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Tomassini, Lucia; Cavagnaro, Elena

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Circular economy, circular regenerative processes, *agrowth* and placemaking for tourism future

Lucia Tomassini and Elena Cavagnaro

Lucia Tomassini is based at the NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands and University of Groningen – Campus Fryslân, Groningen, The Netherlands. Elena Cavagnaro is based at the University of Groningen – Campus Fryslân, Groningen, The Netherlands.

Abstract

Purpose – *This conceptual paper explores the possibility to envision circular regenerative processes embracing agrowth and placemaking within tourism; an industry remarkably connected to the Anthropocene and its detrimental impacts on the planet. Drawing on theorisations of circular economy, on the concept of agrowth, and on theories of placemaking, this viewpoint offers a novel conceptual framework to imagine a regenerative future for tourism.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The authors connect the ancient archetype of “circularity”, largely used to make sense of life on Earth, with the Greek concept of oikonomia. The resulting notion of a circular oikonomia is then intersected with theories of placemaking. In doing so, the authors are driven by the idea of de-growth, as an “a-growthism” urging the abandonment of the faith towards growth for an enduring stable regenerative agrowth.*

Findings – *The authors offer a novel conceptual framework to counteract the negative impacts of Anthropocene and envision future scenarios in which tourism can make a difference by enacting enduring regenerative processes for places and human and non-human entities.*

Originality/value – *The originality of this study lies in the conceptual framework proposed to imagine the future of tourism, hospitality and mobilities in circular regenerative terms. This study envisions stable and enduring regenerative processes of natural assets, materials, products, services and resources as well as a tourism space made up of lively, multiple, transformative relationships and interactions among people and the environments people live in and travel to.*

Keywords *Circular economy, Circularity, Regenerative tourism, Placemaking, De-growth, Sustainability*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

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Introduction

Facing the growing debate and concern on the consequences of Anthropocene, an epoch characterised by humanity as a dominant force in shaping the face of the Earth, the scientific community agrees on the urgency to rethink our relationship with nature to prevent irreversible crises for the planet we inhabit. Elhacham *et al.* (2020) disclose how the human-made mass since 2020 has been exceeding all global living biomass. *The Economics of Biodiversity* (Dasgupta, 2021) urges a novel engagement with nature for its effective conservation and regeneration. Herrington (2021) confirms the accuracy of the scenarios forecasted by the *Limits to Growth* model in the 70s that envisioned a halt in growth within the next decades, amidst climate change, famine, social unrest and geopolitical instability, if growth remains unlimited. In tourism studies, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak triggered a renewed interest in the debate concerning a pro-growth approach for a prompt restart of tourism (Butcher, 2021) versus a responsible approach to tourism to limit its growth (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021) and socialising it (Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2022).

This conceptual paper builds on the idea that Anthropocene is a powerful “epistemic system influencing practices and imaginaries” (Saarinen, 2019, p. 472) and that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 9). In doing so, it explores the possibility of envisioning circular regenerative processes for tourism; a phenomenon and an industry in which growth and geographical evolution has been “noticeably connected to the processes of Anthropocene” (Saarinen, 2019, p. 473). Hence, we intersect theorisations of circular economy – here presented as an *oikonomia* grounded in ethical concerns aiming at circular regenerative processes – with the notion of de-growth, understood as “non-growth”, as an “a-growthism” needed to reject the faith towards growth of the current economic orthodoxy (Latouche, November 2004). Such a theoretical lens is combined with theories of placemaking about how people continuously appropriate (and, therefore, could also regenerate) the environments they find themselves in (Jacobs, 2011; Adhya, 2012). The interplay of circular economy with the notions of *agrowth* and placemaking allows envisioning a future scenario for tourism, hospitality and mobilities rooted in stable and enduring regenerative processes. This means envisioning the regeneration of natural assets, materials, products and resources together with a tourism sociological space made up of multiple transformative relations, networks and interactions (Massey, 2005).

Circular economy and circular regenerative process

The idea of “circularity” is an ancient archetype that has been largely used to make sense of life on Earth, of biological processes, and of the cyclic nature of material and spiritual life (Bradley, 2012). Here we use a concept of “economy” chiming with the ancient Greek notion of *oikonomia* which differs from contemporary economics in its stronger relationship to ethics and praiseworthy goals (Leshem, 2016). Hence, the circular economy is here understood as moulding the circularity archetype into an *oikonomia* that focuses on the stewardship of our “household” – namely our planet and the creatures that inhabit it. This results in a vision of circular economy beyond circular design and the regeneration of materials and products (McDonough and Braungart, 2003). It means rethinking circular economy as an *oikonomia* ethically driven towards a praiseworthy end beyond the pursuit of merely economic goals (Leshem, 2016). This understanding discloses the possibility to envision circular regenerative processes of products, services, mobilities and natural assets as a promising driver to critically enact sustainability (Geissdoerfer *et al.*, 2017) and rethink tourism as an agent of positive change, regeneration and hope (Ateljevic, 2020).

Beside a circular design allowing the regeneration of materials and products (McDonough and Braungart, 2003), we envision how circular economy in the socio-relational space of tourism and hospitality can activate deeper regenerative processes for places, natural assets and living creatures by prompting a multiplicity of novel relations, connections and networks among a plurality of stakeholders (Massey, 2005). In this way, a novel tourism space made of different stakeholders with different and multiple functions can emerge and pursue the well-being of both the local community and global “household” we inhabit and belong to (Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2020). For instance, in tourism destinations, a circular *oikonomia* can help regenerating monocultural farmlands via biodiversity enhancement and/or reintroduction; can rehabilitate the local heritage and the abandoned real estate for the benefit of dwellers and visitors; can transform hospitality facilities into hubs of social inclusiveness by involving local community members in projects of waste collection and upcycling, and can organise forms of green mobility to facilitate proximity tourism via the involvement of local stakeholders and actors.

Enduring regenerative *agrowth* and placemaking

This idea of enduring circular processes is here explored in combination with the notion of *agrowth*. Herrington (2020, February 2013) stresses how the pursuit of business as usual and continuous growth are no longer possible; “having a different goal than growth does not mean pursuing ‘degrowth’ [. . .] We should adopt an attitude of indifference to growth: *agrowth*”.

Indeed, [Van Den Bergh \(2017\)](#) discusses *agrowth* as a strategy and third option in between de-growth and pro-growth. [Latouche \(2004, November 14\)](#) argues that “we could then start talking about ‘a-growthism’, as in ‘a-theism’”. After all, rejecting the current economic orthodoxy means abandoning a faith system, a religion. To achieve this, we need doggedly and rigorously to deconstruct the matter of development”. While in the last decade the notion of de-growth has received an increasing level of attention in tourism studies to critically discuss tourism sustainability ([Fletcher et al., 2019](#); [Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019](#); [Saarinen, 2018](#)), the implications of an *agrowth* strategy in tourism remain largely unexplored.

Looking at tourism future in terms of *agrowth* permits us to imagine a stable equilibrium via enduring cyclic regenerative processes. For us this means refocusing tourism practices on local spaces with multiple interactions and multifunctional relations among different stakeholders ([Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2020](#)). Hence, we envision a placemaking made of locally situated contexts where tourism can facilitate enduring transformative encounters and practices as well as creative regenerative processes for places, natural assets and living creatures ([Richards, 2020](#); [Karakor, 2014](#)). Placemaking discusses how people continuously appropriate the environments they find themselves in. Appropriation – we argue – can lead to the transformation and regeneration of such places. This chimes with the placemaking theories and practices of Jane Jacobs ([Adhya, 2012](#); [Jacobs, 2011](#)) taking a critical stance on the “political-economic ‘growth machine’” ([Adhya, 2012](#), p. 218) and supporting grassroots-level efforts and community-based plans contrasting top-down approaches to planning and development. Hence, drawing on Jacobs’ Critical Planning Practice ([Adhya, 2012](#)), we envision the implications in tourism destinations when people – both as dwellers and travellers – come to love the places they live in and travel through.

Moving forward: a theoretical framework of circular regenerative process, *agrowth* and placemaking

Confronting the environmental and social challenges of Anthropocene and the disruption prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, this conceptual paper offers a novel theoretical framework to envision a regenerative tourism able to contrast such global challenges. Acknowledging the fragilities of an economic model based on never-ending growth and nature depletion ([Herrington, 2021](#); [Elhacham et al., 2020](#); [Dasgupta, 2021](#)), we propose a new theoretical framework combining:

1. Circular economy as a circular *oikonomia* enacting circular regenerative processes of places, natural assets and living creatures ([Bradley, 2012](#); [Leshem, 2016](#); [Geissdoerfer et al., 2017](#); [McDonough and Braungart, 2003](#)) via a multiplicity of networks and relationships taking place in the tourism sociological space ([Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2020](#)).
2. *Agrowth* and “a-growthism” pursuing an enduring stable equilibrium ([Herrington, 2021](#); [Latouche, 2004](#); [Saarinen, 2018, 2019](#); [Fletcher et al., 2019](#); [Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019](#)).
3. Placemaking as a set of practices and processes through which people creatively and positively appropriate and transform the environments they inhabit and travel through ([Adhya, 2012](#); [Jacobs, 2011](#); [Richards, 2020](#); [Karakor, 2014](#)).

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Corresponding author

Lucia Tomassini can be contacted at: tomassini.lucia@gmail.com

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