
Populism, Nationalism, And The Transformation Of Global Tourism: Political Ideologies, Destination Dynamics, And The Reconfiguration Of The Tourist Gaze

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of populism and nationalism across diverse political contexts has profoundly altered the global tourism landscape. Tourism, once primarily framed through economic development, cultural exchange, and leisure mobility, has increasingly become entangled with ideological narratives emphasizing sovereignty, identity, security, and exclusion. This article offers a comprehensive theoretical and analytical exploration of how populist political movements and governments reshape tourism development, destination management, tourist behavior, and global travel patterns. Drawing strictly on established scholarly literature, the study synthesizes insights from political economy, cultural theory, sustainability studies, and tourism sociology to illuminate the multidimensional impacts of populism on tourism systems. The article adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in critical literature analysis, enabling a deep engagement with conceptual debates rather than empirical generalization. Findings indicate that populist ideologies influence tourism through five interrelated mechanisms: the politicization of national branding, the securitization of mobility, the reconfiguration of sustainability discourses, the reshaping of overtourism narratives, and the transformation of the tourist gaze. Populist governance often promotes selective openness, privileging certain tourist flows while discouraging others, and reframes tourism as a tool of national affirmation rather than cosmopolitan exchange. At the same time, resistance to globalization embedded in populism generates paradoxical outcomes, as tourism remains economically indispensable even to nationalist regimes. The discussion critically examines these contradictions, addresses theoretical limitations, and identifies future research directions in a world marked by ideological polarization and mobility inequalities. The article concludes that understanding tourism in the age of populism requires moving beyond apolitical economic models toward a politically informed, ethically grounded, and socially reflexive framework.

KEYWORDS

Populism, Nationalism, Global Tourism, Political Ideology, Destination Management, Tourist Gaze.

INTRODUCTION

Populism, Tourism has long been understood as one of the most globalized sectors of the world economy, characterized by transnational mobility, intercultural encounters, and economic interdependence. Traditionally, tourism scholarship emphasized growth, development, cultural exchange, and sustainability within relatively stable political frameworks. However, the past two decades have witnessed a profound transformation in global political landscapes, marked by the rise of populist and nationalist movements across both developed and

developing regions. These political shifts challenge the foundational assumptions of tourism as an inherently cosmopolitan and liberalizing force. Instead, tourism increasingly operates within contested ideological terrains shaped by discourses of sovereignty, identity, security, and resistance to globalization (Baker & Nissen, 2021).

Populism, though diverse in form and expression, commonly constructs politics as a struggle between a virtuous “people” and a corrupt or threatening “other,” often targeting elites, migrants, international institutions, and global flows. Tourism, as a sector reliant on openness, mobility, and cross-border interaction, becomes particularly vulnerable to such narratives. Nationalist governments may simultaneously celebrate tourism’s economic benefits while condemning its cultural and social implications, producing ambivalent and often contradictory policy approaches (Benyamin, 2019). This tension places tourism at the center of broader debates about national identity, economic sovereignty, and cultural preservation.

The academic literature increasingly recognizes tourism as a politically embedded phenomenon rather than a neutral economic activity. Scholars have examined how populist governments influence tourism development strategies, safety and security policies, destination branding, and sustainability agendas (Mansfeld & Pizam, 2020; Jafari, 2021). At the same time, tourism practices themselves shape political imaginaries by reinforcing or challenging narratives of belonging, exclusion, and national pride (Urry, 2014). Yet despite growing scholarly attention, existing research often remains fragmented, focusing on isolated dimensions such as security, overtourism, or nationalism without integrating these perspectives into a coherent analytical framework.

This article addresses this gap by offering an extensive, theoretically grounded examination of the relationship between populism, nationalism, and global tourism. It seeks to understand not only how populist ideologies shape tourism policies and practices, but also how tourism functions as a site where populist narratives are enacted, negotiated, and contested. By synthesizing insights from political economy, cultural sociology, and sustainability studies, the article positions tourism as both an object and an instrument of populist politics.

The central problem guiding this research is the lack of a comprehensive theoretical account of tourism under populist regimes. While empirical case studies provide valuable insights, there is a need for deeper conceptual elaboration that situates tourism within broader ideological and structural transformations. This article responds to that need by engaging critically with foundational and contemporary tourism scholarship, highlighting the implications of populism for tourism governance, destination management, tourist subjectivities, and global mobility patterns.

MMETHODOLOGY

The methodological approach adopted in this study is qualitative, interpretive, and theoretically oriented. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the research relies on an in-depth critical analysis of established academic literature on tourism, populism, nationalism, and political change. This approach is particularly suitable given the study’s aim to generate conceptual insights and synthesize diverse theoretical perspectives rather than to test hypotheses or measure causal relationships.

The analysis proceeds through a systematic reading and interpretation of key scholarly works that address tourism’s intersections with political ideologies. These texts are treated not merely as sources of information, but as theoretical interventions that reflect broader intellectual debates within tourism studies and the social sciences. Attention is paid to the assumptions underlying different analytical frameworks, the concepts used to describe tourism-politics relationships, and the normative implications of various arguments.

A thematic analytical strategy guides the synthesis of the literature. Core themes such as nationalism, security,

sustainability, overtourism, and the tourist gaze are examined in relation to populist politics. Rather than isolating these themes, the methodology emphasizes their interconnections, recognizing that populist ideologies operate across multiple dimensions simultaneously. For example, security discourses are linked to nationalism, while sustainability narratives intersect with overtourism and local resistance.

The methodology also incorporates reflexive interpretation, acknowledging that tourism scholarship itself is embedded in particular political and cultural contexts. By critically engaging with the literature, the study seeks to uncover implicit biases, silences, and contradictions, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of tourism under populist conditions. This text-based, interpretive approach allows for extensive theoretical elaboration and is well suited to addressing complex, multi-layered phenomena that resist simple empirical categorization.

RESULTS

The analysis of the literature reveals several interrelated patterns that characterize the impact of populism and nationalism on global tourism. These patterns are not uniform across all contexts, but they reflect recurring tendencies observed in diverse political settings.

One significant finding is the politicization of tourism as a symbol of national identity. Populist governments often appropriate tourism narratives to project images of cultural authenticity, historical continuity, and national pride. Destination branding shifts away from cosmopolitan openness toward selective representations that emphasize heritage, tradition, and sovereignty (Benyamin, 2019). Tourism thus becomes a stage for performing the nation, reinforcing distinctions between insiders and outsiders.

A second pattern concerns the securitization of tourism. Populist political shifts frequently foreground issues of safety, border control, and risk management, framing tourism within broader security agendas. Mansfeld and Pizam (2020) demonstrate how tourism security policies increasingly reflect populist anxieties about terrorism, migration, and social disorder. While these measures are often justified as protecting tourists and citizens, they can also restrict mobility, deter certain visitor groups, and contribute to perceptions of exclusion.

The literature also highlights the complex relationship between populism and sustainability. On one hand, populist movements may criticize global environmental governance and resist international sustainability frameworks, viewing them as elite-driven constraints on national sovereignty. On the other hand, concerns about overtourism and local resource depletion can align with populist calls to protect “the people” and national assets from external exploitation (Papageorgiou & Kolios, 2018). This ambivalence results in fragmented and sometimes contradictory sustainability policies.

Another key finding relates to the reshaping of tourist preferences and behaviors. Halkier and Hovgaard (2019) note that tourists themselves are influenced by populist discourses, which shape perceptions of destinations, cultural authenticity, and political legitimacy. Some travelers may be attracted to destinations that align with their ideological values, while others may avoid places associated with exclusionary politics. Tourism demand thus becomes increasingly politicized, reflecting broader ideological divisions.

Finally, the analysis underscores changes in global travel patterns and tourism development trajectories. Populist governments may prioritize domestic tourism, regional alliances, or politically aligned markets while discouraging others (Jafari, 2021). This selective globalization reconfigures tourism flows, reinforcing inequalities between destinations and reshaping the global tourism system.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight tourism's entanglement with populist and nationalist ideologies, challenging conventional understandings of tourism as a politically neutral or universally beneficial activity. One of the most significant theoretical implications is the need to reconceptualize tourism governance as an inherently ideological process. Decisions about who is welcomed, which narratives are promoted, and how destinations are managed reflect political values and power relations rather than purely economic considerations.

The politicization of destination branding illustrates how tourism becomes a tool for constructing and disseminating national narratives. This process raises critical questions about representation, inclusion, and cultural authenticity. While nationalist branding may resonate with domestic audiences and certain international visitors, it risks marginalizing minority groups and reinforcing exclusionary identities (Baker & Nissen, 2021). Tourism scholars must therefore interrogate the ethical dimensions of branding strategies shaped by populist politics.

The securitization of tourism further complicates the relationship between mobility and hospitality. While safety is a legitimate concern, the framing of tourism through security discourses can normalize surveillance, restrict freedoms, and perpetuate fear. Mansfeld and Pizam (2020) caution that excessive securitization may undermine tourism's role as a space of encounter and exchange, transforming destinations into controlled environments that prioritize risk management over meaningful engagement.

Sustainability debates reveal the paradoxes of populist governance. Resistance to global environmental norms may undermine long-term ecological goals, yet populist critiques of overtourism highlight genuine concerns about local well-being and resource limits. Papageorgiou and Kolios (2018) suggest that these tensions offer opportunities for rethinking sustainability from more locally grounded, socially just perspectives, provided that exclusionary tendencies are addressed.

The transformation of the tourist gaze, as conceptualized by Urry (2014), is particularly salient in the age of populism. Political discourses shape what tourists seek, how they interpret destinations, and how they relate to hosts. Tourism thus participates in the reproduction of political imaginaries, reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies. This insight underscores tourism's role not merely as an economic sector, but as a cultural practice with profound social implications.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. Its reliance on secondary literature means that empirical variations across specific contexts are not fully explored. Future research could complement this theoretical analysis with comparative case studies, ethnographic research, or policy analysis to examine how populist tourism policies are implemented and experienced on the ground. Additionally, the dynamic nature of populism calls for longitudinal studies that track changes over time.

CONCLUSION

This article has offered an extensive theoretical examination of the intersections between populism, nationalism, and global tourism. By synthesizing insights from diverse strands of tourism scholarship, it demonstrates that populist ideologies reshape tourism in profound and multifaceted ways. Tourism becomes a site where political narratives are enacted, contested, and embodied, influencing governance structures, destination identities, and tourist subjectivities.

The analysis reveals that populist politics generate both constraints and opportunities for tourism. While

exclusionary policies and securitization threaten openness and inclusivity, critiques of globalization and overtourism open spaces for reimagining sustainability and local empowerment. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond simplistic binaries of pro- and anti-tourism stances toward a nuanced appreciation of tourism's political embeddedness.

Ultimately, the article argues that tourism scholars and practitioners must engage more critically with political ideologies shaping the sector. In an era of ideological polarization and mobility inequalities, tourism cannot be separated from broader struggles over identity, power, and belonging. A politically informed, ethically reflexive approach to tourism research is essential for navigating the challenges and possibilities of the populist age.

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