



# I QUADERNI

## #13 Anti-gentrification nelle città (Sud) Europee

Anti-gentrification in (Southern) European cities

Edited by Sandra Annunziata  
Commentary by Loretta Lees

- Tonia Katerini |
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- Agustin Cocola-Gant & Daniel Pardo, ABTS |
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nelle città (Sud) Europee**  
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# **Le esperienze degli attivisti**

The experience of activists



# Resisting tourism gentrification: the experience of grass-roots movements in Barcelona

@ Agustin  
Cocola-Gant |  
@ Daniel Pardo,  
ABTS |

# Tourism  
gentrification |  
# Resistance |  
# Barcelona |  
# ABTS |

## Resistere alla gentrificazione turistica: le esperienze dei movimenti urbani a Barcellona

# Tourism  
gentrification |  
# Resistenza |  
# Barcellona |  
# ABTS |

*Questo paper esplora l'impatto del turismo a Barcellona e le modalità di resistenza al turismo messe in atto dall'Assemblea de Barris per un Turisme Sostenible (ABTS) (Assemblea per un turismo sostenibile). Le pratiche di resistenza che presenteremo sono dovute al fatto che le politiche del turismo urbano a Barcellona si siano negli anni rivelate una forma di gentrificazione, che ha avuto come effetto diverse forme di espulsione. Due autori, un attivista e un ricercatore, discuteranno delle pratiche di ABTS contro Airbnb e alberghi, sostenendo che la prevalenza di destinazioni d'uso turistiche di beni immobili mini il diritto all'abitazione di residenti autoctoni, e pratiche di riappropriazione dello spazio pubblico per finalizzarlo a usi comunitari. ABTS ha avuto grande esposizione mediatica a livello locale, nazionale e internazionale, al punto che il governo cittadino ha riconosciuto l'assemblea come portatrice di un punto di vista civico e come interlocutore stabile in materia di sviluppo urbano. Il paper conclude con una riflessione sulla necessità di andare oltre il presente modello di sviluppo turistico verso un modello di de-crescita del turismo come approccio indispensabile per preservare le città storiche e garantire principi di giustizia spaziale come il diritto alla casa.*

### Introduction

The *Assemblea de Barris per un Turisme Sostenible* (ABTS) is a grassroots organisation that emerged in Barcelona in 2015 when over 35 collectives from different neighbourhoods unified to resist against what was viewed as a critical threat undermining the right to the city: the growth of tourism. This paper explains why tourism plays a central role in the displacement of residents in Barcelona and shows the way in which the ABTS has responded to such a threat. The paper contributes to a better understanding of (anti)gentrification in Southern Europe (Annunziata & Lees 2016; Annunziata & Rivas 2018) and sheds light on the growing phenomenon of 'protest and resistance in the tourist city' (Colomb & Novy 2016).



**Fig.1\_** Protest against a luxury hotel, January 2017. Source: ABTS.

The paper results from a collaboration between an academic (first author) and a member of the ABTS (second author)<sup>1</sup>. As a critical scholar having previously engaged with gentrification theory I was interested in exploring the impacts of tourism, particularly because social movements in Barcelona were claiming that a wave of speculation and displacement was triggered by visitors and tourism investors, rather than by middle class residents. I interviewed 42 residents and participated as an observer in various grass-roots organisations in the historic centre of Barcelona, including the ABTS. But this raises the issue of how academics become involved in gentrification struggles. I believe that our role as critical researchers should not simply involve describing how resistance takes place or participating in struggles as activists, but should also include collecting and producing data that can be used by those who are at risk of displacement. Admittedly, the findings of this research were very similar to what residents and the ABTS already knew. However, as social injustices are only visible if the facts are placed in evidence, the use of data to show how displacement was taking place became a crucial tool for political action. I published an open access report about how the growth of Airbnb and hotels were displacing communities<sup>2</sup>. The report received considerable media attention and was used by residents and the ABTS to exemplify with ‘facts’ the extent to which tourism was causing inequalities. This confronted the hegemonic view of city leaders for whom tourism was seen as being in the interests of all.

### **New crisis, more tourism**

Protests against tourism in Barcelona are not a new phenomenon. On the contrary, protests emerged at the end of the 1990s. In the 1980s, tourism was identified as one of the main objectives for Barcelona’s urban regeneration and, after the crisis of the 1990s, local authorities saw tourism as the ‘easiest’ way of attracting inward investment and consumers. Smith (2005) noted that the search for tourism growth in Barcelona was implemented by a neoliberal process of deregulation and urban entrepreneurialism and,

**1\_** Hereafter the researcher will speak in first person while the member of the assembly will speak on behalf of the ABTS and so will speak in third person.

**2\_** <https://agustincocolagant.net/en/short-term-rentals-hotels-and-displacement/>

importantly, that such a process resulted in a situation in which the needs and satisfaction of tourists were prioritised over those of local residents. In this context of tourism growth, Degen (2004) and García and Claver (2003) observed that residents in the city centre were rebelling, particularly since the tendency was that “among those who use city services, visitors are proportionally on the increase” (García & Claver 2003, p.120).

The neoliberal answer to the post-2008 crisis has been the promotion of further tourism growth, but this time in a more dramatic way. In an example of Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*, Barcelona City Council activated a new round of flexible policies which (i) relaxed the restrictions which had prevented the growth of hotels in the historic city; (ii) adapted planning regulations suited to the needs of tourism investors as well as the introduction of tax incentives; and (iii) licensed all forms of tourism-oriented commercial activities which resulted, for example, in pharmacies being displaced by tapas bars. In addition, airline companies were further subsidised to fly to Barcelona; the central government introduced less rigid labour regulations which allowed companies to offer cheaper services by undermining working conditions; and this period also witnessed the emergence of Airbnb.

It is in this context of unregulated tourism growth that the ABTS emerged. If at the turn of the century acts of rebellion by residents were only observed in the city centre (called the Ciutat Vella district), the growth of tourism has been paralleled by a burgeoning opposition movement. In fact, the ABTS is now formed of grassroots organisations from almost all of Barcelona’s districts (see also Mansilla, in press). But why is tourism contested? The next section explores this question and discusses the reasons why tourism is seen as a threat that undermines the rights and needs of local residents.

### **Tourism, a displacing process**

Recent research in urban studies highlights the way in which tourism may be seen as a form of gentrification (Cocola-Gant 2018; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand 2017). To understand this process, it is worth noting how the so-called ‘new urban tourism’ does not evolve in tourist precincts but rather in residential environments which previously lacked tourist infrastructures (Maitland 2010; Fuller & Michel 2014; Quagliari-Domínguez & Russo 2010). In a context of mass tourism such as in Barcelona, the expansion of tourism into residential areas precipitates pressure from tourism which poses significant risks for residents. In particular, it makes it increasingly difficult for them to consider some neighbourhoods as liveable places. This situation leads to a process of displacement in which residential spaces and facilities increasingly cater to the needs of visitors. Such a process affects housing dynamics as well as neighbourhood life.

Firstly, the growth of tourist accommodation – including both hotels and particularly holiday rentals – is directly linked to residential displacement. In central areas of Barcelona, as there is no space left for new developments, the opening of hotels tends to involve the conversion of residential apartment buildings into tourist facilities. There have been several cases in which residents were evicted from their homes so that hotels could be opened in their place. For instance, what is currently the SOHO Hotel in Barcelona was a residential building inhabited by more than 100 people. Instances of residents being directly displaced has also been documented during the creation of holiday rentals (Cocola-Gant 2016). However, there are other important



**Fig.2** *#UNFairbnb* action, March 2017. Source: ABTS.

issues related to the growth of holiday rentals. The first is that it leads to a shortage of housing stock and a consequent increase in house prices. This makes it increasingly difficult for residents to find affordable accommodation. A second point to note is that a significant manifestation of tourism pressure occurs when residents have to share apartment buildings with visitors. The fact that apartment buildings combine both residential and tourist uses is the cause of cohabitation annoyances which for many has been the main reason behind their decision to move out of their homes.

Secondly, the impacts of tourism go beyond the housing market and affect residents at the neighbourhood scale. In other words, it causes daily disruptions which make places increasingly unliveable. Impacts on daily life include a lack of consumption facilities, loss of public space, mobility disruptions, noise and pollution. First, shops and services that residents need on a daily basis have been displaced by consumption services for visitors (Cocola-Gant 2015). This process also involves the substitution of family businesses for franchises. Second, retail change leads to the monopolisation of squares by terraces and bars which consequently prevents residents from using public spaces as gathering places for the community. Third, the large number of visitors and the use of bicycles, segways and other rental vehicles overcrowds public areas and makes it increasingly difficult for pedestrians to move around. This disruption affects the elderly and families with children in particular. Furthermore, the sizeable number of visitors saturates the public transport network and, at the same time, tourist coaches increase traffic congestion. Fourth, noise is a notable daily disruption. It is linked to low-cost tourism and 'party tourism' but also to the entire machinery of the leisure industry including ambulances, cleaning services using trucks and employing numerous workers, the delivery of supplies for restaurants early in the morning, people pulling noisy suitcases, music and so on. Finally, together with noise, pollution has increasingly become a public health issue. Pollution is caused

by the cruise industry, aeroplanes and tourist coaches, as well as by the emissions from restaurants. In relation to this, tourism also leads to a considerable increase in water consumption, energy consumption, use of construction materials and waste generation.

These changes undermine the quality of life of residents to such an extent that the most touristed areas are experiencing progressive population loss (López-Gay & Cocola-Gant 2016). Tourism, consequently, is experienced as a process of dispossession. Residents are displaced and substituted by a floating population of transient consumers which, in turn, undermines the sense of community and belonging.

In addition, tourism is contributing to other forms of inequality that are also contested by the ABTS. These are linked to precarious working conditions and high levels of exploitation and discrimination, as well as to the fact that tourism generates considerable costs that are paid for by taxpayers. In conclusion, the tourist industry mirrors other processes of capital accumulation since the benefits are enjoyed by private companies while the damages affect ordinary local people.

### **Resisting tourism: the experience of the ABTS<sup>3</sup>**

The ABTS is a means of coordination for neighbourhood groups working on collective action against tourism and, in particular, against the Barcelona model of urban entrepreneurialism. Although the Barcelona model was first celebrated in the 1990s – primarily due to the creation of a number of facilities for collective consumption and a governance style from below – it turned into a neoliberal model of city governance in-line with the imperative agenda of interurban competition that has led to different forms of urban inequalities (Delgado 2007; Degen & García 2012). In this context, we are united by our shared criticisms of the official rhetoric which celebrates tourism growth as being inherently positive. Our organisation is an assembly which runs meetings and working groups set-up to complete specific tasks. In the summer of 2015 we explored the conflicts caused by tourism in each neighbourhood. The recognition of tourism-related conflicts was our first collective piece of work.

The main narratives and strategic vision of the ABTS is to prove that the current model of tourism growth is unsustainable. We oppose the city council's vision for tourism and suggest that the most basic answer to the current effects of tourism in Barcelona is a planned and regulated system of tourism de-growth. We argue that it is crucially important to reduce the number of visitors and tourist-oriented commercial activities if we are to achieve a fairer city, both socially and environmentally. While the city council suggests that a solution could be to spread tourism to other neighbourhoods so that central areas become less congested, we believe that such policies will merely expand and increase the problem rather than reducing it.

The ABTS carried out targeted mobilisations against the growth of tourism accommodation, including both hotels and holiday rentals. The report published by the researcher of this paper provided us with several examples in which people were displaced as a result of the opening of tourist accommodation. For instance, in January 2017 we 'occupied' the SOHO hotel for several hours which, as mentioned, was built after an investment fund displaced

**3** This section is written by Daniel Pardo on behalf of the ABTS. This explains why the author uses 'we' as a collective subject.



more than 100 residents that were living in the building. We organised a march under the slogan “Mass tourism and speculation won’t force us out” which ended in the lobby of the hotel. More than 100 people were involved in the march, including a musical band (figure 1).

**Fig.3\_** #UNFairbnb action, March 2017. Source: ABTS.

In relation to holiday rentals and the right to housing, we organised two #UNFairbnb actions. For example, members of the ABTS booked unlicensed holiday apartments using the airbnb.com website. They were located in buildings in which all of the residents had been displaced. Once we were inside the apartments we hung banners from the balconies while other members took action on the street. The idea was to publicly denounce the expulsion suffered by residents and to dismantle the social myth regarding Airbnb and its false pretension of a collaborative economy. In this instance the property owners were not simply increasing their incomes by renting their flats – they were professional speculators and owned several apartment buildings in which similar expulsion processes took place in order to accommodate tourists. The #UNFairbnb actions received considerable media attention and caused the city council to examine the properties, leading them to take action against the owners (figures 2 and 3).

The ABTS also participates in the grassroots initiative Fem Plaça (<http://fem-placa.org>). Fem Plaça – meaning ‘square making’ – is a spontaneous rally in which residents ‘occupy’ a square for several hours in order to simply be there, talk and play with their children. The intention is to enable people to visualise the privatisation of public spaces and the effects this has on community life. Instead of demanding that local authorities implement reforms, Fem Plaça organises community-led actions aimed at taking back control of former residential spaces.

In July 2016, we organised the 1st Neighbourhood Forum on Tourism. Over two days – and through public talks, workshops and debates – a great deal of collective work was done in collaboration with experts and activists which were invited from Venice, Mallorca, Camp de Tarragona and Malaga. Dozens of people participated and highlighted the need to confront tourism at an international level. This showed how the ABTS established itself as an important tool for reflection, debates, networking and proposals. The Forum boosted the profile of the ABTS to a European scale and our members have participated in recent mobilisations against the cruise industry in Venice; in meetings aimed at responding to the touristification of Palma de Majorca; and in the “Closing the Island: Reflection on Tourism De-growth” meeting in Ibiza.

### **Concluding remarks**

From the dialogue between academic research and activism, we provide an account that strengthens current understandings of tourism as a process of displacement. The acts of resistance used by the ABTS find legitimacy in this framework. After two years of active resistance, we firmly believe that the ABTS has helped to change certain things. In the last few years, public opinion regarding the tourism industry in Barcelona has transformed. It has shifted from an uncritical acceptance of the policies dictated by local elites into a situation in which over 50% of the population wants to limit tourism according to one local survey. We believe that the work of the ABTS and other similar groups has played a crucial role in this change. The ABTS has a

strong influence on the local, national and international media and the city council now recognises the ABTS as a civic society organisation that needs to be heard. However, we also feel that this is not enough. Ultimately, the main factor in raising awareness of the negative consequences of mass tourism is its endless growth. Although the citizens of Barcelona are increasingly against tourism, the industry is still growing and more rapidly than ever. This growth is related to the number of people that visit Barcelona<sup>4</sup> but, in particular, to the liberalisation of the sector and the expansion of services and spaces which cater to tourists. We want to emphasise, consequently, that moving to a phase of tourism de-growth is a critical necessity if we truly want to protect our places and guarantee the right to the city.

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