DIE ERDE

Journal of the
Geographical Society
of Berlin

Observations on slums and their touristification

Julia Burgold[1], Fabian Frenzel[2], Manfred Rolfes[1]

[1] *Universität Potsdam, Institut für Geographie, Karl-Liebknecht-Str. 24-25, 14476 Potsdam, Germany, julia.burgold@uni-potsdam.de, mrolfes@uni-potsdam.de*

[2] *School of Management, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, England, ff48@le.ac.uk*

This special issue intends to open a discussion about the different ways in which slums become an object of observation. To start, this introduction discusses three communication contexts in which slums have been observed: in the academic debate, in global and urban policy, in popular culture. A sensitivity for these different perspectives matters when investigating the observations on slums that take place in the context of slum tourism. In this tourist practice, selected aspects of slum observations from the three communicative contexts are assembled to create the – at first sight – unlikely tourist destination of the slum. The process of this assembly is one of the key objects of study in the emerging field of slum tourism research. In this opening reflection, we firstly aim to briefly outline the ways in which the slum is observed and constructed in the aforementioned communicative contexts. Then, we want to look more specifically at some forms in which slum tourism potentially adds a new dimension to the ways we speak about and see slums. We end this introduction by briefly presenting the current state of research and by assessing how the contributions to this special issue attempt to advance our understanding of slum tourism.

Observing slums

The first context we will address is the view on slums in academic research. Slums have long been an object of academic investigations. As the contribution by *Nuissl* and *Heinrichs* in this issue highlights, academic observations on slum settlements has long been centred on a problem-oriented approach that focuses on the material, social and institutional dimensions of exclusion, such as poor housing standards, high population density, insufficient infrastructure, crime and violence. In this perspective academic research defines slums as spaces of socio-economic exclusion and social discrimination. *Davis* (2006) popularised such a negative view on slums by drawing a pessimist perspective for the future development of the world's slums (slums of despair). Such a perspective on slums does not take into account the strong socio-economic disparities within the slums. Slum settlements are not homogeneous entities, rather they are extremely diverse with residential areas ranging from socio-economically very well developed and infrastructurally well equipped to poorly developed and strongly disadvantaged. In addition to the problem-oriented

approach, academic research also highlights the slum's creative potential (slums of hope) and argues that political interventions to improve slum conditions must follow the principle of self-reliance and a multidisciplinary approach. According to this dissenting academic view, slums offer autonomous answers to rapid urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration while policy and mainstream research tend to underestimate the solutions, creativity and industry in place (*Saunders* 2011). Such positive views on slums might themselves fall prey to romantic imaginaries, however, they offer an important corrective to overly negative and simplified views as well as the resulting policies, which often show little or no respect for the structures developed within slums.

Secondly, slums are an important communicative focus in global, national and local policy. In this context, slums are generally perceived as a problem or a challenge – from global policy to urban planning. For decades, politicians, architects and social workers have been conceiving, designing and implementing approaches and interventions to remove or upgrade slums – depending on their ideas of slums as places of despair or places of hope. The eight United Nations millennium development goals aim at measures and means to improve the living conditions of the slum dwellers. According to UN-HABITAT, characteristics of inadequate living conditions in these settlements, e.g. insufficient access to clean water, sanitation and other infrastructure as well as poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding and insecure residential status, must be eliminated (cf. UN Habitat 2003). But upgrading and security represent only one part of the political strategies when dealing with slums. While there has been a general shift in policy away from slum removal to slum improvement (see *Nuissl* and *Heinrichs* in this issue), urban planning and policy are still notoriously ill-informed, non-participatory and short-breathed in many contexts globally. Slums are still primarily considered as a challenge when security issues arise while questions of social justice and equity form part of rhetoric rather than political practice. For example, the prevention of crime and the securisation in the slums is an important field of political intervention especially in the context of sports mega-events (see *Steinbrink*, *Freire-Medeiros* et al. in this issue). To summarise, we can argue that – with few exceptions– an overtly negative semantic field surrounding the category of 'slum' is predominant. Slums are generally constructed as areas of poverty, exclusion, insecurity and stagnation.

Within the third communication context – popular culture – we also find these negative portrayals of slums and their inhabitants. A sea of tightly arranged huts, open sewers, children playing between mountains of rubbish are images that are produced and circulated by mass media, movies and books. However, in popular culture these images are sometimes contrasted with more positive notions and ideas of slums. In particular, movies have been important in producing imaginaries of slums that show their challenges and problems while at the same time pointing to the industry, culture, creativity and often community found in slums. The well-known 'City of God' and 'Slumdog Millionaire' are just the most important ones of the recent years. An appreciation of 'ghetto style' fashion, music and other sometimes deviant culture is found globally. Music genres that carry imaginaries of slums with them range from hip-hop to samba, baille funk and jazz, to name but a few of the more important examples. Besides the valorisation of the slum we find in here, it is important to note that the spread of these cultures is often propelled by their commoditisation in commercial culture industries. This abstract valorisation means that cultural styles are increasingly disconnected from the living realities in which they arose and therefore provide little scope for an increased understanding of these living conditions. The music or imaginary is lifted from the slum while the place-related semantics of the slums remains overly negative in connotation.

The ambivalent glance on slums and the oscillation between positive and negative images that appears in these different communication contexts is an important motor of slum tourism. Therefore, we want to ascertain how slums are observed in the context of tourism. Since the mid-1990s a touristic gaze on slum settlements has been a manifest occurrence in an increasing number of slums in the developing world. Touristic observations of slums incorporate a varying mix of the observer positions identified above. Like these communication contexts, slum tourism's discourse centres on poverty. In slum tourism, however, poverty is valorised as an attraction of the destination, a value that tourists aim to incorporate into their experience. This blatantly dubious and flippant desire is often criticised by the media and some tourism researchers as immoral and described by means of the zoo-visit metaphor (see *Burgold* and *Rolfes* in this issue). We, however, find that a more substantial treatment of this valorisation practice is necessary. Despite the apparent cynical nature of these tours, their rele-

vance lies precisely in their discursive and structural similarities to the discourses and practices that take place within the communicative contexts that we have described above. More importantly, the valorisation of slums in tourism, rather than being merely cynical, may provide a corrective element to the other communication contexts, moving them from often one-sided negative oversimplification to a more complex and generally more positive understanding of slums (see *Frenzel* in this issue). This comes with several potential problems. To valorise the slum, for example as a place of cultural difference, brings the danger of de-dramatising and depoliticisation of the suffering and inequality that constitutes poverty. Indeed slum tourism is used, as *Steinbrink* points out in his contribution to this issue, as a tool of public policy where its precise purpose is a selective visualisation of the slum that aims at hiding a much more dramatic social reality of inequality. Cultural difference becomes a convenient way to justify and naturalise social inequality also for the visiting tourists, who, after all, come from much wealthier backgrounds. There is significant evidence that the valorisation of slum life might serve as a way to deal with the tourists' privilege, for example when they present slum dwellers as poor but happy (c.f. *Crossley* 2012, *Frenzel* 2012). In this respect it might be of little surprise that slum dwellers have a good understanding of the limits of tourism to transform their lives. While existing evidence suggests that slum tours are overly regarded as positive, this comes with the caveat of an increasing understanding of some of the negative impacts of tourism development. The answer to these developments is sometimes a politicisation of the tours themselves. Tourists are mobilised to support demands for better development, to see through the limits of existing slum policies and to help residents struggle for recognition as well as for more specific aims in policy. All this, however, points to slum tourism's potential as a new way of speaking about poverty, to transform and to influence the established communicative discourses of academia, policy and popular culture. How precisely this might work is an important topic of research in the developing literature in this field.

Slum tourism research and the papers presented

In recent years, researchers from across disciplines have started to take the growing phenomenon of slum tourism seriously. An interdisciplinary field of research has emerged, ranging from tourism studies, urban studies and sociology to geography, anthropology and political science. For a broad and detailed overview on slum tourism research, we recommend *Freire-Medeiros* (2013), *Frenzel* et al. (2012) and *Frenzel* and *Koens* (2012). Although research on slum tourism began to develop only 10 years ago, it has already become an established field. Following *Frenzel* and *Koens* (2012) and *Koens* et al. (2012) as well as our own evaluations, different areas and results within the existing research on slum tourism can be distinguished. However, these can only be sketched briefly here.

At the beginning, the academic field of slum tourism research primarily comprised case studies, initially in South Africa (township tourism) and Brazil (favela tourism). By nature, these are unique and it is not always easy to directly transfer concepts, ideas and theoretical angles. However, the increasing number of case studies opens the way to a certain level of comparative and conceptual research (*Dürr* and *Jaffe* 2012). Thus, this research includes a reflection on the relationship of contemporary slum tourism to the historical phenomenon of slumming. Slumming has played a central role in the formation of the modern city in Europe (London) and the US (New York), and prior research has indicated how slumming experiences came to transform political and cultural discourses in the 19th-century city (*Steinbrink* 2012). More recent research on slumming focuses on the places and appearance of this touristic practice especially in the Global South. Key aspects are tourist services in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro. Central to this research is the question of the slum tourist's subjectivity and their motivation to participate in such tours. Within this context, researchers debate the topics of different moral and ethical concerns regarding slum tourism. Empirical studies show how the tour providers react to these ethical concerns (see *Burgold* and *Rolfes* in this special issue). Other research reflects whether slum tours may positively change the image of the slums, favelas and townships. A certain transformation process is evidenced in several destinations (see *Steinbrink*, *Burgold* and *Rolfes*, *Freire-Medeiros* et al. in this issue). Tour operators are reproducing slums positively in these tours through a range of representations. Beyond studying the narratives of the tours, practices of tour operators may also become the object of study. These are sometimes key components to the production of authenticity and the tourist desire for the 'real' slum. In doing so, the providers try to evoke the impression that the tours offer an insight into the real life of the visited country or the visited

city. Finally, the already indicated pragmatic question of how slum tourism helps to actually improve the poverty situation in the slums is of importance. Here slum tourism research connects to reflections of community-based tourism and pro-poor tourism. The question is under what conditions slum tourism could be considered pro-poor (see *Frenzel* in this issue). In the context of recent and upcoming mega-events, research has also shown that slum tourism can be used by public policy to sustain the resemblance of an inclusive urban policy in the absence of substantive improvements for the urban poor (see *Steinbrink* and *Freire-Medeiros* et al. in this issue). Against this background, slum tourism research needs to continue to address moral and political questions over the commodification and valorisation of poverty and slums.

Overall, further research efforts are necessary to theoretically determine and understand the global phenomenon of slumming. To explain and reflect on slum tourism, it is possible to connect the topic with globalisation theories, including the ideas of post-colonial critique. It is also necessary to intensely deal with the question if and how tours and encounters contribute to the construction of the identity of the tourists as well as the locals. In doing so, one can for example observe that many tours tend to culturalise poverty, which then leads the tourists to trivialise the tenuous living conditions of the slum dwellers ("It's not that bad at all."). A central question of slum research is how one's own and the foreign self are (re-)constructed. Barely explored is how the inhabitants of the already visited slums perceive and evaluate the increasing number of tourists in their slums. Also consequences for the local economies or the social empowerment of the slum dwellers on a local and global level have not been systematically examined so far.

Over the past years, more and more slum tourism destinations have been explored. Interestingly, tourism to deprived areas in the Global North now also arises as an increasingly visible tourist practice. New York's Bronx, London's Banglatown, Paris's banlieues are prominent examples of neighbourhoods with a high proportion of socially disadvantaged population groups, in particular migrants, that have become an object of the touristic gaze in recent years. In Berlin-Neukölln, to give one example, tours have been occurring since 2007, run by Muslim women with a Turkish or Lebanese background. Although Berlin-Neukölln is anything but a slum, these tours show some aspects very similar to slum tours in the Global South. The aim

here also seems to be to shed light on the other side of the city or society respectively and in particular to create a different, more positive image of these often stigmatised neighbourhoods and their inhabitants. There is a substantial need for further research in this area.

This present special issue can no more than offer a limited contribution to the broader research aim of the slum tourism research field. Following a brief introduction into the state of the art in slum research, the discussion moves on to investigate various aspects of the interrelations between different discourses. In the previous statements, we have repeatedly pointed out how the individual contributions are placed within the overall context of this research field. In detail, the five articles deal with the following aspects:

The first article by *Henning Nuissl* and *Dirk Heinrichs* provides an overview of the recent debates about the world's slums. Their aim is to demonstrate the heterogeneity of approaches to define, assess and solve problems of informal settlements and their inhabitants. It is argued that the appraisal of the slum phenomenon largely depends on the perspective from which it is viewed. In their review of the wide range of paradigms and approaches through which slums and their challenges have been addressed, *Nuissl* and *Heinrichs* outline the conceptual changes from problem-oriented approaches (slums of despair) and the ensuing strategies of slum clearance until the 1970s, via more differentiated perspectives that shed light on the self-help potential of slums (slums of hope) and, therefore, favour consolidation and upgrading strategies in the 1980s up to the present integrated approaches that combine several dimensions of poverty.

The possible role which slum tourism may play to improve the living conditions of slum dwellers, i.e. to overcome poverty, is discussed in the contribution by *Fabian Frenzel*. Based on an analysis of the state-of-the-art literature on tourism and poverty alleviation, it is shown that tourism's potential of reducing poverty is mostly seen in economic terms and measured with quantitative indicators such as the headcount of people that move beyond the poverty line. The author elaborates the hypothesis that this predominant positivist and quantitative approach does not sufficiently account for the multidimensional character of poverty. For *Frenzel*, research on slum tourism and poverty relief, which often evokes qualitative approaches discussing concepts of em-

powerment, opportunity, security and valorisation, provides new insights into social and political questions of poverty relief. The author highlights that the qualitative role of slum tourism in poverty alleviation relies on the ways poverty is valorised on the level of semantics. As different understandings of poverty are circulated and exchanged in the slum tourism debate, for *Frenzel* the main potential of slum tourism lies in overcoming stigmatisation and discrimination on a global level. However, the author also points at the risk that this valorisation may create new de-problematised and romanticised notions of poverty. Therefore, he concludes, future research on slum tourism and poverty relief should address the representation of slums and poverty and develop criteria to evaluate this process of valorisation.

Problematising the de-problematisation of poverty is also one of *Malte Steinbrink's* concerns in his analysis of governmental tourism programmes in favelas. His contribution picks up on the question of how Rio de Janeiro's urban policy deals with its favelas in the preparatory phase to two upcoming mega-events: the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. In addition to the usual strategy of invisibilisation (through forced evictions or visual protection screens), *Steinbrink* identifies another, more innovative strategy, which he calls transformation. This three-step strategy includes (1) the pacification of selected, strategically located, favelas with the help of military and pacifying police units, (2) subsequent construction and infrastructural activities in order to improve the outward appearance, as well as (3) the support of local favela tourism as a tool for transmitting a more positive favela image and as one for local development. Interpreting these governmental measures within the context of Rio's festivalisation policy, the author demonstrates that this strategy – contrary to official representations that present the Brazilian state as socio-political caretaker – mainly serves the outwardly directed objective of image production and international recognition. For *Steinbrink*, two consequences are of particular concern: He claims that, firstly, such an upgrading in terms of security and aesthetic design paves the way for gentrification, and that, secondly, the enhanced focus on colourful and pleasant aspects of the favela involves a specific form of culturalisation that leads to a de-problematisation of (the observed) social inequality.

The potential of slum tourism in distributing perspectives on poverty different from the existing

ones is further discussed and empirically illustrated in the contribution by *Bianca Freire-Medeiros*, *Márcio Grijó Vilarouca* and *Palloma Menezes*. The authors present the results of a quantitative survey with 400 international tourists who participated in tours in the "pacified" favela Santa Marta, Rio de Janeiro. Special emphasis was laid on the question to what extent the tourists' perceptions of favelas changed through participating in a tour. Although acknowledging that there is no standardised favela tour, as these vary substantially – depending on whether they are led by local or external tour guides –, the authors' results show an overriding transformation of the favela's image from negative connotations of disorder, violence and despair towards more positive portrayals of development, solidarity and happiness.

By means of two empirical case studies *Julia Burgold's* and *Manfred Rolfes's* contribution also points to the active role of slum tourism in changing conceptions of slums and poverty. The authors look closely at the relationship between particular notions held regarding slums and townships and the moral charging of the practice of slum tourism itself. Presenting the results of their case studies carried out in Cape Town and Mumbai, the authors illustrate that the moral charging of slum tourism as bad, i.e. voyeuristic, and exploitative or good, i.e. educational and helpful, depends on the interpretation of slums and townships as either places of hardship and despair or places of development of hope. Consequently, *Burgold* and *Rolfes's* empirical analysis shows that moral concerns about slum tourism expressed by most of the tourists before embarking on a tour have been erased by the end of the slum tour. Placing these results in the wider context of ethical consumption, the authors intend to highlight that the praxis of slum tourism can be considered as another tool for social distinction.

Thus, the five contributions deepen very different aspects of slum and slum tourism research. We hope that the opening contribution and the five essays will give a good overview of the young research field. Still, slum tourism research develops dynamically. From May 14th to 16th, 2014, Potsdam University will host the international conference "Destination Slum 2.0: New Developments and Perspectives in Slum Tourism Research" (http://slumtourism.net/destinationslum/). On this occasion, slum researchers from all over the world will present their latest research result for discussion.

References

Crossley, E. 2012: Poor but happy: Volunteer tourists' encounters with poverty. – Tourism Geographies **14** (2): 235-253

Davis, M. 2006: Planet of slums. – London et al.

Dürr, E. and *R. Jaffe* 2012: Theorizing slum tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Performing, negotiating and transforming inequality. – Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe / European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies **93**: 113-123

Freire-Medeiros, B. 2013: Touring poverty. – New York

Frenzel, F. 2012: Beyond 'Othering': The political roots of slum tourism. – In: *Frenzel, F., K. Koens* and *M. Steinbrink* (eds.): Slum tourism. Poverty, power, and ethics.– New York: 49-65

Frenzel, F. and *K. Koens* 2012: Slum tourism: Developments in a young field of interdisciplinary tourism research. – Tourism Geographies **14** (2): 195-212

Frenzel, F., K. Koens and *M. Steinbrink* 2012 (eds.): Slum tourism. Poverty, power and ethics. – London, New York

Koens, K., F. Frenzel and *M. Steinbrink* 2012: Keep on slumming. – In: *Frenzel, F., K. Koens* and *M. Steinbrink* (eds.): Slum tourism. Poverty, power and ethics. – London, New York: 271-280

Saunders, D. 2011: Arrival city. How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world. – London

Steinbrink, M. 2012: 'We did the slum!'. Urban poverty tourism in historical perspective. – Tourism Geographies **14** (2): 213-234

UN Habitat 2003a: The challenge of slums. Global report on human settlements. – London