OVERTOURISM? CITIES COUNT

PROJECT OUTLINE

OVERTOURISM: A CONTROVERSY WITH NUMBERS

The collective Venessia.com has been alerting for decades about the "exodus" of the Venetian resident population. The symbolic threshold of 50'000 inhabitants was crossed in July 2022.
Source: venessia.com

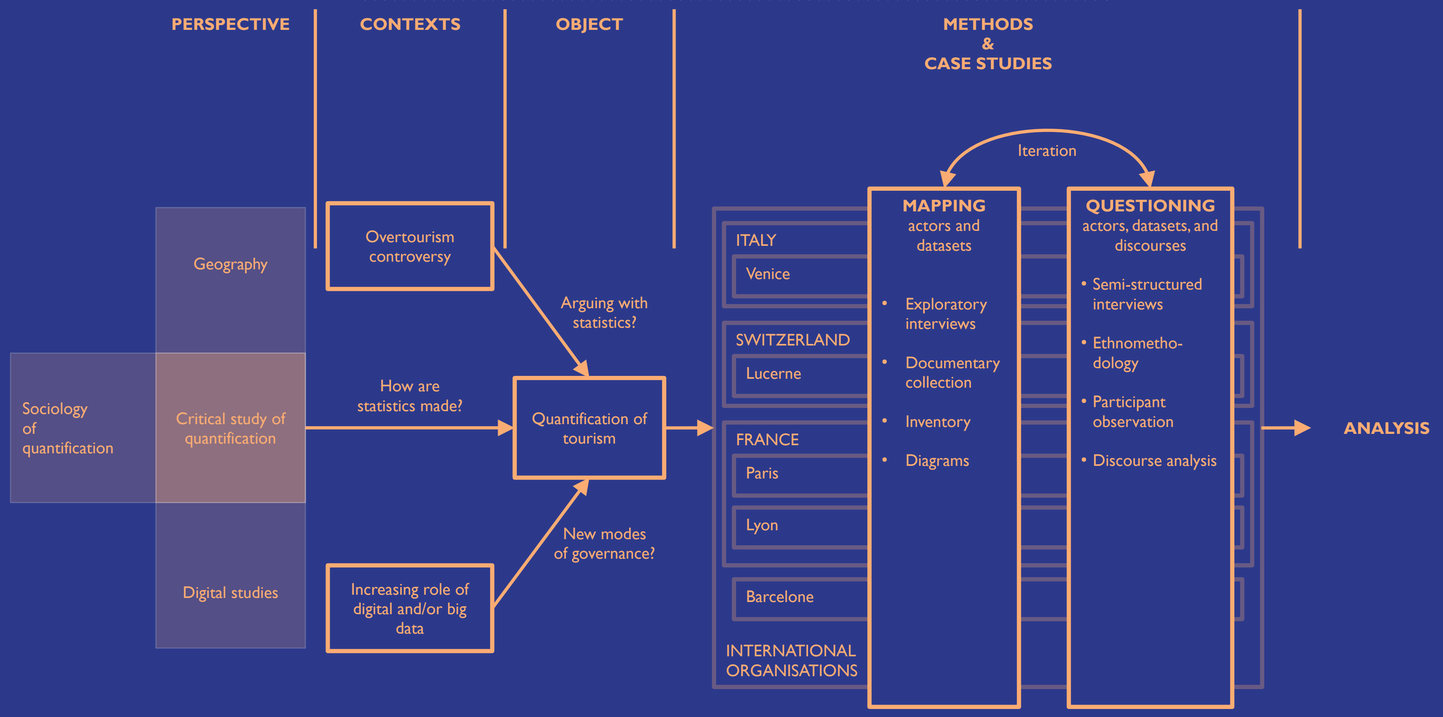
In the debate framed as 'overtourism', the question 'how much' is central. The statistical argument is frequently brandished by opposite sides: to emphasise the economic benefits of tourism, or to point to the detrimental effects of a perceived excess of visitors (on rents, on population diversity, on natural resources...).
However, a statistical common ground for discussion is hard to reach, as tourism statistics are riddled with flaws and gaps, as mobilities become increasingly hybrid, and as and new sources of quantification emerge.

BIG DATA: THE FUTURE OF TOURISM STATISTICS?

Promotional visual of the data solution "Mobility Insights" by the mobile network operator Swisscom.
Source: swisscom.ch

The massive flows of data produced by ICT infrastructures and digital practices fuel high hopes for "data-driven" governance and business. Tourism statistics could rely on new sources such as the tracking of mobilities, transactions, or the digital traces of tourism-related apps or platforms (TripAdvisor, Airbnb...).
A critical view of these developments means analysing not only the biases and black boxes associated with these new sources, but also the new power balances that arise from instances of *platform urbanism* or *algorithmic regulation*.

RESEARCH DESIGN



Perspectives:
The **critical study of quantification** that we conduct in this project combines 3 perspectives:
- the **sociogy of quantification** (Desrosières, 2010) studies the contexts, processes, and conventions that make the statistics, and the involvement of numbers in social and political structures and phenomena.
- **digital studies** investigate the societal stakes and effects of digital technologies. Here, it allows to account for the digitalisation of tourism practices, governance, and observation.
- **geography**, as the science of space in society, provides tools to expose the spatial conditions and problems of quantification; for instance, the choice of area and scale in quantification, or the statistical categorisation of mobilities.

Object of study:
The quantification of tourism in European cities; its social and political stakes, especially regarding the controversy on overtourism (renewed by the 'undertourism' situation during the Covid-19 pandemic) and the rise of big data in quantification and governance.

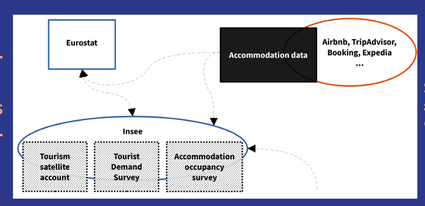
Methods and case studies:
- Mapping actors and datasets allows in particular to answer our 'descriptive' questions—the who, what, when and where of tourism quantification.
- Questioning actors and datasets aims at answering the more analytical questions—how and why are tourism statistics made. Observations, interviews and ethnomethodology-inspired approaches will allow to delve into the mundane work and day-to-day decisions that produce numbers on tourism, and discussions with tourism numbers.
- A comparative approach :
  - 3 countries
  - 5 cities

HOW MANY TOURISTS IS TOO MANY TOURISTS?

... BUT WHAT IS BEHIND 'HOW MANY'?

WHO
counts?

Who makes the statistics? What organisations, companies, people? What are their aims, their jobs, their skills?
National statistical offices produce some of the main sources on tourism; but many other public and private actors may produce other data, including citizens and activists.



Snapshot of the mapping of actors and datasets for France.
Conception Valérian Geffroy

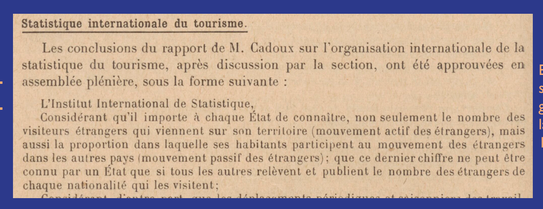
WHAT
counts?

Accommodation supply and occupancy, international arrivals, tourist flows, expenses, market trends... What quantitative indicators are used to represent the tourism phenomenon? What forms do the sources take (databases, surveys, registries, digital traces...)?

Istat, Movimento turistico in Italia 2018

WHEN
is it counted?

When are the data collected, with what frequency are they published? On what period of time are they meant to bring knowledge? When were the indicators and methods designed?



Statistique internationale du tourisme.

Les conclusions du rapport de M. Cadoux sur l'organisation internationale de la statistique du tourisme, après discussion par la section, ont été approuvées en assemblée plénière, sous la forme suivante :

L'Institut International de Statistique,

Considérant qu'il importe à chaque État de connaître, non seulement le nombre des visiteurs étrangers qui viennent sur son territoire (mouvement actif des étrangers), mais aussi la proportion dans laquelle ses habitants participent au mouvement des étrangers dans les autres pays (mouvement passif des étrangers); que ce dernier chiffre ne peut être connu par un État que si tous les autres relèvent et publient le nombre des étrangers de chaque nationalité qui les visitent;

Bulletin statistique général de la France, 1928

WHERE
is it counted?

In which national, cultural, or political context are the statistics produced? On what areas, locations, or scales is the count performed?
The spatial basis of statistics is an acute question for cities: different perimeters produce different figures, and tourist practices are often very concentrated on the local level.

Le Monde.fr, 2019

HOW
is it counted?

With what conventions, what mathematical calculations and technical processes are statistics produced? How are the data published, if they are published at all? In a 'raw', processed, or aggregated form? Through what channels, media outlets, intermediaries?

Security cameras in Paris.
Photo by Nicolas Nova, CC BY 2.0

WHY
is it counted?

Why were the various tourism statistics initially designed, for what purposes and along what principles? What are the ends and uses of the data, be they technical, political, or even polemical?

"1,8 million tourists in a city centre turned into Disneyland... Let's turn off the lights festival!"
Poster by the Lyon collective "Fête des Lumières, non merci !"

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Poster and content by Valérian Geffroy

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