

Exploring the foundations of tourism geography: between flat ontology and J. Searle's vertical social ontology

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Abstract. This article explores the theoretical foundations of tourism geography, focusing on the dialectic between flat ontology and John Searle's vertical ontology. Drawing from contemporary debates in the field, it examines the philosophical underpinnings of tourism geography and their implications for understanding the social and spatial dynamics of tourism. The concept of flat ontology, rooted in a posthuman approach, posits an egalitarian view of the world, where both human and non-human entities possess equal ontological status. Proponents argue that this perspective provides a holistic understanding of tourism, acknowledging the co-agency of non-human elements such as landscapes, ecosystems and material culture. In contrast, J. Searle's ontology underscores the significance of human intentionality and social structures in shaping the institutional frameworks and practices of tourism. By engaging with these two ontological frameworks, the article highlights the potential synergies, but also tensions, between flat ontology and vertical social ontology within tourism geography.

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1. Introduction

In the realm of social constructions such as economies, religions, institutions and tourism, it is undeniable that distinct spatial dimensions are at play. Surprisingly, modern social thought has consistently disregarded the significance of these spatial characteristics (Schatzki, 1991). Notwithstanding the considerable progress made in geographical research (Casey, 2001), a substantial gap persists in comprehending the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of these social structures, particularly when examined from a spatial standpoint. This critical issue remains largely neglected in discussions concerning the methodological aspects of human geography and its various sub-disciplines. Consequently, it becomes imperative to undertake further exploration and analysis of these foundational elements to propel the field's scholarly discourse and enhance its theoretical frameworks. According to Chojnicki (2010), a deeper analysis of their subject matter, particularly the ontological bases of empirical fields within these disciplines, is needed. Difficulties related to those issues appear to be one of the most important methodological challenges of human geography (Johnston, 1984; Lisowski, 1996, 2004; Maik, 2004). They raise the important question as to whether it is possible at all to agree on the commonly accepted foundations of such a subject of research in regard to human geography as a whole, but also between its individual sub-disciplines. These general remarks seem to be justified, especially in relation to those sub-disciplines of human geography that developed relatively late. Certainly, the geography of tourism is one of them (Warszyńska & Jackowski 1976, 1978; Kowalczyk 2001; Butowski 2020). Additionally, the sub-discipline is in a particularly difficult position because it deals with tourism, which appears as a complex social phenomenon—a phenomenon that is perceived as extremely “under-theorized, eclectic, and disparate” (Meethan, 2001: 2). Consequently, it becomes evident that the exploration of tourism demands interdisciplinary approaches, extending beyond the purview of geographical sciences alone (Jafari & Brent Ritchie, 1981; Brent Ritchie, Sheehan & Timur, 2008). These opinions are commonly shared by many authors (e.g., Franklin & Crang, 2001). Some of them, in order to elevate studies on tourism to a higher level, postulate the need to explore the ontological foundations of tourism (Coles et al., 2005, 2009), which are poorly understood. Given these critical but probably true statements, this article tends to fulfil, at least partially, existing gaps by offering a discussion on the ontological aspects

of tourism, conducted from different philosophical positions as an important addition to the theoretical development of tourism geography. At the same time, this analysis should contribute not only to the development of human geography itself but also to the study of tourism as a whole.

The article first introduces the selected ontological questions concerning the empirical field of tourism geography. These questions are followed by a brief presentation of the historical development and current methodological status of the discipline. Then, the article determines the tourism realm, including particular groups of its components (entities), through a formal and factual description. This leads to the core of the article: an ontological analysis of the empirical entities that comprise the tourism reality—a reality that constitutes similarly the empirical field of tourism geography. The analysis is conducted in the light of two opposing positions, one based on flat ontology (Ash, 2020) and the other on J. Searle's (1995, 2011) social ontology. The final section addresses the questions posed at the beginning of the article. It summarizes several conclusions regarding the ontological foundations of the entities, taking into account the two opposing positions.

The analysis is brought into focus by answering a number of questions concerning the nature of the empirical field of tourism geography (with all its components). These ontological questions include: 1) What entities constitute the empirical field of the discipline? 2) How are they formed? 3) How do they exist in the world? and 4) What are their characteristics? The discussion of these issues is conducted in light of two opposing ontological approaches. The first position pertains to the so-called flat ontology (Ash, 2020), which is situated within the broader framework of posthumanism (Fukuyama, 2002; Castree, 2003; Williams et al., 2019). The second approach relies on the advancements of J. Searle's (2011) new realist social ontology. It is worth noting that despite the opposition between these ontological positions, both are grounded in realist ontological foundations and somehow align with the concept of “innocent realism” introduced by S. Haack (2003, 2016). The core assumption of this concept is based on the belief that there is one, albeit highly diverse, world comprising various natural and man-made (social) components.

The ontological analysis of empirical fields of human geography is proposed in this article, with a particular focus on tourism geography and from a realist perspective. Such analysis has not been adequately addressed in current discussions

within the geographical discourse. Instead, phenomenological approaches, which delve into the intricate interrelations between humans, space and its particular places, have rather garnered greater traction in contemporary academic considerations. This tendency is observable in various scholarly works, such as those authored by Relphs (1976), Tuan (1976) and Bunkse (2004) and critically discussed by Malpas (2018) as well as Butowski et al. (2023). Given the prevailing trends in the field, I firmly believe that this article possesses the potential to offer a valuable and worthwhile contribution to the subject matter under examination—specifically, by treating the sub-discipline of human geography centered on tourism as a special platform through which the proposed viewpoints are presented. I am convinced that these insights can be deemed applicable to the entirety of human geography, encompassing all its sub-disciplines.

2. Geography of tourism as a discipline

2.1. Historical development

Tourism geography is one of the newest sub-disciplines of human geography (Butowski, 2023a, 2023b). Its development was associated with the increasing significance of tourism as a new social phenomenon, encompassing various socio-economic, cultural, spatial and environmental consequences. The discipline began to develop mostly in continental Europe after World War I, particularly in France, e.g., works of Blanchard (1925) and Borrel (1933), as well as in Germany along with German-speaking Austria and Switzerland in works by, among others, Stradner (1905), Grünthal (1934) and Poser (1939). The latter countries became the primary academic centers focusing on tourism studies until the 1960s (Butowski, 2020). In Poland (that is, the author's country), the first institution conducting regular geographical research and academic education on tourism was established in the 1930s at Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Jackowski et al., 2016). Surprisingly, English-language geographers only developed significant interest in tourism during the late 1950s and early 1960s (Cazes, 1992). However, they quickly gained a dominant position in tourism research, including geographical studies (Williams, 2009).

This chronology is quite evident in Butler's (2004) distinction of three eras of geographical approaches to the study of tourism and his underestimation of the first period, which primarily developed outside

the English-speaking world. Butler's three eras have been characterized by Williams (2009) as follows:

1. Pre-1950, the "descriptive period": During this era, the study of tourism was uncommon within human geography and was considered a topic of marginal interest. The work carried out was highly descriptive in nature.
2. 1950 to ca 1980, the "thematic period": According to Ateljevic (2000), the geographical approach during this time was strongly focused on spatial aspects and predominantly employed naturalistic perspectives to document tourism geographies. Topics such as the impact of scale, spatial distribution of tourism phenomena, people-land relationships, tourism impact, and spatial modeling of tourism development were typical in geographical works of this period (Williams, 2009).
3. Post-1980 to present, the "diversity period": In this era, geographers' interests expanded beyond the themes characterizing the previous "thematic" era to include new topics such as tourism and communities (Murphy, 1985), tourism and capitalist political economies (Britton, 1991), tourism, production, consumption, and the "new" economic geography (Shaw & Williams, 1994), cultural change and new cultural interpretations of tourism (Crouch, 1999), and tourism as a sustainable form of development (Mowforth & Munt, 2003).

What appear to be more significant, however, are the noteworthy methodological changes in geographical approaches to tourism research that occurred during Butler's last period. These changes reflect broader trends in the epistemology of human geography and are associated with the "cultural turn" and postmodern critical perspectives in human geography. They also involve the development of relational approaches that replace traditional binary interpretations of tourism's impacts and effects. Additionally, there is a closer connection to new critical and conceptual positions within human geography and the broader social sciences (Williams, 2009).

2.2. Methodological development: between the naturalistic and humanistic models

The fact that the geography of tourism has been developing within the broader area of human geography is implicitly or explicitly demonstrated in the works of many authors, including Cazes (1992), Lijewski et al. (2002) and Williams (2009). This connection is also evident in the “classic” definition provided by Warszyńska and Jackowski (1978: 15–16), wherein the discipline explores: 1) the suitability of geographical space for tourism, considering its forms and seasonality; 2) the impact of tourist phenomena on this space; and 3) the processes resulting from tourism that occur within geographical environments.

Kowalczyk (2001: 16) details this rather large and vague area of study, pointing to its specific research fields, such as: 1) assessment of factors and conditions determining the importance of tourism in a given geographical area; 2) analysis of tourist traffic understood as a distinct form of migration between emission and reception areas (destinations); 3) evaluation of the impact of tourism on changes in the structure and spatial distribution of the economy in regions receiving tourists; 4) appraisal of areas for tourism development based on their natural and man-made resources; 5) identification of regions that should develop tourist functions for economic reasons. More precisely, this author proposes a comprehensive definition of tourism geography as a discipline that examines “the spatial differentiation of socio-cultural, economic, legal, political, and environmental influences on tourism” (Kowalczyk, 2001: 20). To summarize these considerations at the broadest level, it can be assumed that the geography of tourism addresses the spatial factors influencing tourism (Knafo, 2011).

The theoretical output of the discipline is characterized by numerous, more or less complex, and theorized concepts, including tourist assets (attractions, resources), tourist attractiveness, tourist space (area, region, locality), tourist functions, tourist capacity, and tourist migration. They have been utilized to construct initial models, pre-theories and theories, often borrowed from both geographical and non-geographical disciplines. Among the most advanced concepts are, for instance, Christaller’s (1955) peripheral areas (complementing his basic central place theory), the tourist space theories proposed independently by Miossec (1977) and Liszewski (1995), as well as Butler’s (1980) model of the tourist area life cycle. These examples represent the theoretical accomplishments of geographers

studying tourism. However, many of them are characterized by varying degrees of theorization and should be regarded as loosely conceptualized.

Regardless of the aforementioned conclusions, when analyzing the methodological foundations and theoretical achievements of tourism geography in recent decades, it is evident that there have been noticeable changes in researchers’ approaches, particularly with regard to the so-called “cultural turn”. These approaches are often situated within heterogeneous postmodern and critical perspectives that are also prevalent in the field of human geography (Williams, 2009). They can be observed, for instance, in Crang’s (1998) analyses, which explore the subjective nature of representations of people and places, the construction of specific identities, and the role of consumption patterns in cultural rather than economic processes. Crouch (1999), on the other hand, highlights that tourism is now regarded as a practice rather than a product, actively shaped and reshaped through intricate human interactions, social engagements and negotiations. Similarly, Shurner-Smith and Hannam (1994), as well as Castells (1997), argue for the replacement of the traditional “hosts–guests” relationship with a focus on the construction of power relations.

2.3. Entities that constitute the empirical field of tourism geography

The geography of tourism focuses on studying the phenomena related to tourism that take place within a specific portion of reality, namely, the geographical environment (Degórski, 2004). Tourism geographers analyze the geographical aspects of these empirical phenomena, which vary in terms of their levels of aggregation and complexity. To comprehend the scope of tourism geography, the following questions need to be addressed: Are these tourist phenomena identifiable and, if so, in what manner? To answer affirmatively, one must acknowledge that the phenomena must be observable (or at least detectable) either directly or indirectly. The following figure recognizes this condition and also assumes that, as the subject of tourism geography, all pertinent tourist phenomena can be represented by sets of entities that are identifiable either directly or indirectly, along with the visible manifestations of their internal and external relationships (Fig. 1).

In a formal notation, the empirical field of tourism geography can be defined as a distinct universe consisting of sets of observable entities, each

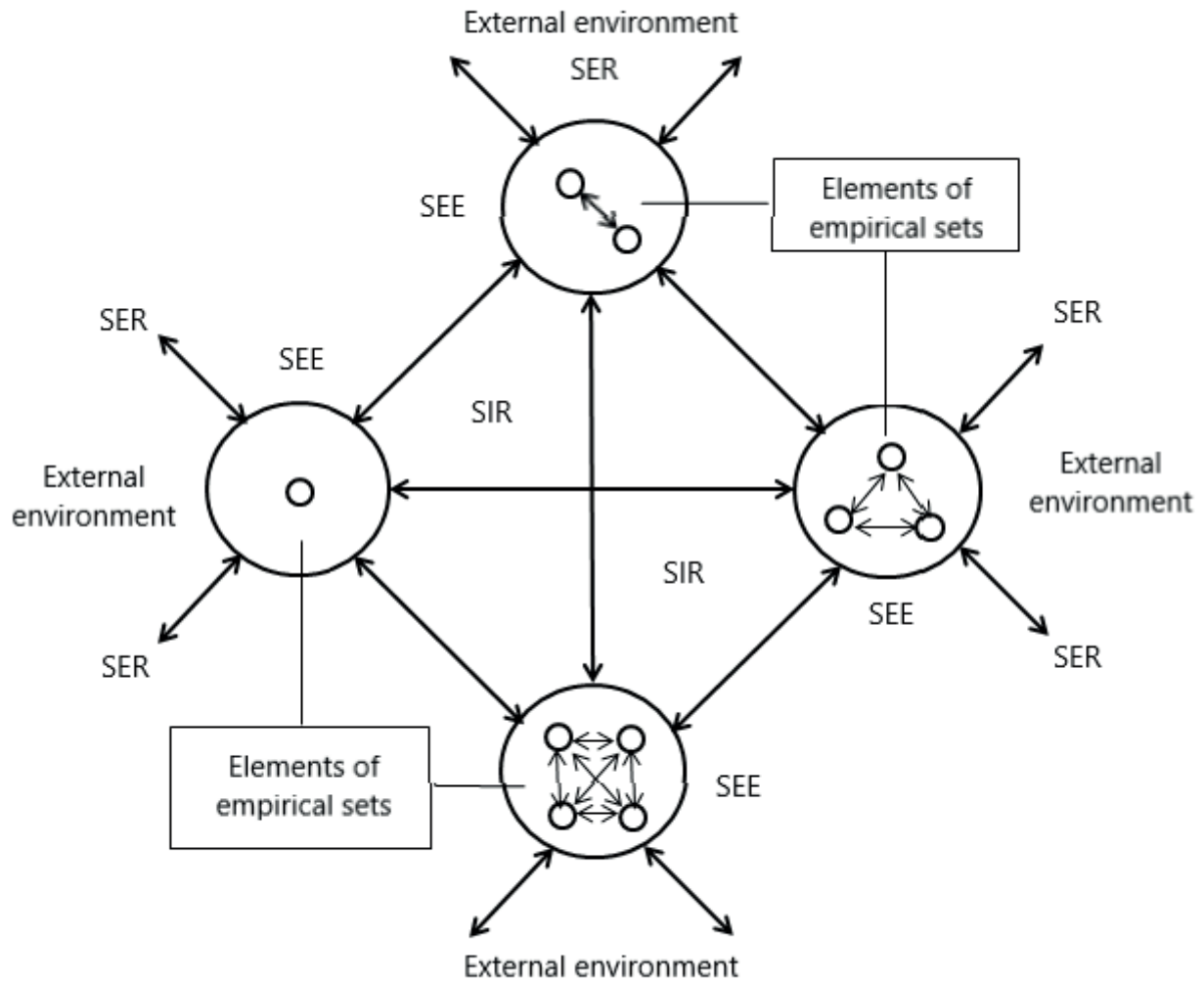


Fig. 1. The empirical field of tourism geography as a network of observable empirical sets of entities with their relations
Source: Butowski, 2023b: 309

where: SEE = sets of observable empirical elements

SIR = sets of observable internal relations of SEE

SER = sets of observable external relations of SEE

possessing their own properties and relationships of diverse kinds (Butowski, 2023b: 310):

$$D_{TG} = [U_{TG}; E_1, \dots, E_n; P_1, \dots, P_n; R_1, \dots, R_n]$$

where: D_{TG} = the empirical domain of tourism geography

U_{TG} = the universe of D_{TG}

$E_1, \dots, E_n$ = sets of observable elements as subsets of U_{TG}

$P_1, \dots, P_n$ = sets of observable properties of $E_1, \dots, E_n$ as subsets of U_{TG}

$R_1, \dots, R_n$ = sets of observable relations of $E_1, \dots, E_n$ as subsets of U_{TG}

Given these distinctions, it is important to highlight that multiple disciplines share the same empirical field of study, often referred to as the material object of research. However, what sets them apart is their disciplinary focus, or the formal object of research, which enables individual disciplines to investigate the same empirical entities from their own specific perspectives (Maryniarczyk, 1998; Maciołek, 2002). In this sense, all the empirical entities constituting the domain of tourism can be examined by various disciplines in their respective aspects. Tourism geography, therefore, investigates the empirical entities of tourism to enhance our understanding of the geographical facets of this phenomenon.

3. The ontology of the tourism realm: exploring flat ontology and Searle's new realism

This section introduces two distinct ontological positions: flat ontology and J. Searle's "vertical" new realism, which incorporates the concept of biological naturalism. The core tenets of these positions will subsequently be applied to analyze the ontology of the tourism realm, considering it as the focal subject of tourism geography.

3.1. Flat ontology (ontologies) in human geography

The concept of flat ontology, also known as "flat ontologies", has provided an ontological basis for various positions within the humanities and social sciences in recent decades. Notable among these are Actor-Network Theory (ANT) proposed by Latour (2005), assemblage theory by DeLanda (2006, 2016), practice theory (Cetina et al., 2005; Schatzki, 2016), theories of affect (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), Harman's (2010, 2018) object-oriented ontology, and agential realism proposed by Barad (2007). Surprisingly, some of these concepts draw from the assumptions put forth in Tarde's *Monadology and Sociology* (2012), originally published in 1893. However, the term "flat ontology", as commonly used today, originated from the work of Bhaskar (1978), who employed it to refer to theories that "flatten the world" to render it accessible to human observers. Nevertheless, DeLanda (2002) subsequently redefined the term, understanding flat ontology as an ontology in which all entities are treated equally (Harman, 2011).

These positions, to varying degrees, endorse the perspective that no categories of entities in the world should be privileged in any way. Accordingly, under flat ontologies, human beings (along with all manifestations of their activities) are not deemed more important than other entities in the world. Advocates of such positions argue for the elimination of dualisms that have traditionally separated different kinds of entities (and their relationships), such as human and non-human, animate-inanimate, nature-culture, we-them, active-passive, and made-living. Thus, flat ontologies seek to eliminate the qualitative differentiation of entities, freeing analysis from humanistic fundamentalism (Nowak, 2015). In this sense, they form the foundations of posthumanism and new materialism.

In human geography, the concept of flat ontology primarily pertains to the notion of scale (Marston et al., 2005; Collinge, 2006; Leitner & Miller, 2007). It is understood as a hierarchical framework where larger geographical scales are assumed to dominate smaller scales. Secondly, to avoid hierarchical or vertical forms of classification, flat ontology emphasizes the notion of coming together through the lens of Deleuzian events and "differences" (Mac Farlane, 2014; Beck & Gleyzon, 2016; Cockayne et al., 2017). This approach helps in defining and distinguishing between entities and their associated space-times (Ash, 2020: 346). The concept of flat ontologies has served as a theoretical foundation for empirical research in geography for at least the past two decades, often linked to the related concept of site ontology (Woodward et al., 2010). Several studies have utilized flat ontology as their theoretical framework in geography. For instance, Aitken and Plows (2010: 329) examined the status of border spaces as "complex, emergent spatial relations" rather than fixed terms or locations. Springer (2014) employed flat ontology to explore anarchist politics within the context of political geography. Furthermore, many human geographers have conducted research based on specific concepts embedded in flat ontologies, such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Murdoch, 1997; Thrift & Bingham, 2001; Hitchings, 2003), assemblage theory (Muller & Schurr, 2016; Anderson et al., 2012), and the concept of affect (Thrift, 2004; Dawney, 2011; McCormack, 2008; Lees & Baxter, 2011; Roberts, 2014). In summary, as noted by Ash (2020, 350), these positions represent "more or less flat and relational perspectives, but they have different ways of accounting for relationality, which nonetheless can overlap and inform one another".

3.2. Flat ontology in tourism studies

In the field of tourism studies, although explored relatively infrequently from a geographical perspective, one of the most popular concepts that employs flat ontology is Actor-Network Theory (ANT). A key insight from this approach is Ren's (2010: 200) postulation that "the social is not separable from the material in human society". Ren also delves into the role of a unique non-human actor, the oscypek cheese, proposing a radical ontology of the tourism realm. She illustrates how this local cheese influences the destination by "producing, shaping, and altering destination realities" through the interplay of multiple actors, discourses, and practices (Ren, 2011: 858). This

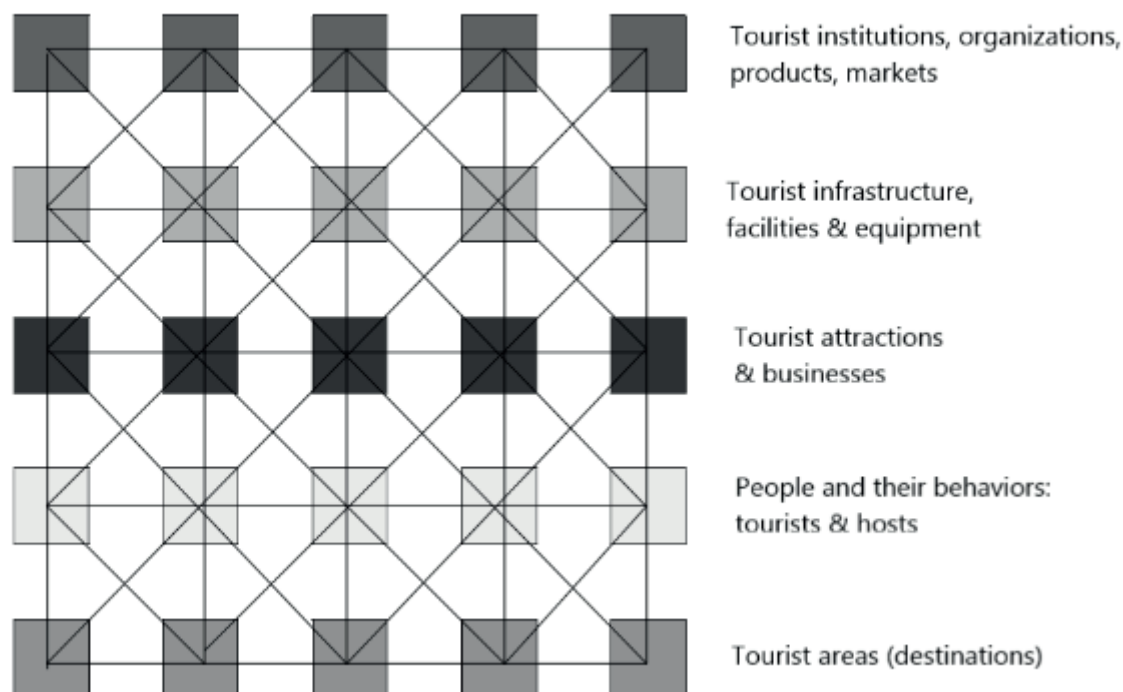


Fig. 2. General model of the tourism realm based on the flat ontology concept

Source: Author's elaboration based on Butowski (2010: 8)

explicitly highlights the incorporation of non-human agency within the proposed ontology. Similarly, Duim et al. (2017) advocate for focusing the ontological debate on the relational effects of the entities that constitute tourism reality, as posited by Jóhannesson (2005).

These relational effects can also be identified in the concept of tourist product networks (Butowski, 2010), where flat ontology is implicitly employed. This concept primarily emphasizes the relationships among different material entities or their representations. It is possible to further develop this idea to comprehend the entire tourism realm (see Fig. 2).

Another area where flat ontology finds application in tourism research is within practice theories. These theories operate on the assumption that the social aspects, as well as the natural, material and immaterial aspects, exist at the level of practices (James et al., 2018). An example of this approach is the practical research conducted on Arctic cruise ship arrivals, which explores their integration into the daily experiences of small local communities and the materiality of destinations (Ren et al., 2021). Another instance is the utilization of assemblage theory as an ontological foundation for studying the relationships between water, boats and individuals

in the context of nautical tourism in British inland and coastal waters (Rhoden & Kaaristo, 2020).

3.3. Searle's new realist ontology

Searle's new realist ontology is rooted in his concept of biological naturalism (Searle, 2017). On one hand, it acknowledges the existence of human consciousness and intentionality, which operate based on natural neurobiological processes taking place in the human brain. However, on the other hand, human consciousness and intentionality possess a subjective and qualitative nature. This implies that they can be described at one level of analysis as reducible to fundamental physical processes, while at a higher level, they manifest as qualitative characteristics of the brain that cannot be meaningfully reduced to lower-level components. In this latter sense, they manifest as mental states, including beliefs, desires, hopes, intentions, fears, perceptions, and more. Additionally, human consciousness and intentionality are embedded within the social context, which is understood as a collection of pre-intentional capacities acquired through social interactions. It is important to note that human beings have the ability to share

their individual intentional states with others, and this capacity plays a crucial role in facilitating the transition from individual to collective intentionality, forming the basis for collaboration among individuals and groups. Fundamentally, Searle's biological naturalism posits that human social reality is a natural extension of the world's basic facts. Simultaneously, it possesses unique qualitative features that cannot be reduced solely to these basic facts.

In order to explicate his ontology, Searle introduces a number of eight fundamental categories that serve as specific building blocks for understanding human social reality. These categories are as follows:

1. **Regulative and constitutive rules:** These rules govern and give rise to human activities that would not be possible without them (Searle, 1969, 2018). Scholars such as Giddens (1984), Garcia (1987), Ruben (1997) and Hindriks (2009) have also explored this concept.
2. **Functions:** They represent the manifestation of human intentionality and are ascribed by conscious users to natural objects and artifacts (Searle, 1995).
3. **Status functions:** This category pertains to the special type of functions assigned to both individuals and objects that cannot solely perform these functions based on their physical structure. The performance of status functions requires the presence of a collectively recognized symbolic status attributed to the person or object (Searle, 2017). Jankovic and Ludwig (2022) further discuss this concept.
4. **Human collective intentionality:** This is essential for the collective acceptance of constitutive rules and the recognition of functions, including status functions (Searle, 1990). Jankovic and Ludwig (2017) and Schweikard and Schmid (2021) also contribute to the understanding of this concept.
5. **Deontic powers:** Deontic powers encompass various rights, duties, obligations, requirements, permits, authorizations and entitlements that are associated with status functions (Searle, 2005, 2011). Hall (2018) and McNamara & Van De Putte (2022) further explore this topic.
6. **Desire-independent reasons for action:** Recognizing deontic powers logically leads to the existence of reasons for action that are independent of individuals' inclinations and desires (Searle, 2011).
7. **Human institutions:** Institutions emerge as the final stage of the aforementioned process, starting from the establishment of constitutive rules and the collective assignment of status functions to objects and individuals. Institutions comprise individuals who hold deontic powers (Searle, 1995, 2005, 2011). Balzer (2002) also contributes to the understanding of human institutions.
8. **Institutional facts:** created within institutions. They are necessary for the very existence of institutions (Searle, 1995, 2005, 2011). Mours (2002) also offers insights into this concept.

These categories form the foundational elements of Searle's new realist ontology, providing a framework for comprehending human social reality and its underlying principles. In addition, Searle (1995, 2011) puts forward two ontological distinctions that serve as criteria for analyzing the social realm:

1. **Intrinsic (observer-independent) vs. observer-relative (observer-dependent) features of entities:** According to the first criterion, intrinsic features of entities are those that exist independently of humans. These features include physical characteristics such as size, mass, weight, velocity and quantity. On the other hand, observer-relative features are dependent on humans for their existence. Functions assigned by people to objects (including the tourist function) are examples of observer-relative features. One can differentiate between observer-independent and observer-dependent features by asking whether they would still exist if human beings disappeared.
2. **Ontologically subjective vs. ontologically objective modes of existence:** The second criterion distinguishes between the ontologically subjective and ontologically objective modes of existence of entities. Ontologically subjective refers to people's desires, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, motives and experiences, as their existence is dependent on human emotional feelings. In contrast, entities that are external to people are classified as ontologically objective because their existence is independent of any mental state.

As for Searle's two analytical criteria, they can be successfully applied to the ontological considerations of all entities within the tourism realm. Taking Mount Kilimanjaro as an example, its intrinsic

features are regarded as independent of human observers, treating it as a phenomenon separate from human influence. However, when exploring Mount Kilimanjaro as a tourist attraction, the observer-dependent perspective becomes relevant.

It is important to highlight the special type of function in this context, namely, status functions. Unlike the intrinsic features of Mount Kilimanjaro, status functions are assigned to objects or people not based on their physical characteristics but through socially recognized acceptance. Various objects that fulfill status functions can be found within the empirical field of tourism, including money, property, passports, visas, passenger tickets, and all tourist institutions. Additionally, individuals are assigned status functions, such as tourist guides, hotel employees or souvenir sellers. Geographers often study these entities as components of the empirical domain of tourism.

The second criterion allows for the distinction between entities that are ontologically objective or subjective. In this regard, Mount Kilimanjaro, existing independently of observers, is classified as ontologically objective. On the other hand, people's desires to visit Kilimanjaro are ontologically subjective as they depend on human mental states.

These two ontological criteria proposed by Searle provide a framework for examining the whole tourism realm and categorizing features and modes of existence of entities that it comprises. By applying these distinctions, researchers can analyze the nature of entities in terms of their dependence on human observers and their subjective or objective mode of existence.

3.4. The construction of the tourism reality according to Searle's social ontology

The construction of the tourism realm, in accordance with Searle's social ontology, involves the application of his building blocks of human social reality. These blocks are utilized to establish the framework of the tourism realm within the broader context of the human social realm. The logical process of constructing this tourism realm can be described as follows (Fig. 3):

Human actors (1) *establish constitutive rules specific to tourism*, which are then (2) *implemented through the assignment of tourist functions* (both ordinary and status) that are (3) *imposed by people onto objects and other human individuals*. These assigned functions result in the individuals and objects becoming holders of tourism functions that are (4) *provided with tourism deontic powers*.

Based on these powers, (5) *tourism institutions are constructed*, within which (6) *tourism social, including institutional facts are generated* (Butowski & Butowski, 2023). Notably, the whole process exhibits a structured and hierarchical nature, with a vertical direction, emphasizing the central role of human beings as the creators.

Based on the above described conceptual framework and the criteria employed, an ontological analysis can be conducted on the entities constituting the empirical field of the tourism realm and, consequently, the geography of tourism. This article adopts the following main categories of entities:

1. Tourist attractions, categorized as natural or man-made, with the latter further divided into historical artifacts, contemporary artifacts including events. These attractions are spatially distributed and located within individual destinations (receiving areas).
2. Tourist and other infrastructure, encompassing facilities, equipment and man-made objects located in both emitting and receiving areas, facilitating connectivity between them. For instance, passenger transportation infrastructure plays a pivotal role in enabling tourists to reach their destinations.
3. Tourist destinations, referring to geographical areas differentiated by size, location and specific characteristics.
4. Tourist and non-tourist social institutions that fulfill status functions. Examples of such institutions include money, property, tourist markets, passports, visas, booking systems.
5. Human actors, i.e. people involved in various capacities related to tourism, consisting of two main sub-groups:
6. Tourists, comprising various types and characteristics of tourist groups;
7. Host communities, including local authorities, businesses and their employees, representatives of NGOs, individuals managing both commercial and non-commercial tourist attractions and infrastructure.
8. People residing in tourist destinations who are not directly engaged in tourism.
9. The wills, feelings, motives, beliefs, experiences and perceptions of both tourists and host communities, manifested through their observable behaviors, including spatial behaviors.

Each of the above groups of human and non-human entities has been deliberately selected due to their distinct ontological positions. The synthesized results of their analysis, based on Searle's two

Table 1. Ontological status of entities that make up the empirical domain of tourism geography

Groups of entities that make up the tourism realm (explored from the geographical aspect)				Features of entities		Existence of entities		
						Ontologically		
				Intrinsic	Observer-dependent		Objective	Subjective
					Functions assigned to entities			
		Ordinary	Status					
Tourist attractions (located in destinations)	Man-made	Natural		X		X		
		Historical artifacts		X		X		
		Contemporary artifacts and events		X		X		
Tourist infrastructure, facilities & equipment (commercial & non-commercial)				X		X		
Tourist areas (destinations) as a separate kind of entities				X	X ¹	X		
Tourist institutions & institutional facts, organizations, markets, products, etc.					X	X		
People (human actors)		Involved in tourism: tourists & hosts				X		
		Living in destinations but not involved in tourism		n/a	n/a			
Spatial implications of people's (tourists and hosts) wills, perceptions, feelings, motives, beliefs, experiences, etc.				n/a	n/a		X	

Source: Author elaboration

(previously mentioned) criteria, are presented in Table 1.

The outcomes presented in Table 1 pertain to the manner in which the entities constituting the empirical domain of tourism (thus the empirical field of tourism geography) exist within the world. As such, the conclusions, addressing the ontological status of entities, seek to respond to the questions concerning their deep nature and way of existence posited at the outset of the article. They are enumerated below:

1. All entities comprising the fabric of tourism reality inherently rely on the observer. Consequently, as constituents of the tourism realm, they are perpetually perceived through the lens of the functions they fulfill. In other words, it can be argued that these entities, as tourist-related, cannot exist autonomously from observers. This conclusion bears significance as it can be regarded as a

kind of ontological evidence, enabling the classification of the geography of tourism—which inherently focuses on human-associated elements of the geographical environment—as a sub-discipline within human geography.

2. Two types of functions are attributed to the entities constituting the realm of tourism, including the empirical field of tourism geography. The first type, known as ordinary functions, are assigned based on the physical attributes of the objects that bear them. In contrast, the second category of functions, referred to as status functions, are assigned to entities not on the basis of their physical characteristics, but rather through socially recognized conventions.
3. The geography of tourism pertains to entities that are assigned either ordinary or status functions. While the first category raises no

doubts, further clarification is required for the second group of entities. In addition to simple examples such as objects like passenger tickets, passports and visas, this group encompasses more intricate entities that manifest as diverse social institutions and are represented through socio-institutional facts. Noteworthy illustrations of such facts can be observed in various forms of tourist behavior, including tourist trips, hotel stays, car rentals, and more. All of these phenomena emerge within social (tourism) institutions that are established based on the attribution of status functions.

4. The majority kinds of entities comprising the empirical field of tourism geography possess an objective existence, meaning that their being is independent of any human mental state. However, within this empirical field, there exists a group of entities that are

contingent upon people’s emotional states. These entities include human wills, motives, perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and so forth. The manner in which they exist categorizes them as ontologically subjective.

5. The aforementioned ontologically subjective entities also play a role in co-creating the empirical field of tourism through observable human behaviors, including, for example, tourist trips or stays in destinations. These behaviors have notable spatial implications, particularly in receiving areas. It is precisely for this reason that they can also be regarded as the subject matter of the geography of tourism.

After scrutinizing the characteristics of the groups of entities making up the tourism realm, one can now categorize them within the previously

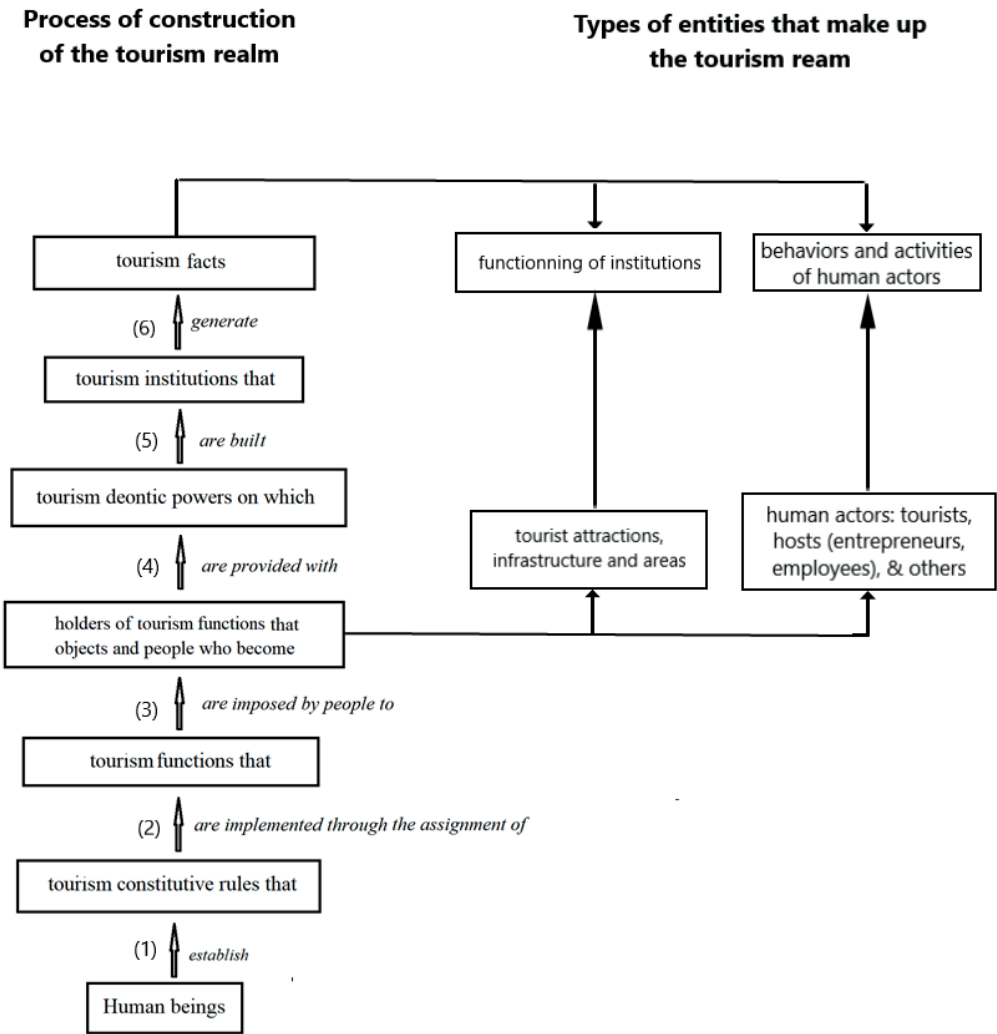


Fig. 3. The process of construction of the tourism realm (flows from the bottom up)
Source: Author elaboration

delineated process of its formation and identify the stage at which they manifest, as shown in Figure 3.

The diagram illustrates the construction of tourism reality on its left side, depicting the specific stages (from 1 to 6), while the right side indicates the moments when distinct groups of entities appear. Moreover, tourism institutions and tourism social facts are mentioned as the ways and forms in which human and non-human entities are manifested in the whole process.

4. Conclusions and final considerations

The results of the aforementioned analyses serve as the basis for formulating the primary ontological conclusions. These conclusions are examined in relation to two approaches: flat ontology and Searle's social ontology. However, special emphasis is given to the outcomes that can be drawn from the latter standpoint. Those findings prove particularly valuable in determining the nature, mode of existence and characteristics of the entities comprising the realm of tourism, which also serves as the empirical field of tourism geography.

First and foremost, it is essential to emphasize that both discussed ontological approaches are grounded in the realist perspective. This perspective assumes the existence of an external world that is, to some extent, independent of observers. However, there are fundamental differences, especially in the positions of observers (researchers) within these concepts, depending on whether they rely on flat ontologies or Searle's ontology. In the former, all entities (human and non-human) within the tourism realm are regarded as equal. Conversely, in the latter, human beings hold a distinct position in the process of constructing this realm. Moreover, when comparing various concepts rooted in flat ontologies (the best is Actor Network Theory) with Searle's ideas concerning the construction of social reality (applied to the formation of tourism reality), it becomes evident that flat ontology places greater emphasis on horizontal relationships between entities—actors, sometimes even at the expense of the entities themselves. On the other hand, Searle's ontology highlights vertical cause-and-effect relationships of a functional nature.

When considering the potential advantages of applying flat ontology in geographical tourism studies, it appears that this approach can offer certain benefits at the level of current research practices. Specifically, it proves valuable in studies aiming to reveal entities within the tourism realm that are

often obscured by an anthropocentric perspective. The principles of flat ontology help avoid the prevalence of hierarchical and vertical structures that typically accompany such a viewpoint. But more importantly, as philosophical foundation, flat ontology serves as the starting point for numerous emerging postmodern ideas (Hicks, 2019) that are sometimes very radical and encompassing, among others, posthumanism, new materialism, non-human agency and other philosophical currents that diminish the role of human beings as a central assumption.

This last conclusion represents the fundamental difference between philosophical concepts based on flat ontology and Searle's ideas of social ontology. When comparing them, it seems that the former, by treating all entities equally, intentionally or unintentionally introduces a specific "disorder" (from the human perspective) into human reality. The latter, on the other hand, attempts to establish a kind of order in this reality by ascribing a specific role to human beings as its creators. As a result, one obtains an ordered, logical structure that includes human and non-human entities occupying particular positions and bound by specific cause-and-effect relationships. These relationships express human intentionality, which operates on natural neurobiological processes while also possessing a non-reducible, subjective and qualitative nature.

At the final conclusion of these deliberations, it may be worthwhile to pose the fundamental question of whether such considerations are necessary at all. Undoubtedly, numerous authors cited at the outset of this article underscore the significance of furthering the philosophical underpinnings of geography and tourism studies.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that numerous human geographers and other tourism researchers effectively carry out their empirical investigations without perceiving a significant necessity to delve into issues that do not directly impact their research endeavors. Hence, the response to this question is by no means unequivocal. This ambiguity is further exemplified by the dilemmas expressed by Searle himself who states, that:

It is impossible to tell in advance what is going to be useful for actual research. (. . .) My instinct, though, is to think that it is always a good idea to understand the foundational issues. It is much more plausible to me to think that an understanding of the basic ontology of any discipline will deepen the understanding of issues within that discipline. (Searle, 2011: 200)

Bearing in mind these viewpoints and the uncertainties they raise, the author of this article concurs with Searle's assertion that comprehending the basic ontological foundations of any discipline is preferable, even if they are contingent on accepted philosophical positions and thus exhibit significant divergence. Although this discussion has focused on only two positions within the article, it certainly has the potential to encompass other philosophical stances. Moreover, it is crucial to emphasize that the ontology of the empirical field in a given discipline plays a pivotal role in its epistemology. Simultaneously, it influences the selection of methodological approaches, which not only encompass specific investigative methods and techniques but also refer to the broader research procedures, including modes of explanation and inference.

Regarding tourism geography, the discussion on the ontological foundations of its empirical field holds particular significance due to the relative theoretical underdevelopment of these disciplines. However, it is worth reiterating that the deliberate choice of the geography of tourism as the focal point in this article serves as a specific conduit to address issues and present conclusions that possess broader applicability to other sub-disciplines within human geography.

Furthermore, at the level of individual geographical research, adopting a specific ontological perspective is paramount during the stage of interpreting obtained results. This enables their placement within a broader philosophical context, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the findings, especially in relation to studies grounded in competing ontological frameworks.

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