Chapter 3

TRAVEL BOYCOTTS, ETHICAL CONSUMPTION AND DESTINATION COMMUNITIES: EXPANDING THE MORALITY OF NEIGHBOURLINESS

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Introduction

“I still think that people should not come to Burma (Myanmar) because the bulk of the money from tourism goes straight into the pockets of the generals. And not only that, it’s a form of moral support for them because it makes the military authorities think that the international community is not opposed to the human rights violations” - Aung San Suu Kyi, Leader of Myanmar’s National League for Democracy (cited in Pears, 2019, n.p.).

With greater public attention to corporate social responsibility and increased vulnerability of brands and corporate reputations, boycotts have increasingly become a consumer tool to coerce corporate or political change (Friedman, 1991; Klein et al., 2004; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Many contemporary consumers choose brands, products and services according to how ethical, environmentally friendly and socially and politically responsible they view them to be (Seyfi & Hall, 2020; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Tourism is argued as becoming “commodified”, or at least intimately tied in with processes of commodification, and has therefore become a ready arena for “political consumer actions” and consumer activism (Boström et al., 2019; Gretzel, 2017). As a result of such processes, and the various meanings that are associated with travel, for many tourism has become recognised as a global phenomenon with substantial justice implications (e.g., Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Some argue that as tourists develop a greater sense of civic responsibility or have become more politically conscious, so the number of boycotts increases (Shaheer et al., 2018; 2019; Shepherd, 2021). However, while from a social justice perspective such a situation would be laudable, it must also be treated with caution as the increase in the number of boycotts may be the result of social media growth rather than a real increase in the number of people that care enough about an issue to make it a boycott action (Seyfi et al., 2021). Nevertheless, regardless of the context, travel and business boycotts clearly are of importance to destinations, industry and tourism dependent communities alike, and their tourism related futures.

Ethics now occupies an important place for many people in the choice of destination and tourism product, and how tourists practice political and ethical consumerism in their wider travel context is of growing interest (Castañeda & Burtner, 2010; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013; Weeden & Boluk, 2014). The ethics of tourism has long been concerned with what tourists purchase and the effect of tourism on communities and the environment (Duffy & Smith, 2004; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). Although it should be noted that such concerns have often been expressed as more generic ethical questions rather than dealing with the specific ethical concerns of consumers and businesses, with some even questioning the extent to which leisure tourists actually care about the ethics of their tourism decisions so long as they have a cheap holiday (Hall, 2014a; Tomazos & Butler, 2012). Nevertheless, the ethics of tourism is addressed by institutions, i.e., religious bodies; organizations, i.e., NGOs; and individuals, all of which address in various ways what is and what is not appropriate to consume and supply and, beyond that, what should be done to influence or prevent such production and consumption. Such is the interest in conscious
consumption in some quarters that tourist and hospitality products are increasingly focusing on branding, communicating and promoting the supposed environmental and other benefits of purchase (Hall, 2014b). But what then is ethical in tourism consumption and production? A number of different dimensions can be suggested:

- appropriate and inappropriate purchasing and shopping behaviours;
- consumer and destination resistance and activism;
- consumption and producer morality in relation to concerns over sustainability;
- corporate and social entrepreneurial attempts to promote ethical consumption and production opportunities; what is sometimes referred to as corporate social responsibility and/or societal marketing; and
- ethical consumption and production as a conscious political project of individuals and small groups as part of a broader politics of consumption (Hall, 2014a, b).

Importantly, the above elements are not mutually exclusive but should be seen as deeply entwined with each other. The consumption and production of tourism are interrelated, and ethical decisions made by consumers have flow on effects in destinations and vice versa. Such relationships also highlight the way in which the idea of ethical consumption has expanded from the immediate point of consumption throughout the entire system by which the tourist experience is produced. This shift in understanding of the morality of consumption therefore reinforces the significance of a growing trend to understand ethical consumption not just in terms of the act or experience of consumption and the cost and utility of what they consume, but also in terms of the ways in which they are produced, processed and transported (Trentmann, 2007). As a result of such expanded notions of ethical consumption, individuals may be able to do two things: “Firstly, at a personal level, they can lead lives that are more moral. Secondly, at a public level, they can use their purchases to affect the larger world, by putting pressure on firms in a competitive market to change the ways that they do things” (Carrier, 2010: 672). One of the main ways that ethical consumption has grown at the public level has been with respect to boycotts.

Over the years, many destinations have been boycotted by tourists for a range of reasons including human rights violations, treatment of LGBTQ-people and other minorities, violations of animal welfare and rights and inappropriate environmental actions (Shaheer et al., 2018; 2019). Boycotts usually mean fewer tourists, less business and a dent in the public image of a destination, but what of the communities affected by boycotts? The idea of community in tourism is often used in a far too monolithic manner and in a way that serves to hide the different competing interests and values that emerge with respect to the economic and political uses of tourism (Hall, 2008). Moreover, as suggested above ethical contestation and decision-making is not just the domain of the consumer but also resides with the producers of the tourism experience which, at a community level includes not just businesses but also the residents themselves.

To address this question and drawing on different cases, this chapter discusses such discourses as a way of problematising the notions of community which are often central to tourism planning discourse. These have already been the focus on growing research (Higgins-Desbiolles, & Bigby, 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2021; 2022) and proposed as a “local turn in tourism” (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). In response we argue that not only does there need to be greater recognition of the lack of homogeneity in communities, but that the very embeddedness of destination communities in the capitalist production of tourism makes it extremely hard for them to develop truly inclusive forms of tourism.

### Boycotts in tourism

Friedman (1999: 4) defined boycott as “the attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases”. The boycott phenomenon has been widely studied in the social sciences but has only recently become a subject of inquiry in tourism (Seyfi & Hall, 2020; Seyfi et al., 2021; Shaheer et al., 2018;
2019; Shepherd, 2021), although it had previously been discussed in relation to work on the politics of tourism (Richter, 1989).

Individuals, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are increasingly involved in supporting boycotts in order to change institutions, organisations or societal situations that are seen as ethically, ecologically, or politically disagreeable (Rössel & Schenk, 2018). The growth in boycotting can arguably be interpreted as the “flip side” to neoliberal globalisation. This is because the increased global stretch of capital, communication and mobility has made businesses and places more vulnerable to crises or problems in the tourism system, including opposition to tourism industry and destination actions, decisions or policies.

Significantly, boycotters strive to get the media’s attention in order to harm the reputation of a specific business, destination or a country (Hawkins, 2010; Yousaf et al., 2021). The growth of social media has only enhanced this capacity (Gretzel, 2017; Seyfi et al., 2021). For instance, the study of Yousaf et al. (2021) on the #BoycottMurree campaign showed how campaign momentum on social media affected Murree which is a popular tourist destination in Pakistan. This is also especially evident in the case of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigners pushing for a boycott of Israel’s hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest 2019 and accusing Israel of exploiting the artistic event to whitewash its human rights violations against Palestinians (Morrison, 2022; Shepherd, 2021). Nonomura (2017) argued that owing to increased political engagement thanks to social networks, many individuals have developed a greater awareness of their agency and active position as consumer citizens in society. Lamers et al. (2019) identified specific practices of political and ethical consumption within a tourism context including sustainable consumption, climate change, slow travel, conservation tourism and voluntourism that have strong ethical and political consumerism dimensions grounded on individualised responsibility-taking. Furthermore, there appears to be a surge in the boycotting of destinations and tourist firms for sustainability-related reasons (Shaheer et al., 2019) and 90 per cent of boycotts in the last 70 years have occurred within the last decade (Shaheer et al., 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). For many, such an increase in tourism-related boycotts is related to technological innovations which have facilitated boycott organisation and communications (e.g., Gretzel, 2017; Mkono, 2018; Shaheer et al., 2018; Yousaf et al., 2021), while Castañeda and Burtner (2010) attributed such a surge in boycotting to the growing use of tourism as a vehicle for social and political change. However, it is likely that the reality for this increase lies at the intersection of all these factors given that technologies should be best understood as something embedded within socio-economic structures, rather than as having separate agency (Seyfi et al., 2021).

Boycott and social justice

Boycotts have long been heralded as exemplary nonviolent movements working for social justice and have been used as a “tried-and-true tactic of social justice movements” to respond to injustice or wrongdoing, and as a means of dismantling systems of injustice (Chaitin et al., 2017; Maira, 2018; Radzik, 2017). Boycott has become a widespread and established part of social and environmental justice activism in tourism in recent years (Mkono, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2021). This is evidenced by the growth in tourists’ boycotting of products, brands, destinations and services on the basis of their political or ethical characteristics (e.g., sustainability, social justice, fair-trade, corporate responsibility or animal welfare) (Boström et al., 2019; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). These are believed to be increasingly important in global struggles for social justice and human rights (Seyfi et al., 2021; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013) and serve to connect tourism consumption with broader political and ethical issues from which the industry, along with many consumers, has often tried to position itself as being outside of. These issues have long been demonstrated in the politics of tourism in south-east Asia, for example. Countries such as Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia have long had goals with respect to tourism that are similar to many others with respect to the attraction of foreign exchange, encouragement of economic development and generating employment opportunities. However, since the 1990s the creation of a positive image via tourism promotion and having tourists come visit is also important in terms of not only
attracting much-needed foreign investment, but also providing political legitimacy internationally, if not domestically. No more has this been clearer than in the case of Myanmar. However, the political dimensions of tourism, including such things as the abuse of human rights in the name of tourism development, challenges not only the tourism industry but also the student of tourism with respect to the ethics of tourism. Is money “more important than human rights”? (Oo & Perez 1996: n.p.). Or, is the most appropriate approach that of TravelAsia (1996: n.p.) when trying to deal with issues of human rights abuse in Myanmar and the encouragement of tourism via Visit Myanmar Year:

As travel business professionals, we have to keep a clear head and not take sides. Indeed, the only side we should be on is our customers. The only questions we should ask are, does Myanmar have the products, the infrastructure and the will to become one of Asia’s great destinations?

In their study, Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) reported that boycotts were becoming more successful in achieving their aims in a number of cases. They further argue that such success could be because such activism enhances legitimacy and encourages broad participation. Traditionally, the boycott has been viewed as social responses to injustice and wrongdoing. In his interpretation of the term “social”, Radzik (2017) argued that boycotters lack legal power and that their own activities are often legitimate. Boycotting is a moral instrument in the toolkit of everyday people. For Hallward (2013), boycotts have been used by civil society organisations as a tool for exerting political pressure in a non-violent manner in the international realm. Nonetheless, as Sharp (2013) pointed out, these tactics continue to be problematic since they seek to bring social, political and economic change. The South African boycott movement as well as Palestinian BDS movement are two examples of boycotts as a way for fighting for social justice. For many commentators, when tourists travel to countries with poor human rights record, they might unintentionally support businesses linked to war crimes and human rights violations. From a tourism perspective, such ethical debates have been applied to sanctions on tourism to a destination (Seyfi & Hall, 2019; 2020). For example, as noted above, in the longstanding debate over sanctions on Myanmar tourism, some proponents of sanctions have suggested boycotting Myanmar travel and tourism to effect “regime change” and argue that it is unethical for individuals to support the military dictatorship, which controls most of the country's productive capacity including tourism, which attracts considerable foreign exchange (Hall & O’Sullivan, 1996). In contrast, those who argue against sanctions suggest that visiting such destinations might help to reduce the isolation of the wider population as well as generating needed employment and visitors can advocate for justice (e.g., Seyfi et al., 2021). However, what is important to stress here is that these competing arguments do not just occur in the abstract, but they reflect the real-life tensions and strains that exist within communities.

Boycott or not: Is boycotting always the best practice?

It has become an increasingly common debate to consider the pros and cons of boycotting attractions, brands and destinations. When deciding whether or not to visit a specific destination, especially those with a poor human rights record, travelers may sometimes face a significant ethical dilemma. Many have questioned who does such a kind of action really hurt. Do such measures harm the people they are intended to protect more than the ruling classes they are targeting (e.g., Delacote, 2009), given that such policies may reduce the population’s well-being more than the governing class. There are two schools of thought. One view believes that boycotting a destination is a way to demonstrate and to take a stand against injustice, cruelty and/or discrimination. The supporters of this view argue that tourists should avoid at all costs going to a destination, for example, where human or animal rights are violated in order not to condone abuse. Perhaps, one longstanding case subjected to such actions is Myanmar, but it is significant to note that although tourism has fluctuated in terms of arrivals and economic impact it has never stopped. For example, the legitimately elected leader of Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi declared in 1996:
...They (tourists) should stay away until we are a democracy. Look at the forced labour that is going on all over the country. A lot of it is aimed at the tourist trade. It’s very painful. Roads and bridges are built at the expense of the people. If you cannot provide one labourer you are fined. If you cannot afford the fine, the children are forced to labour (cited in Pilger, 1996).

Even though such remarks were widely reported, it is significant that although tourism slowed, the tourists never stopped coming and investment in tourism development also continued.

More recently, some tourists and travel companies alike boycotted Brunei following the introduction of the death penalty for homosexuality. The second view contends that it is the very people who are being oppressed who are most likely to suffer as a result of travel boycotts and going to such destinations might help to get the population out of their isolation by avoiding government-run businesses as much as possible. The supporters of this view believe that travel and human interaction can bring about more and deeper change than a reflective boycott.

It should also be acknowledged that there is also a third view, which is essentially one that is not bothered by the issue either way, and in fact does not even engage with it, because it focuses completely on personal or business satisfaction, i.e., it is based on self-interest rather than notions of community interest. In fact, in one of the seminal works on the politics of tourism, Hall (1994) argued that this was more likely the dominant perspective among consumers. He noted for example how the growth of mass tourism to Portugal and Spain in the late 1960s and 1970s was the result of the actions of fascist dictatorships to generate foreign income, and that the vast number of visitors did not care because it represented a cheap holiday package. While on the community side he noted that even though many community members recognised their powerless in front of change and the loss of traditional agriculture and fishing there was still often support for the employment, even though of poor quality, that was created. And for many in such communities, employment is the major issue if they wish to stay in place, even though place and communities change as a result.

In his study on the ethical arguments for and against tourism in Myanmar, Hudson (2007) reported that Myanmar visitors were generally in favour of tourism in Myanmar but were uncomfortable with the ethical implications of their visit. He further continued that visitors who disregarded a suggested boycott of Myanmar emphasised the advantages of their tourism to Burmese residents, the transforming nature of their interactions with locals and the chance tourism afforded them to demonstrate their sympathy with the Burmese people. Tourism guidebooks such as Lonely Planet and websites such as Responsible Travel argue that it is possible to travel very responsibly in destinations with poor ethical records and argue that visitors to Myanmar may visit and not support the regime as long as they travel “responsibly” (Shepherd, 2021). Radzik (2017) argued that boycotting implies “damage to innocents”, in which third parties are economically or socially penalised for government policies over which they have little influence.

The debates over boycotts and the problem of community

The debates over sanctions are therefore just one case of the problem of community writ large. One of the problems in discussing community issues in tourism is the extent to which they have often become implicitly homogenised in notions of community which have emphasised commonality of interest rather than difference. This is of especial importance in tourism given that tourism development can serve to dramatically alter the web of relations that residents have with place and further contribute to different perspectives on the benefits of tourism. As Millar and Aitken (1995: 620) commented in a resource management context:

Conflict is a normal consequence of human interaction in periods of change, the product of a situation where the gain or a new use by one party is felt to involve a sacrifice or changes by others. It can be an opportunity for creative problem solving, but if it is not managed properly conflict can divide a community and throw it into turmoil.
Communities exist within a web of kinship, physical interdependency and social obligation, and because of this, tourism cannot be separated from the social issues of property and morality (Hall, 2008; Millar & Aitken, 1995). But it is important to recognise that such morality is not necessarily the ethical position of the tourism consumer.

Different places and positions in the tourism system will have different ethical positions on the nature and value of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism. In the absence of a universal ethical position on the relative worth of the collective versus the individual in notions of rights, or even different notions of rights, it seems readily apparent that difference within communities is normal. From a consumer perspective, for example, Zapata Campos et al. (2018) suggested that Swedish consumers of package travel were far more concerned with animal rights than labour rights in the destinations they travelled to. While from a destination community perspective, Hall (2008) drawing on Millar and Aitken (1995) argued that there is a two-part morality of neighbourliness in which, while there is a recognition that everyone has the right to make a living, there is also a belief that everyone who is affected by tourism development should have the right to be consulted. Promotion of boycotts therefore will almost invariably lead to conflict and debate within destination communities as it inherently contributes to the embodied difference of the two-part morality of neighbourliness. In societies where there are strong, impartial, legal, and regulatory institutions the moral divisiveness of boycotts may not necessarily lead to long-term splits within communities. However, the majority of boycotted (and at the extreme, sanctioned) countries are those in which governments tend to operate, almost by definition, against international legal norms and have legal systems that only have limited independence from government (Seyfi & Hall, 2019; 2020; Seyfi et al., 2020). Therefore, destination communities affected by boycotts and sanctions not only face an undeniable difference with respect to the morality of neighbourliness but the economic difficulties that sanctions create may even favour economic arguments for tourism and employment regardless of the ethical cost.

If seeking to reorient tourism communities then the experience of the role of sanctions suggests that alternative community futures lie in consideration of alternative economic frameworks, as the central role of economic exchange means that communities are bound to the morality of the “right” to make a living which is interpreted from within a capitalist context. The result of which is that rather than ethical consumption, pro-cotting, and boycotting creating an alternative economic space, new spaces of capitalism have instead been opened in existing systems of provision (Hall, 2014a). Ethical tourism consumption, including switching destinations in the case of tourism sanctions, is still consumption. Similarly, acknowledgement of the morality of the right to make a living as the dominant morality in many communities means that the right to production cannot be ignored even if, from other notions and framing of rights, other human rights are being substantially damaged.

Questions of what precisely makes such projects “alternative” are central to issues of sustainable tourism and rethinking community futures, as are a set of questions about the relationship between the alternative and its constituent other, the mainstream or conventional capitalist economy (Whatmore et al., 2003). Few alternative tourism products and the communities within which they are embedded are so alternative that they eschew the circulation of capital in commodity form altogether; rather, they attempt to harness intrinsic dynamics of capitalism to progress destination projects. By definition, a destination community cannot exist unless it is a part of the economic system of tourism (Hall, 2022). Tourism is therefore a driver of capitalism and extends and deepens neoliberalism within destination and other tourism communities (Brockington & Duffy, 2010). If capitalism is identified as part of the problem for alternative community futures, it is therefore difficult, if not impossible, for it to offer the solution. As witnessed in responses to boycotts in countries like Israel, neoliberalism does not necessarily displace or obliterate existing ways of valuing place and community relations. Instead, it mixes with the local context to create new dynamics (Brockington & Duffy 2010) and thereby reflects the fundamentally uneven nature of the neoliberal capitalist project (Hall, 2014a).

Conclusion
The way that tourism acts to provide an economic value for communities is integral to the way that neoliberalism is fundamentally concerned with “the financialisation of everything” (Harvey, 2005: 33). The problem with the rhetoric of ethical consumption, including enacting and support of boycotts, is that tourism’s contribution to often laudable goals as being such a positive form of ethical consumption, “presents us only with market solutions” (Brockington & Duffy, 2010: 481) which only further embed the consumer and the destination community in processes of contemporary capitalism. Undoubtedly, boycotts do open a contested moral terrain with respect to their real impacts. However, as we have suggested, the intrinsic embeddedness of destination communities in the capitalist tourism system means that the economic aspect of the morality of neighbourliness dominates community structures and thinking. While the ethical consumer selects another destination to travel to within the tourism system, the boycotted destination often only further deepens is dependency on tourism and creates further fractures in entwined community social and economic in the desire to make a living (Seyfi & Hall, 2020).

There are certainly attempts by members of destination communities and tourist consumers to escape the “totalizing logic of the market” by attempting to construct localised “emanicipated spaces” that are constructed by “engaging in improbable behaviors, contingencies, and discontinuities” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995: 255). Such improbable behaviours include acts that appear to be outside the logic of commercialisation, such as voluntary simplicity, anti-consumption and the ethics of the local and cooperativism (Gibson-Graham, 2003a; 2003b). Nevertheless, focusing on lifestyle alone, without challenging the role of structure and the cultural and political forces of production, may well mean that alternative consumption and production paths remain cut off over the longer term (Hall, 2014a; 2022; Chassagne & Everingham, 2019; Hall et al., 2021).

There is therefore a need in tourism for a clearer theorisation of what are alternative community futures or not (Whatmore et al., 2003). Although this is a long-held point of debate in tourism studies, given the long-standing search for alternative tourisms, such a discussion may need to connect more to some of the broader debates on alterity and alternative economic and political spaces. Problematising boycotts as a form of ethical consumption and the ethics and morality of its effects on communities is a way of opening thinking and reflexivity regarding future tourism communities. As we have argued, the two-part morality of neighbourliness that is central to communities and considerations of their decision-making and future is typically dominated by economic reasoning, in great part because being a destination community inherently means that you are embedded in the capitalist logic of the tourism system. To think other, therefore means to engage with non-capitalist alternatives as to how tourism can be reimagined, along with the communities within it. Such theorisations need to engage much more substantially with the way tourism embeds communities in contemporary neoliberal capitalism and its implications for the way members of communities live their lives and how power is structured in communities. And ask why?

References


