Paper title: *Tourists, out! Neighbourhood conflicts and the 'politicization from below' of urban tourism in Barcelona*

Dr Claire Colomb
Senior Lecturer in Urban Sociology & European Spatial Planning
The Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, United Kingdom
E-mail: c.colomb@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper concentrates on the local social conflicts and mobilizations which surround the increasing dominance of tourism in urban space and in the urban economic development strategy of the city of Barcelona. The city has consolidated itself as a major tourist destination since the early 1990s: tourist flows in Barcelona grew from 1.7 million to 7 million annual visitors between 1990 and 2010; the total number of hotel beds has more than tripled in the same period. In recent years, debates have emerged amongst local residents and grassroot organizations in popular tourist neighbourhoods about the negative impacts which mass tourism has had on the city' urban fabric and on the daily life of locals. The growing visitor economy has triggered material transformations of urban spaces, which are increasingly felt and contested by local residents. While tourists patron local shops, cultural venues, restaurants and cafés, they have increasingly been perceived as a source of nuisance (e.g. litter, overcrowding and noise). The tourist demand for particular types of venues and services has been rapidly appropriated by local entrepreneurs or external investors who have opened (or converted) businesses to cater for the visitor economy. This has put visible pressures on existing businesses and residents, through rent increases, pressures for land use changes, building conversions, the displacement of businesses serving local needs and a rise in consumer prices for certain goods. There has been a rapid increase in the opening of new hotels and hostels, as well as a sharp rise in the conversion of residential apartments into holiday rentals (legal and illegal) – a major topic of contention in Barcelona. This has prompted various organisations to call for more policy intervention and public regulation of tourism by the city's government.

These debates have been increasingly publicized in the local media and gradually pushed within the formal political sphere. In Barcelona conflicts and debates have centred on the historical district of *Ciutat Vella* (the medieval district of the city), which concentrates a significant part of total tourist flows in a very dense urban district suffering from various physical, economic and social problems. In recent years the district's "neighbours' associations" (*associacions de veins i veïnes)* have played a prominent role in raising public awareness and putting the topic of urban tourism on the political agenda of the city, through various forms of mobilizations and actions. Such associations have a strong tradition of activism dating back from the Franco era. This paper investigates the emergence of a public debate about the negative impacts of urban tourism in Barcelona and the 'politicization from below' of the topic of urban tourism under the impetus of grassroot organizations and citizens' mobilizations. It addresses the following questions: Who are the stakeholders who started a debate about tourism's adverse impacts on neighbourhoods, and what are their arguments? How do they politicize the issue? What kind of demands do they make on the city' governments for more policy intervention, regulation or control? Are there tensions, ambiguities and contradictions between these demands? Has the city's government begun to recognize and address these demands and the tensions and conflicts arising from the impact of tourism on the city's urban fabric and social life? If so, what kinds of strategies and measures have been implemented – or not?