

Please cite the Published Version

Skinner, HM (2018) Utopias, Dystopias, Heidegger, and Homer: Considering the essence of Greek Island destinations. In: 5th Corfu Symposium on Managing & Marketing Places, 16 April 2018 - 19 April 2018, Corfu, Greece.

Publisher: The Institute of Place Management

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Utopias, Dystopias, Heidegger, and Homer: Considering the essence of Greek Island destinations

Dr Heather Skinner

Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University

heather@placemanagement.org

Abstract

This paper presents a critical consideration of utopias and dystopias in the context of Greek Island tourism destinations, with insights from Homer's *Odyssey*, underpinned by the concept of places as lived environments, where human beings dwell in meaningful environments (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). From a Heideggerian existentialist perspective, Norberg-Schulz (1980) presented a phenomenology of architecture, providing useful conceptualisations of both the natural and built environment in terms of the *genius loci*, the 'spirit of place'. *Place* is then the term used for sum of all the 'concrete things' that determine an 'environmental character' (Norberg-Schulz, 1980:6). While place structure (its character and spatial dimensions) may change over time, it is argued that its *genius loci* remains relatively stable. Yet while this is what characterises one place's identity from another, the whole concept of place identity is seen to be 'elusive and paradoxical' (Kalandides, 2012). Rendering what a place is to a name reduces its complexity, and does not necessarily reflect the way elements of that place have changed or remained the same over time. As Kalandides (2012) points out, 'place is always the same and different, unique and multiple, distinct and interchangeable'. Yet that the essence of one place differs from another motivates tourists to travel, to escape from the everyday, to experience places that are different from those they usually inhabit (Williams & Lew, 2015).

Simpson (2016) conceptualises 'tourist utopias' as 'enclave *spaces of exception* within larger states'. Utopias are 'perfect worlds and ideal societies' offering 'pure escapism' far removed from reality (Podoshen *et al.*, 2015:316). Dystopias are then perceived as the opposite of utopias. In art and literature, dystopias often present a warning of a society that could come about if mankind does not mend its ways and reduce conflict, war, and inequality, where some inhabitants are 'excluded from the new society', and where 'a new era of extreme violence and extreme solutions act as answers to the "problems" of prior society' (Podoshen *et al.*, 2015:316). Outside of a specific focus on Dark Tourism dystopias have received limited attention in the tourism literature (Podoshen *et al.*, 2015).

Offshore places can also be considered as spaces of exception, and often different taxes or other laws apply in island destination tourist utopias (Simpson, 2016). Stratford (2003:495) also believes that islands can be 'paradisiacal, utopian and dystopian, tourist meccas'. She argues that such bounded places as islands are well-placed to 'contribute to our knowledge about the world and ourselves ... enhance how we understand the world and the self, place and identity'. The Greek National Tourism Organisation notes that 'Greek sovereign land includes 6,000 islands and islets scattered in the Aegean and Ionian Seas', not only is this 'a truly unique phenomenon for the European continent', but 'the islands are the main characteristic of Greece's morphology and an integral part of the country's culture and tradition' (http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/greek_islands).

The author Homer mythologised the Ionian islands in *The Odyssey*, telling of the adventures and travels of Odysseus, King of the Ionian island of Ithaca. The Ionian island of Corfu was

Homer's mythical land of 'Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians where Odysseus was shipwrecked and recounted his adventures' (Hopkins, 1977:22-23).

However, Corfu, like many other idyllic, paradisiacal, utopian Greek island destinations, now suffers from many dystopian problems including a decline in tourist numbers, a decline in tourist spend, 'a growth in all-inclusive tourism product offerings; a decreasing tourist season in many resorts; and an over-reliance on tour operators with low rental fees paid by operators to accommodation providers' (Skinner, 2017).

Corfu's 'party resort' of Kavos is often portrayed as highly dystopian, with young, mostly British, tourists engaging in risky sex, drug, and alcohol-related behaviours, while in the winter months many of the island's local residents have to cope with limited income and very few open facilities in resort areas (Williams Burnett & Fallon, 2017; Williams Burnett *et al.*, 2016).

As the global economic crisis has hit many Greek communities hard (Artelaris, 2017; Smith, 2017), in the 2017 'summer of overtourism', the Greek island of Santorini has attracted almost 2 million tourists, 'but locals say it has hit saturation point' and the island's infrastructure can no longer cope with such success (Smith, 2017).

Accommodation owners across Greece are taking matters into their own hands and renting out their properties to tourists via platforms such as Airbnb, however, not all declare this taxable income, and estimates suggest Greek hotels could be losing up to 525 million Euros a year from the 'sharing economy' (Greek Travel Pages, 2017).

The islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Agathonisi, Leros, Kalymnos, Kos, Symi and Rhodes saw a large influx of refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Almost half of the 100,000 refugees entering Greece from January 2015 came into Europe via Lesbos (Leadbetter, 2016).

Therefore, whereas certain places may be romanticised by some as utopian and idyllic, the reality may be perceived by others to be dystopian (Toker, 1996). Perhaps such tourist utopias 'might better be construed as *dystopian* for the manner in which vast resources are deployed to benefit a few at the expense of many others, with often devastating social costs and environmental consequences'. Tourism in general can be seen to privilege 'consumption over production, leisure over labour, and gratification over the daily grind'. What may be considered a tourist utopia may in fact be paradoxical, 'both utopian and dystopian', and therefore 'perhaps best understood as heretopias' (Simpson, 2016). Such is the 'hidden logic of utopia' whereby those pursuing their own utopian ideals may be creating dystopian environments for others (Isaac, 2015:330). Thus, the Santorini tourists cramming into the island's tiny streets to experience the utopian beauty of the place may be creating dystopia for local residents, similarly the Kavos partygoers' behaviours can have negative effects not only on local residents, but also on other tourists. Those who rent out their homes may be offering more authentic island experiences for tourists to local villages, and may be providing themselves much needed additional income, but it is having a negative effect on the hotel industry. Furthermore, tax evasion can be seen to also have an overall detrimental effect on Greek society in a time of on-going financial crisis. Some media reports focused on tourists who claimed their vacations were spoiled by the vast numbers of refugees on their utopian Greek island holiday destinations, but it must be questioned if these refugees pursuing a utopian dream, or simply fleeing dystopian environments.

This paper therefore concludes by posing, rather than answering, a number of questions:

- Does every utopia turn into a dystopia (as argued by Isaac, 2015)?
- Should enclavic spaces of exception such as All-Inclusive resorts be framed as utopian or as dystopian?
- Can the *genius loci* of these idyllic utopian places indeed remain stable even when they experience large influxes of refugees, or tourists, who may also behave badly, when there is not always enough income for residents to pay basic utilities or feed their families over the winter months?

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