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## RESEARCH FRONTIERS

### Evolutionary economic geography: a new path for tourism studies?

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Evolutionary economic geography (EEG) is an emerging theoretical framework which attempts to better understand long-term economic change and why it differs between regions. Tourism geographers are showing increasing interest in EEG with a growing number of publications and conference presentations on EEG applications within tourism studies. This article briefly sets out the conceptual background to EEG and how it relates to extant studies within tourism, drawing on examples from the literature on tourism studies and evolutionary research. A concise list of some actionable areas for EEG studies within tourism is presented as well as an appraisal of the theoretical particularities of applying EEG within tourism studies. EEG is shown to be a new path with much potential for tourism research.

**Keywords:** evolutionary economic geography; research; theory; tourism

This article explores the application of evolutionary theory to tourism studies. Specifically, does evolutionary economic geography (EEG) offer any benefits to empirical studies of tourism development? The article is inspired by the three sessions titled Tourism Geography and Evolutionary Research presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) (April 2013), in which I was a co-organiser together with Professors Alison Gill and Salvador Anton Clavé. The primary goal is to highlight the potential of an EEG conceptual framework for tourism research (cf. [Brouder & Eriksson, 2013a](#)). First, I briefly set out the conceptual background to EEG and how it relates to extant studies within tourism. Next, I present examples from the three sessions on tourism studies and evolutionary research from the AAG meeting. Then, I propose a concise list of some areas within tourism studies where EEG theory can assist in developing empirical studies. Finally, I appraise the theoretical particularities of applying EEG within tourism studies.

EEG has emerged in the last decade as a powerful explanatory paradigm and has led to an improved understanding of long-term economic change and why it differs between regions (Boschma & Martin, [2010a](#)). EEG is not concerned with equilibrium and stasis in the spatial economy but with the historically influenced, geographically embedded, long-term processes that cause the economy to transform itself from within over time. Thus, local economic evolution is characterised by continuous change (Boschma & Martin, [2007](#)). Research in EEG is concerned with economic novelty (innovation), how spatial structures emerge (as economic activity self-organises over time) and how path dependence (and new path creation) are inherently place dependent (Martin & Sunley, [2006](#)).

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This has resonance for tourism scholars engaged in regional development research who see tourism as one (or more) oft-contested, dynamic development path(s) among many.

Tourism is vast and diverse but it has a high degree of spatial fixity (e.g. simultaneous production and consumption) and is naturally region-specific and highly interactive in nature. However, as a place-based economic activity, location and natural amenities are important factors which condition the range of possible developments over the long term. Thus, the challenging epistemology of the tourism economy makes it an intriguing and variegated field of study and tourism scholars tend to be open to advancements in other disciplines in order to develop tourism studies (Xiao, Jafari, Cloke, & Tribe, 2013). However, the idiosyncratic regional tourism economies require new approaches to be fully vetted for fitness to task.

The research field of evolutionary economics (EE) sees the ‘creative destruction’ of firm routines as leading to change in the economy but EEG asks whether the processes of creative destruction are in any way place dependent, a proposition for which there is substantial empirical support. For example, Rigby and Essletzbichler (2006) show that routines and technologies within a sector differ greatly across US regions and this affects economic performance across space. Thus, EEG is distinct from EE as it focuses on the regional scale since learning tends to be geographically bounded (Boschma & Martin, 2007), a fact which is highly intuitive to tourism scholars as the tourism sector is place based, yet there is more to tourism development than simply locational advantage.

EEG scholars claim three foundations to EEG – path dependence, complexity theory and generalised Darwinism (Boschma & Martin, 2010b). These conceptual foundations are the bedrock on which empirical work is built. While methodological reductionism tends to lead researchers to focus on one or other of these, the comprehensive epistemology of EEG requires that all three must be kept in mind when designing empirical work so that individual studies may fit into the over-arching framework. This challenge becomes clear in the following presentation of one paper from each of the three AAG sessions and the reflection which follows on what was missing from the sessions. Each chosen paper is a representative of the theme of its session and these three papers are already available in published format for the interested reader.

Session I focused on learning through interaction and included Anders Larsson’s presentation on constraints to knowledge transfer between the unrelated sectors of boat building and tourism in one region of Sweden (Larsson & Lindström, 2013), where the potential of recombinant knowledge is present but the conservative nature of the boat-building sector and the immature nature of the tourism sector mean knowledge transfer is limited. However, possibilities exist to develop mutually beneficial industrial tourism and the presentation highlighted the recent establishment of a cross-sectoral maritime innovation platform which will facilitate future success. This presentation showed the difficult knowledge exchange environment of mature and newly emerging sectors.

Session II focused on policy and agency with several presentations focusing on path dependency. Among these was Henrik Halkier’s presentation on breaking from path dependency in tourism (cf. Halkier, 2013), which reflected on the factors enabling path plasticity in coastal tourism destinations, with extra-regional and extra-sectoral sources of knowledge chief among them. This points to how regional change requires new knowledge.

Session III focused on thresholds of change and among the presenters was Edward Huijbens, who presented a critique of top-down tourism development policy in Iceland, which has focused on regional cluster development but has only paid lip-service to cluster theory (Huijbens, Jóhannesson, & Jóhannesson, 2013). The presentation

highlighted the need to engage with socio-spatial specificities in regional tourism development in order to avoid spatially blind prescriptions. This implies that local knowledge and historical industrial set-up influence future change.

Overall, the sessions were interesting with fruitful discussions throughout. However, there were two weaknesses in the sessions (but not the individual presentations) which must be acknowledged. First, the sessions were dominated by the path-dependence aspects with fewer presentations focusing on the complexity aspects and none engaging directly with generalised Darwinism. This is not surprising, since path dependence is well established in tourism studies but certainly shows that there is room for empirical engagement with other aspects of EEG. Second, the majority of studies presented were not designed with EEG in mind. Instead, they took an after-the-fact approach to EEG and thus risk not fully engaging with the theory. However, authors did find EEG useful in an iterative manner in the post-empirical analysis, a fact which certainly implies that EEG has further potential if it is included from the research-design stage. Of the authors who did consider EEG theory in the research design, it was clear that it offered a fresh perspective on long-term economic change in tourism destinations and the empirical results are encouraging.

There are a number of research paths along which tourism studies and EEG may co-evolve and add new knowledge to the emergence, growth and (possible) eventual decline of tourism destinations. A concise selection of research paths is as follows.

- Path dependence – although many studies in tourism have shown its worth (e.g. Gill & Williams, 2011; Halkier, 2013; Williams & Baláz, 2002), studies from an EEG perspective will assist tourism scholars in further conceptualising long-term change in tourism. For example, understanding that path creation and path dependence are two aspects of the same regional processes is important, as is placing tourism studies in its regional context so that relationships with other sectors and technologies are not forgotten (e.g. Larsson & Lindström, 2013). Also, as Baum (1998, p. 173) has argued, when, where and why tourism is in decline is also an aspect of evolutionary path dependence since ‘deliberate overt policy change against tourism is less likely than evolutionary change in that direction’. Which paths reproduce successfully over the long term is an open question and how tourism co-opts the creative industries or how communities use festivals and events to support their locale all point to the evolution of tourism as one entity within broader regional development strategies.
- Knowledge transfer – while certain path-dependent processes tend to dominate regional development prospects for most regions, studies of networks and knowledge transfer show how path dependence is both upheld and overcome. Extant studies of knowledge transfer in tourism come close to the mechanisms of change which EEG is concerned with (cf. Weidenfeld, Williams, & Butler, 2010) and it would be interesting if scholars in this area took a closer look at the potential of EEG to inform research design. Here, generalised Darwinism has much potential (cf. Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010). Terms such as replicator, interactor, fitness and selection are challenging to apply but are important for understanding relational exchange from an evolutionary perspective, e.g. how does knowledge move from one tourism firm as it interacts with another firm and how is that knowledge replicated within the receiving firm? Selection and transfer of knowledge is far from haphazard and research on the mechanisms which enable the transfer of newly acquired knowledge is a rich empirical field.

- Regional branching – few studies show how tourism emerges in regions where it was not historically significant. Tourism continues to expand its global reach with ever more places in developing countries and in rural and peripheral regions adapting to an increased tourism presence. Empirical studies of tourism at the nascent stage will show how and why it develops differently in different regions. Branching implies taking knowledge from existing industries and adapting it to the new sector but tourism often emerges in regions dominated by very different sectors despite an increased risk of failure due to experience deficits of entrepreneurs (Brouder & Eriksson, 2013b). Thus, studies of regional branching into tourism may reveal other mechanisms of gradual regional economic change than those reported in other sectors.

It seems that EEG has much potential for empirical studies in tourism. However, there are a number of theoretical considerations when engaging with a new framework such as EEG. First, the focus on routines raises questions about the nature of knowledge in tourism, i.e. as a low-technology service sector, can the mechanisms of change be expected to have the same impact on regional economic change as routines in the high-technology sectors which dominate EEG research? Is the knowledge being transferred of the same kind and, if not, is the framework of EEG appropriate? Certainly, EEG scholars claim to be interested in the entire spatial economy (Boschma & Martin, 2010b) and so tourism studies may present a unique challenge to EEG's empirical operationalisation and epistemological validation.

Second, generalised Darwinism is widely used in EEG studies and holds a fluid ontological view of the entire spatial economy with knowledge able to flow through space via individual workers, firms and regional institutions. It is essential to understand not only how successful routines are adopted at an organisational level, and thereby contribute to regional development, but also how individual skills evolve and how both skills and routines co-evolve with the wider institutional development shaping the preconditions for economic change. In practice, this means being more aware of tourism myopia and carefully considering how tourism fits into the broader regional economy. As Larsson and Lindström (2013) have shown, this can open new avenues of enquiry. Generalised Darwinism is an important antecedent to be aware of, so that methodological reductionism (e.g. in studies of knowledge transfer) does not preclude the broader implications of generalised Darwinism if scaled up, i.e. do studies fit into a generalised Darwinism (and EEG) view of the world.

In conclusion, EEG is not actually a 'new path' for tourism scholars but rather a gradual (dare I say, evolutionary) development of previous research in tourism studies, particularly, path dependence. This development has been led by tourism geographers since its beginning but perhaps the time has come for an evolutionary revolution to occur since EEG offers perspectives beyond unilineal success stories and instead places tourism development within broader, dynamic, regional development frames. Thus, EEG opens studies of the tourism economy to a more fluid understanding of destination regions, where tourism is one strategy among others and, indeed, where tourism may be represented by several (oft-competing) strategies. The excellent work of, for example, Williams and Baláz (2000, 2002) has paved the way but an EEG lens refocuses research on the changes occurring not just in transitional cases (as in Williams and Baláz's research) but in every region on an ongoing basis.

Furthermore, low-technology service sectors are under-researched in EEG and the tourism economy offers prime empirical material for such studies. It is also clear that

evolutionary approaches to tourism research will not only enhance the theoretical development of tourism studies, but also strengthen the relevance of EEG by testing it in a very different context.

EEG provides a fruitful ground for future research in tourism studies by offering new perspectives to both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Evolutionary theory cautions that most paths lead to dead ends but that should not discourage researchers from exploring the possibilities, since EEG also shows that recombining knowledge can lead to new knowledge being created and thus opens further avenues to explore. The potential is there and research is already underway and so EEG and tourism studies are destined to co-evolve in the coming years.

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