



## Book Review

**The Passenger Experience of Air Travel: A Critical Approach, J. Small (Ed.). Channel View Publications, Bristol (2022). vii + 229pp. ISBN 9781845419028 (Hbk.); ISBN 9781845419011 (pbk.), ISBN 9781845419035 (eBook: pdf); ISBN 9781845419042 (eBk: ePub)**

*The Passenger Experience of Air Travel: A Critical Approach* is ostensibly an edited collection, although the editor is author or co-author of eight of the nine contributions to the volume. The nine entries in the work include the editor's *Introduction* and *Epilogue* and contributions on the airport experience (Losekoot and Small); passenger-passenger interaction (Small); flying and appearance (Small); flying with mobility disabilities (Darcy, Small and Almond); flying with non-mobility disabilities (Small, McIntosh, Almond and Darcy); fear of flying (Small and Cockburn-Wootton); and confronting the negative psychological effects of air passenger travel (Higham and Young).

The first thing to report is that this is an information rich book. Every contribution contains a plethora of well-sourced research and general and journalistic observations on its chosen topic. This was perhaps to be expected as the focus is on passenger experiences of air travel, but the editor and contributors are nevertheless to be congratulated on producing a document that will be an invaluable synthesis of extant scholarship for those seeking a literary starting point for their own research. Further, the range of topics covered is well-chosen and, if not exhaustive, then certainly wide-ranging. Worth singling out is the contribution of Darcy, Small and Almond on flying with mobility disability, which is both informative and moving, especially when taken with the increasing number of public reports detailing the appalling treatment of physically disabled persons by airports and airlines (e.g. *The Guardian*, 2022a; 2022b).

Secondly, and more problematic, are the claims to critical analysis. In an Introduction that might otherwise be a *tour de force*, the editor fails to completely persuade the reader that the critical analytic framework guiding contributions to the book is either systematic or coherent. In an important section (pp. 14–17) there is a now all too (commonly) tiresome caricature of the evils of positivism which is contrasted with the social constructivist approach supposedly informing the book. Social constructivism is hardly new: philosophers have arguably been doing it for centuries and sociologists for at least decades. A constructivist-subjectivist approach is not even new in tourism research. Towards the end of the section being discussed here, the editor writes (pp. 16–17): 'In sum, a critical approach is concerned with mobility rights, seeking social transformation and mobility justice to 'even out' mobility capital'. This is an odd assertion to arise from an approach claiming to be predicated on a 'relativist ontological worldview' (p. 14) as it embodies a failure of critical appreciation, assuming the 'natural' existence of certain rights and the compatibility of transformative mobility justice with the hard empirical reality of (dare one say a positivist?) capitalism.

It is, perhaps, unfair to labour this point too much as the approach taken by the editor only reflects the broader problem of the role of theory in tourism scholarship. A greater difficulty for the phenomenon of tourism and its study is the extensive environmental and social harms caused by tourism activities of which aviation is, of course, a part (one widely cited statistic claims that aviation contributes around 2.4% of global CO2 emissions). This topic is addressed to some extent in the final substantive contribution in the book by Higham and Young (pp. 178–196) who get off to an energetic start noting that (p. 178):

Despite the individual benefits of air travel, passenger air travel is perhaps the key driver of exhaustive tourism in two respects. First, jet aircraft and their associated transport infrastructures enable the transport of millions of tourists per day [...] These ... trips create social and environmental impacts at destinations on an unprecedented global scale. Second, the air transport system itself has become a globally significant emitter of greenhouse gases.

For one glorious moment, it seemed that a sensible Marxist analysis of tourism aviation in terms of base and superstructure might be in the offing but, alas, what follows is cast in terms of describing how knowledgeable fliers agonizing over the tensions between air travel and environmental considerations can and might cope with such psychological stress, surely a rich world, or at least a bourgeois, problem. This said, Higham and Young do contextualise such individualistic considerations in a wider social, economic and policy framework and the opening line to their conclusion is both chilling and an apparently implicit rebuttal of the possibility of 'sustainable tourism' when they write (p. 190) that 'Aviation emissions represent an existential threat to all life on Earth'. Quite so.

Despite reservations about theoretical framings (or the absence thereof) in this book, it is an essentially likeable work and, perhaps above all else, fundamentally humane. Time spent reading it will not be wasted. The publisher, *Channel View Publications*, continue to provide an indispensable service to tourism research in making available attractively packaged, usually specialised, volumes that might otherwise have difficulty finding a publisher.

## References

- The Guardian. (2022a). *Disabled passenger abandoned on a plane at Manchester airport for over two hours*. retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/31/disabled-passenger-abandoned-on-a-plane-at-manchester-airport-for-over-two-hours>. (Accessed 26 March 2023). last accessed.
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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2023.104824>

Available online 16 August 2023

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