasticity seems to us to have to be clarified when we analyze tourist territories with very varied socio-economic configurations and inscribed within rigid administrative territorial limits.

A dynamic of intermediated proximity

Work on territorial productive dynamics questions the logic of proximity implemented. The territorial anchoring of activities and geographical proximity are not sufficient to explain the singular dynamics of these territories. Coordination must be considered from an “interactionist” perspective and the researcher must recognize the idea that if there is geographical proximity, there is not necessarily coordination (Zimmermann, 2008).

Rallet and Torre (1995, 2005) proposed to speak of “organized” proximity to evoke a proximity that is not only geographical but also relational. This can be linked to the fact that economic agents recognize themselves in similar or complementary positions, in projects or organizations. We then speak of organizational proximity. It also arises from the sharing of codes, values or representations. We then speak of institutional proximity. This organized proximity is driven by multiple mechanisms. It is not linked to geographical proximity, which is neutral until it is activated, or can even sometimes prevent cooperation. It is rather exchanges, learning, collaborations or competitive behaviors that will encourage it.

The question of proximity arises with quite natural acuity when it comes to considering tourist activities: tourists prepare a trip, which implies relations – at a distance – with local actors, stay on the territory, and therefore interact to varying degrees with local actors, then come back armed with new experiences, new knowledge that they remember and which can bring them back to this territory later on. These three times question the forms of proximity activated or created.

The latter also attest to the need for intermediation. In the dynamics of innovation, the role of intermediation organizations is well known. The same is true in training. Their function can be summarized in four points:

- the connection and the circulation of information between actors in the territory;
- the animation of networks of actors;
- the translation and the interpretation of the proposals of the actors allowing their adjustment;
- and the coordination of actors of a common project, the definition of common objectives, the federation of the means to achieve them.

In his tripolar model, Bernard Soulage (1994) mentions the primordial place of intermediation institutions: they constitute one of the three groups of actors who activate a territorial economic dynamic. They promote networking, the activation of organized proximity, the irrigation of the territory by social networks carrying social capital.

Tourism involves a very large number of actors as diverse as public authorities, private companies, residents and tourists. It brings into play a confrontation with otherness and is fundamentally linked to mobility. It raises obvious questions relating to the connection and coordination of actors, the animation of networks, and the creation of social capital. The cluster organization of tourist territories naturally invites us to question the dynamics of proximity and the key role of network facilitators, intermediation institutions, which activate them.

A dynamic linked to the socio-economic configuration of the territories

Courlet (2002) recalls that there are multiple socio-economic configurations of growing territories. Based on the work of Markusen (2000), we can thus highlight four types of agglomerations:

- the first, the Marshallian district, is made up of a dense network of SMEs;
- the second revolves around a large company, which is not necessarily from the local system, and maintains strong relations with a fabric of local companies but also with the outside world;
- the third is marked by the driving presence of a large state facility (administrative or military base);
- the last presents the less dense local network. Consisting mainly of branch platforms of large external companies, it is essentially outward-looking.

Nor can territorialized productive organizations be analyzed by disregarding the specificity of the productive activities concerned. When he speaks of clusters, Porter (1998) does not specify whether the economic dynamics envisaged are specific to certain types of industries or economic activities.

Proximity effects, the form of coordination, the nature of social conventions, or the dynamics of innovation are of course specific to each form of local industrial organization. They generate specific development trajectories and require very different modes of governance. The strategies of local actors, the modalities of interaction and coordination, the economies of agglomeration present singularities which must be taken into account by the analysis of proximities, but which cannot be assumed to be identical according to all local configurations. Moreover, coordination and economic interactions do not necessarily require long-term co-location to be knowledge-creating. The reduction in the cost of transporting goods, people and information facilitates interactions and coordination outside the territories which ultimately can be content with episodic co-location to generate a form of organized proximity.

The embedding of activities in the territories considered, their articulation with the social context, seems here again to question the scientific community: the diversity of tourist territories, of their socio-economic configurations, cannot be satisfied with a hypothesis of harmonious articulation proximity to support a tourism cluster model.

The intensity of co-production and co-creation

The concepts of coproduction and servuction are little used in the analysis of tourism, and in particular in approaches to territorial dynamics. In the literature on tourism clusters, the tourist only appears very marginally and only as a consumer. However, he is always, admittedly to varying degrees, actor-producer and designer of his tourist experience. Pascal Cuvelier (1998) thus refutes the use of the concept of consumption in relation to tourism. He replaces it with that of practice which, according to him, better reflects the investment of the individual in the field of tourism.

A major lesson from these analyzes for understanding the productive dynamics that drives tourism clusters is the emphasis placed on the intentionality of the tourist and his ability to mobilize the territorialized constellation of values for the benefit of his project. Tourism clusters are driven by commercial and non-commercial relations that tourists maintain with local actors, businesses, institutions, objects, but also other tourists, during moments of virtual co-presence — preparing for the stay — or actual co-presence. — the tourist stay. Contrary to analyzes in terms of the value chain which sometimes completely exclude it, the tourist on the contrary plays a decisive role in relation to

the other actors who offer but do not have. Consequently, the tourist must be integrated into the cluster.

The dynamics of intermediated proximities

However, the dynamics of co-production collide all the more with the extent and diversity of the terrestrial space as the tourist ecumene, inhabited by tourists, is today larger than the ecumene of permanent inhabitants. The tourist is therefore confronted with the greatest possible diversity since the means of transport make it possible to travel the world.

The model of Cuvelier (1998) makes it possible to understand the diversity of the “worlds” of tourism by considering two continuums: the complexity/simplicity of the services offered by the intermediaries and the autonomy/heteronomy of their implementation. The four worlds of tourism thus highlighted reflect different levels in the intensity of the co-production of the tourist experience: autonomy refers to the figure of a tourist who is very active in co-creation and co-production, while the complexity refers to the variety of services implemented and their articulation in a tailor-made tourist experience.

The intermediaries constitute a whole which includes tour operators, incoming agencies as well as the inhabitants of the territory of destination, even the tourists themselves through the abundant stories which teem with recommendations. Proximity-generating intermediation ranges from the dissemination of information to the federation of means, even to the management of the tourist project.

Intermediaries then have the task of reinventing the reality of the host society to make it accessible and compatible with the expectations of the tourist. In addition to the offer of tangible facilities allowing access to the premises (ad hoc management of the back office, behind the scenes), their function is then to create a staging of the host society, a dramatization of the forefront of service. In this sense, they facilitate the interpretation of places by tourists. For their part, professional and institutional players in tourism are seeking to iron out the difficulties that tourists will face. The infrastructures (international hotels and hotel-clubs, means of transport, restaurants) are thus spatial technologies offered so that otherness remains bearable.

On the contrary, in a place that is more familiar to them, because they frequent it regularly or because the otherness is less marked, tourists are able to activate resources, build and produce their own tourist experience. The intensity of co-production is then greater. This proximity tourism is also the majority fact in all countries. Thus, most tourists are in a situation of relative familiarity, which explains the relatively low use of all-inclusive tours, and the situations in which co-production is affirmed are the most frequent.

The “clusterization” of tourist territories cannot therefore avoid questioning the quality of intermediation and the intermediaries who activate proximities as well as their evolution over time. It is therefore relevant, for example, to question the association of major tour operators or hotel groups, essential intermediaries of distant tourist destinations, or that of actors in the local associative life of destinations. It also seems necessary to examine the relative strength and influence of these intermediaries over time, as the tourist location develops. The dynamics of tourist proximities seem to have to be based on a supralocal and multiscale organization.

The embedding of tourism in a socio-economic context

Economic actors are embedded in social and institutional contexts. This is the case for the practice of tourism and the relationships established with the other actors: they are embedded in an environment within which the actors are temporarily co-present and which influences the course of the co-production process. The analysis of tourism clusters as a productive organization thus induces the consideration of different contexts that influence its efficiency.

From the typology of tourist places, it seems possible to us to sketch a table that accounts for the parameters that influence the development of co-presence and therefore the dynamics of tourism clusters. Then in these places different market configurations prevail. Finally, the spatial limits and the extent of the cluster are not given a priori and only by professional and institutional actors but are co-constructed with tourists.

Thus, there are two categories of places: those created by and for tourism and those that have historically been occupied. In the first, there was almost nothing before the eruption of tourism which will urbanize the place. Consequently, tourism stakeholders are in a position to impose their development strategies. This first category is subdivided into counter or station. The first subtype is characterized by closure, materialized by a more or less assertive enclosure, which isolates, vis-à-vis the outside, a space over which is exercised the control of a major actor, master of the game. This is how the hotel-club works. Conversely, the station is distinguished by the openness and by the in situ competition between companies with the more or less marked intervention of a public actor. However, as tourism is the economic engine of the place, the social capital is based on tourism. Local power is often controlled or influenced by tourist interests. The inhabitants, for the most part employed in companies in the sector, are committed to the interests of tourism. Historically, the establishment of the tourist area on the fringes of the territory induces a shift in centrality. Elsewhere, the process led to the secession of the tourist district erected into a municipality in its own right. The construction of organized proximity is facilitated by excluding or relativizing the power of non-tourist actors.

The second category, tourist towns, is distinguished by the diversity of functions. Tourism has indeed invested in places steeped in history where the administrative and economic functions are plural. Tourism stakeholders enter into competition for the sharing of resources with other interests. The economic actors of the other functions can oppose it. Public authorities are not immediately won over to tourism. The very inventory of actors poses a problem between those who are located at the heart of the tourist system and who identify with it, and others, more on the margins, or who claim other affiliations such as the cultural or sporting sphere without forgetting the synergies with the world of business events. The construction of organized proximities therefore comes up against more obstacles.

The concept of cluster, to be relevant in the field of tourism, must therefore, in our opinion, be distorted, also because of the social, economic and spatial contexts in which it is inserted.

Proposals for an adaptation of the cluster concept to the world of tourism

We propose here to enrich the tourism cluster models proposed by the literature by taking into consideration the criticisms that have been made. Our model then questions the governance of these territories.

For a cluster approach through co-productive dynamics

In shaping their model of tourism destination competitiveness, Crouch et al. (1999) are based on Porter's diamond model that postulates that the competitiveness of a given industry depends on conditions linked to the business environment, namely factor endowments, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, and firm strategies, intensity and structure of competition. From this diamond was born the concept of cluster.

We consider the tourist destination not as a closed space but as a space linked to the world. The tourist destination only exists because it is a place confronted with the world and this confrontation with the world is made by and for tourists. We have also shown that this place is so open that its borders are defined by this confrontation with the world and the representations of tourists, which leads us to take into consideration local actors but also non-local actors of the place. We consider that the conditions of the factors are indeed local and consist of resources and attractions – natural or created – linked to the place, but co-invented by tourists, while the related activities and support, as well as the conditions of demand escape a strictly local vision.

We show the importance of intermediation players but also that of residents. Finally, this generic proposition must be completed to account for the singularity of the dynamics at work depending on whether the tourists are very far from the destination and whether the otherness is strong or, on the contrary, whether the tourists are in close proximity to the destination. In the first case, the socio-economic networks, which support the dynamics of the cluster, bring together non-local actors and numerous intermediaries. The latter, even if they are companies producing a service, at the same time express the demand and create a link between tourists and local actors. In the second case, tourists are at the heart of cluster dynamics, they make the link between the place and the world. They activate the services to combine them into a tourist stay, thereby participating in the local production of tourist stays.

Cluster governance

Our model directly questions the governance of tourist destinations. The cohesion of actor networking systems is only effective if all stakeholders are involved in their governance, whether these stakeholders are local public actors or international private companies. We also show that the governance of tourist destinations must go beyond the governance of territorialized networks, that is to say networks located geographically, because the networks concerned here have the peculiarity of associating non-local actors who participate closely in the local creation of resources and wealth.

If it is risky to commit to recommendations in terms of governance, our model makes it possible to raise the question of the stakeholders. The actors who affect or are affected by the activity of the tourism cluster constitute a large and complex mosaic. Our model shows that these stakeholders go far beyond the local framework. This is the case for businesses but also for all stakeholders in the cluster, including residents and tourists. The co-productive singularity of tourism leads us to question the association of tourists with the governance of tourist destinations. As temporary inhabitants, tourists are difficult to mobilize. However, we now have reliable and powerful technologies that allow one form or another of participation. It is important here to question the use that is made of information and communication technologies to inform tourists, animate networks, develop their skills or a common culture and associate them with the local dynamics of the cluster. Residents, permanent inhabitants, are also stakeholders in the cluster, even if they are not directly concerned by

tourism. In tourist cities, they may even be hostile to tourism, but they are nonetheless stakeholders impacted by tourism. The central actor who carried out the station project, whether public or private, will have a major role in governance which will be more of a focal type. Territorial governance, under the leadership of a public or semi-public actor, will make it possible to coordinate the actors of a tourist city. The governance of the cluster must reflect its socio-economic structure.

Conclusion

We have shown in this article that the concept of cluster was probably too narrow and should at least be enriched to account for the dynamics of tourist territories. Our model insists on the fact that the co-productive dimension of tourism involves integrating the tourist within the cluster. Questioning the proximities at work and the phenomena of intermediation, it shows that a territorial dynamic requires the association of actors who are not necessarily co-present and whose cultures (professional, societal, etc.) are not homogeneous. Finally, we study the heterogeneity of socio-economic and spatial configurations that deserve to be taken into consideration and question us on the bases of the cohesion of the devices.

These first works find their limit in their conceptual character. They call a series of tourism cluster case studies. They open up several research perspectives on the modalities of association of these key actors, temporarily present in the territory, but rarely associated, that are tourists. In this regard, information technologies offer tools favoring the construction of organizational proximity provided, of course, that spaces are open to them. More generally, the governance of destinations is questioned by our work, as well as the trajectories of tourist territories. Destinations change, innovate, renew their organizations and their resources, and this, under the impetus of choice of associated actors, in processes of sorting and of error. The capacity for evolution is linked to the influence of these stakeholders and the games of conflict, cooperation and negotiation around the sharing of territories which drive them.

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