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Revisiting path-as-process: A railroad track model of path development, transformation, and agency

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Abstract

In the path development literature, the path-as-process perspective conceptualizes the emergence, evolution, transformation, and decline of regional industries in the long term. However, critical questions about the role of agency in and between episodes of path development and transformation remain open. This article argues that we should see path development as a long-term sequence that includes stretches of path development interrupted by occasional switches of transformation that are driven by changing patterns of agency. This railroad track model focuses attention on how and why the mix of agency changes at critical junctures between path development episodes.

Keywords

evolutionary economic geography; path development; path transformation; agency; tourism; Israel

This is a pre-print version of a paper that has been submitted for publication to a journal.

In its ambition to understand the evolution of regional economies, the path development literature (e.g., Blažek et al., 2020; Grillitsch et al., 2018; Isaksen, 2015; Isaksen et al., 2018; 2019; Martin & Sunley, 2006; Tödtling & Trippel, 2013) has examined how regional industries emerge, evolve, decline and more recently how they transform (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Miörner & Trippel, 2019). However, understanding what explains the long-term evolution of regional economies requires a long-term, historical perspective (Henning, 2019) that covers not just isolated episodes of path development and transformation but their sequence. Martin's (2000) path-as-process model offers such a long-term perspective but remains vague in analyzing changing "patterns of agency" (Sotarauta et al., 2021, p.93) between path development episodes. In particular, how different patterns of agency such as change agency (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2018), reproductive agency (Bækkelund, 2021; Grillitsch et al., 2021b), or maintenance agency (Henderson, 2020; Jolly et al., 2020) tip the balance towards certain forms of path development remains a critical question.

This article argues that for a more precise understanding of long-term regional evolution, we should look at sequences of path development interrupted and linked by occasional path transformation in what resembles a railroad track. Such a sequence does not follow a deterministic logic but can unfold in various ways (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Strambach & Halkier, 2013). Specifically, a focus on changing patterns of agency during critical junctures of transformation (see also Bækkelund, 2021) can significantly improve our understanding of long-term path development.

Empirically, such a railroad track model offers a framework for refining the analysis of long-term path development and the patterns of agency at critical junctures. To do so, this article takes inspiration from an empirical strategy of "temporal bracketing" (Langley, 1999, p.703) which has proven useful for an evolutionary perspective (Stephens & Sandberg, 2020).

The article starts by reviewing the path development literature and the path-as-process model before proposing a simple railroad track model. In a brief empirical illustration, the article interprets approximately six decades of history of the tourism sector in Eilat, Israel, as a track of path development and transformation. The article closes by drawing conclusions for further research.

Path development and transformation

One of the major achievements of the path development literature is the typology of path extension, branching, diversification, creation, importation, and upgrading (Grillitsch et al., 2018; Isaksen, 2015; Isaksen et al., 2018; 2019; Isaksen & Trippel, 2017; Martin & Sunley, 2006; Tödting & Trippel, 2013) as well as path contraction, downgrading, delocalization, and eventual disappearance (Blažek et al., 2020). Further, major changes of paths have been conceptualized as path transformation (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Miörner, 2020; Miörner & Trippel, 2019) and the relationships between different paths have been addressed (Frangenheim et al., 2020; Hassink et al., 2019).

However, existing regional-level empirical studies tend to regard path development as isolated episodes or at most as a sequence of few episodes (e.g., Bækkelund, 2021; Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021a, 2021b; Dawley, 2014; Isaksen et al., 2019; MacKinnon et al., 2019; Miörner, 2020; Miörner & Trippel, 2019; Sotarauta et al., 2021). There are partial exceptions though. Some studies address longer sequences covering up to roughly five decades (e.g., Binz & Gong, 2021; Isaksen 2015) and cover up to three specifically designated episodes of path development (e.g., Jolly et al., 2021), though some remain vague in defining specific forms of path development (e.g., Binz & Gong, 2021). Those studies that refer to only one episode show that even a single episode of path development can span two decades or more (e.g., Miörner & Trippel, 2017; Rekers & Stihl, 2021) which suggests that a long-term, historical perspective going beyond isolated episodes needs to span longer periods (Henning, 2019).

A focus on isolated episodes of path development runs the risk of neglecting the interplay between path development and transformation and makes it difficult to analyze and compare changing patterns of agency in and between these different episodes. Empirically, looking at isolated episodes limits the possibilities for inter-temporal replication of findings that enables analyzing simultaneous and bidirectional structure-agency dynamics through temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999). Hence, there is a need for a more long-term perspective suitable for conceptualizing shifts between forms of path development (Blažek et al., 2020) and to the “dependence between successive paths” (Martin & Sunley, 2006, p.427) which remains underexplored (MacKinnon et al., 2019).

Conceptualizations that view the development of regional industries as a life cycle such as cluster life cycle models (Bergman, 2008; Harris, 2021; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010) or the tourist area life cycle (Butler, 1980) allow for the possibility of different episodes to follow each other but face criticism due to a certain determinism and neglect of context and agency (Martin & Sunley, 2011; Stephens & Sandberg, 2020; Tripl et al., 2015). The idea of an adaptive cluster life cycle that allows for different trajectories proposed by Martin and Sunley (2011) further widens the concept. Cluster or tourism life cycle models and the path development literature are complementary (Benner, 2020b; Harris, 2021). However, the comparability of forms of path development cannot with life cycle stages is limited because path development does not presume an inherent cyclicity. Hence, in an adaptive conceptualization, path development may be better captured as a sequence with a potentially unlimited number of successive episodes linked by occasional transformation which can include various stages and dynamic processes linked to agency (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Dawley, 2014; Grillitsch et al., 2021b; MacKinnon et al., 2019; Miörner, 2020; Miörner & Tripl, 2017; 2019; Rekers & Stihl, 2021; Simmie, 2012; Sotarauta et al., 2021).

Path-as-process and agency

Path development can be understood as a long-term sequence with successive episodes (Garud & Karnøe, 2001; Martin, 2010; Martin & Sunley, 2006). Martin's (2010) path-as-process model offers a long-term perspective on path development with different stages of path development following each other. Instead of seeing path dependence as "canonical" (Martin, 2010, p.4), this model defines path development as a process with different outcomes that can lead either to stasis and constrain the conditions for growth or to dynamic adaptation that enables further growth in a new round of path preformation, creation, and development (Martin 2010). In this sense, the model offers a circular but non-deterministic long-term perspective of understanding sequences of path development.

The path-as-process model offers a simplified account of what happens at the end of a path development episode by either generating some form of renewal or decline (Martin, 2010). In reality, the succession of different path development episodes is much more complex. As Blažek et al. (2020, p.1467) put it, "the evolutionary trajectory of a particular industry in a particular region might consist of multiple and swinging shifts." Given the possibility of path plasticity (Strambach & Halkier, 2013), these shifts do not occur suddenly but are the outcome of gradual

processes of path transformation (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Miörner & Tripl, 2019).

Path transformation is not a specific form of path development (Miörner & Tripl, 2019). Rather, processes of path transformation occur every time a path transforms itself from one form into another. In a long-term perspective, these path transformations will occur occasionally and repeatedly, and what precisely goes on within these episodes is likely to be a contingent (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003), agency-driven set of mechanisms (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Grillitsch et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hassink et al., 2019; Martin & Sunley, 2006; Miörner, 2020; Miörner & Tripl, 2019; Sotarauta et al., 2021; Steen, 2016; Strambach & Halkier, 2013).

The idea of path development as a process (Garud & Karnøe, 2001; Garud et al., 2010; Martin, 2010; Martin & Sunley, 2006; Simmie, 2012) provides a larger frame for a focus on path transformation (Miörner & Tripl, 2019). In particular, Garud et al. (2010) lay out the role of agency in path-dependent processes which means that it is less exogenous events or “chance” that lead to transformation but agents engaging in Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) intertemporal activities of interpreting the past, imagining the future, and acting upon the conditions of the present (see also Grillitsch et al., 2021b; Martin, 2010; Martin & Sunley, 2006; Rekers & Stihl, 2021; Simmie, 2012; Steen, 2016; Strambach & Halkier, 2013). Hence, processes of agency are often underpinned by narratives, visions, and expectations that set out imagined possibilities for path development and transformation (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Benner, 2020a; 2021a; Borup et al., 2006; Garud & Karnøe, 2001; Garud et al., 2010; Hassink et al., 2019; Miörner, 2020; Sotarauta, 2018; Sotarauta et al., 2021; Steen, 2016; Stephens & Sandberg, 2020).

Following Garud and Karnøe’s (2001) call for an agency-focused process perspective, Martin and Sunley (2006) criticize the neglect of agency in the concept of path dependence. Still, the critical role of agency in transformation is not in the focus of Martin’s (2010) path-as-process model which does not differentiate between different forms of path development, lacks an explanation for what precisely leads to the bifurcation towards either renewal or decline, and treats agency-driven processes of transformation as a black box (see also Dawley, 2014).¹ Hence, a long-term perspective that sees path development and transformation as subsequent and repeated episodes of regional evolution has to address the role of agency inside this black box.

¹ On the black-box character of agency in economic geography, see also Grillitsch et al. (2021b).

Some contributions attempt to alleviate the black-box character of agency in the path-as-process perspective (e.g., Dawley, 2014; Garud et al., 2010; Simmie, 2012), notably through Garud and Karnøe's (2001) focus on agents' "mindful deviation". Bækkelund (2021) argues that agency changes during path development and notably during critical junctures and conceptualizes the role of different forms of agency in Martin's (2010) model. Still, this conceptualization seems to assume the existence of specific forms of agency at a given stage and tends to leave largely open how and why forms of agency evolve, succeed or compete with other, and become dominant in a new mix of agency that generates a new episode of path development.

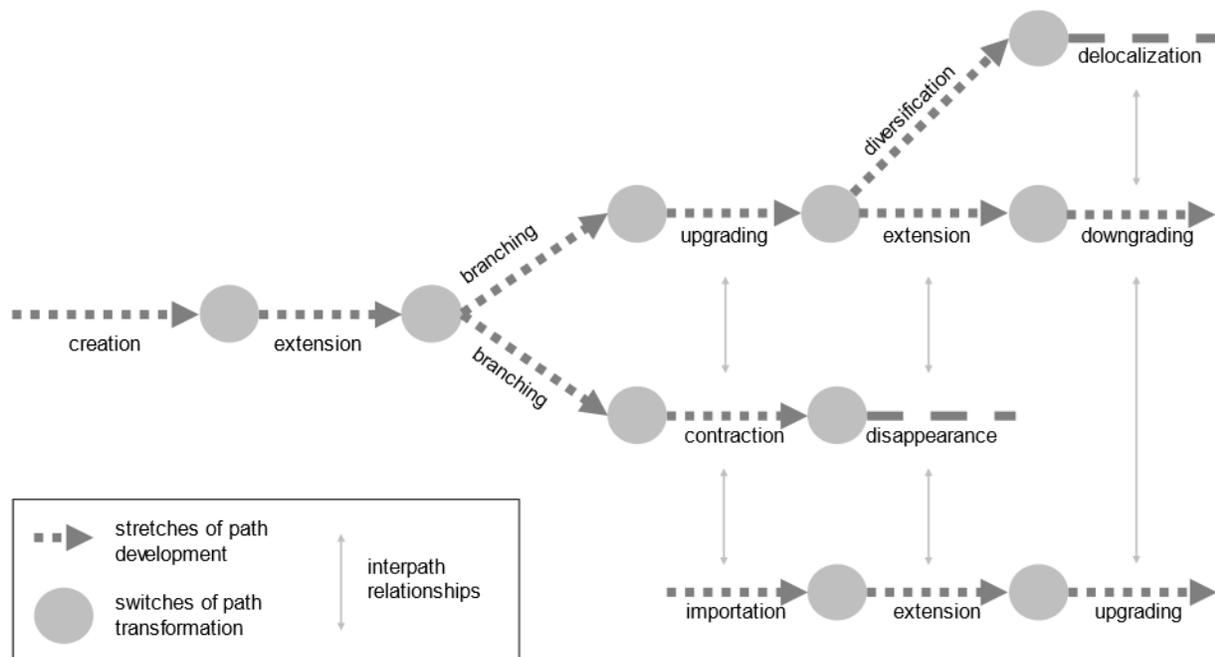
Agency can take various forms that can combine (Bækkelund, 2021; Grillitsch & Sotataura, 2020). Grillitsch and Sotara (2020) argue that three types of change agency (innovative entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship, place-based leadership) form a "trinity of change agency". Following Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) and Henderson (2020), Jolly et al. (2020) add "structural maintenance" agency (p.178) that refers to "resisting novel activities and adapting to change incrementally" (p.179). While this definition emphasizes the negative consequences of non-transformative agency, the related but more positive notion of reproductive agency emphasizes how agents contribute to stabilizing and entrenching development processes (Bækkelund, 2021; Grillitsch et al., 2021b; see also Simmie, 2012). While their outcomes are different, both maintenance and reproductive agency can be summarized as stability agency.

As Fuenfschilling and Truffer (2016) demonstrate, when understood as those forms of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that aim at institutional change (see also Benner, 2021a) institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009) can not only create institutions but also destroy or combat others and thus contains both a constructive and a destructive element, both of which can contribute to the development and transformation of paths (see also Frangenheim et al., 2020). This duality also holds true for the other two forms of change agency, as Schumpeter's (1942 [1976]) metaphor of "creative destruction" implies (see also Kivimaa & Kern, 2016). Further, different forms of agency can coexist and compete in path development and transformation, thus creating friction and contestation (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2020; Frangenheim et al., 2020; Miörner & Trippel, 2019). Summing up, the mix of agency at any given point in path development is the result of different, competing, and contested processes that aim at either change or stability, creation or destruction.

A railroad track model

Combining the path-as-process perspective with repeated transformation due to changing patterns of agency and resulting in variegated forms of path development yields a model that resembles a railroad track. Fig. 1 illustrates a stylized, hypothetical example of a track that includes stretches of positive and negative path development with occasional switches of transformation. Hence, Fig. 1 demonstrates the logic behind the railroad track model. Apart from those forms of path development that lead to the emergence of a regional path (path creation and importation) or to its demise (path disappearance and delocalization), a railroad track model understands all other forms of path development as temporary stretches that begin and end in switches of transformation. Parallel paths are subject to interpath relationships that can be competitive, supportive, or neutral (Frangenheim et al., 2020; see also Benner, 2021; Hassink et al., 2019; Martin & Sunley, 2006; Mörner & Tripl, 2019).

Fig. 1: A stylized example of a path development track



Source: author's elaboration.

In contrast to life cycle models (Bergman, 2008; Butler, 1980; Harris, 2021; Martin & Sunley, 2011; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010), a railroad track model does not imply any pre-defined regularity in the sequence of stretches and switches. Instead, the model assumes that, first, that stretches of path development will at some point be succeeded by switches of transformation and, second,

that path development and transformation will often follow the stages of initiation by pioneers, acceleration by further agency, and consolidation through a critical mass (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021a, 2021b; see also Bergman, 2008; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010).

Further, the model implies that one of the major mechanisms behind the succession of path development and transformation episodes is the changing mix of agency patterns. While Bækkelund (2021) addresses the role of different forms of agency in the phases of the path-as-process model and acknowledges gradual shifts between them, a nuanced conceptualization requires zooming in more closely on how precisely patterns of agency change before, during, and after path transformation and, hence, how and why the mix of agency changes, and who exactly is behind these changes. During path transformation, change agency does not appear out of nowhere but may instead become relatively more dominant than stability agency, thus tipping the balance towards transformation. This can be due, for instance, to a new agent joining the scene or an established one changing strategy or leaving (see also Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b; Bergman, 2008; Jolly et al., 2020; Martin, 2010; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010). Hence, what happens during the path transformation switches in the railroad track model is different forms of agency evolving, emerging, and possibly competing in contested processes (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2020; Frangenheim et al., 2020; Miörner & Tripl, 2019). Tab. 1 sketches how patterns of agency can be expected to change between pre-transformation path development stretches, path transformation switches, and post-transformation stretches, and thus elucidates the changing mix of agency that drives the succession of path development and transformation episodes.

Tab. 1: Agency in path development and transformation

Agency pattern	Path development (pre-transformation)	Path transformation	Path development (post-transformation)
Change agency			
Innovative entrepreneurship	+	++	+++
Institutional entrepreneurship	O	+++	+
Place-based leadership	O	+++	++
Stability agency			
Maintenance agency	+++	O	+
Reproductive agency	++	O	+++

Source: author's elaboration drawing on Bækkelund (2021), Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al. (2021a, 2021b), Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2018), Henderson (2020), and Jolly et al. (2020).

The logic behind Tab. 1 draws on the path transformation stages identified by Baumgartner-Seiringer et al. (2021b) as follows. A path development stretch leading up to a path transformation switch will require change agency to become more dominant than previously dominant stability agency. During transformation, innovative entrepreneurship will be present but may consist largely of pioneering firms that are willing to cope with the high uncertainty present during the initiation stage of transformation. Institutional entrepreneurship will typically be strong during transformation with institutional entrepreneurs creating new institutions or destroying old ones (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2016; Kivimaa & Kern, 2016; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Place-based leadership can occur and, if it does, can be expected to play a strong role. When transformation accelerates and consolidates into post-transformation path development, diminishing uncertainty will lead to a larger critical mass of innovative entrepreneurship while institutional entrepreneurship and place-based leadership will become somewhat less important. As the new path consolidates, reproductive agency will become dominant and entrench the emerging form of post-transformation path development (Bækkelund, 2021; Baumgartner-Seiringer et al., 2020, 2021b).

Empirical illustration

The empirical illustration sketches the track of path development and transformation tourism in Eilat, Israel's Red Sea resort, witnessed over more than six decades. The most recent episode analyzed is the path transformation and resulting incipient path development after the Euro-Mediterranean aviation agreement signed in 2013 that liberalized air traffic between Israel and the European Union (Benner, 2021a; Reich 2013) until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

This illustration is meant as a paradigmatic single-case study (Flyvberg, 2006) that draws on empirical material gathered during a preceding research effort (Benner, 2021a) and recoded and reinterpreted here in view of path development through the lens of the railroad track model. The case study builds on 20 semi-structured interviews with tourism stakeholders and experts (Helfferich, 2019) from Israel performed either on the phone or in internet calls between February and November 2020, in some instances supplemented by written clarifications.²

² This sample is part of a slightly larger sample that covers a wider region and that was analyzed with a different research question by Benner (2021a).

Interviewees included representatives of tourism businesses, representatives of non-profit tourism serviceproviders, representatives of intermediary or destination management organizations, and experts familiar with tourism development in Israel. Interviewee selection was in part based on other interviewees' recommendations. The total interview time was more than 13 hours and 45 minutes. Since all interviewees consented to being recorded, all interviews were taped and transcribed.³ Coding was based on a deductive coding structure (Mayring & Fenzl, 2019) that drew on insights from the literature on Eilat's tourism history (see annex). Coding was carried out with qualitative data analysis software (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

Since the interviews allow primarily for analyzing more recent developments, to redraw the sector's long-term history the empirical illustration relies primarily on available literature on the development of Eilat and its tourism sector. While the number of studies about Eilat is limited, those that are available still provide a consistent picture that allows for checking the plausibility and robustness of the insights gained from the interviews, and they complete the picture of the sector's long-term history throughout the decades at least to a sufficient degree to illustrate the application of the model.

Together, information from both the interviews and available literature on the history of Eilat's tourism sector allow for an approximate analysis of a six-decade sequence inspired by temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999). Such a strategy enables the identification of stretches of path development and switches of transformation, both of which serve as analytical abstractions replicating each other, thus making the method suitable for a single-case research design over time (Langley, 1999). Because it focuses attention on "how actions of one period lead to changes in the context that will affect action in subsequent periods" (Langley, 1999, p.703), temporal bracketing is particularly suited for a perspective of evolutionary economic geography (see also Stephens & Sandberg, 2020).

Eilat's tourism history⁴

Eilat is a young city with about 50,000 inhabitants that came into existence only after 1949 on the site of an outpost taken by the Israeli army at the end of the 1948-1949 war after the founding of

³ Where interviewees are quoted directly, the readability has been enhanced through minor language corrections.

⁴ This sub-section draws on Benner (2021a) and Benner et al. (2017).

the State of Israel (Azaryahu, 2005; Ergas & Felsenstein, 2012; Gradus, 2001; Kliot, 1997; Mansfeld, 2001; Styliadis et al., 2015; 2017). In the early 1950s, Eilat became a port city, driven in part by geopolitical developments such as the Sinai war of 1956 and the subsequent lifting of the blockade by Egypt (Azaryahu, 2005; Gradus, 2001; Kliot, 1997; Zerubavel, 2019). Later, the city became an oil pipeline terminus and came to rely on mines in the region (Gradus, 2001).

1958 to late 1960s: path creation

Eilat's location on the Gulf of Aqaba offers a variety of advantages for tourism such as a year-long warm climate, proximity to the Negev desert and its natural and archeological sites, and the coral reefs off the shore (Azaryahu, 2005; Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2004; Gradus, 2001; Kliot, 1997; Mansfeld, 2001; Schmidt & Altshuler, 2021; Shaari, 1973; Styliadis et al., 2015; Zerubavel, 2019). Eilat's era as a domestic tourist destination started in 1958 when the new road through the Negev made it accessible from the densely populated center of the country (Azaryahu, 1958; Zerubavel, 2019) but tourism development remained limited into the 1960s (Mansfeld, 2001). Soon after its foundation and up until the 1960s, Eilat became engrained in Israeli popular imagination as a site for relaxation with a natural beauty and a liminal character and Eilat came to represent "a substitute to travel abroad" (Azaryahu, 2005, p.121) and a liminal place attractive to international non-conformist hippie youths (Azaryahu, 2005; Belhassen, 2012; Kaplan, 2020; Zerubavel, 2019).

1970s: path upgrading

Eilat's status in Israeli imagination as "the beach at the end of the world" (Azaryahu, 2005) was lost to a certain degree after the 1967 war to Sinai (Azaryahu, 2005; Hazbun, 2008; Noy & Cohen, 2005; Shaari, 1973; Zerubavel, 2019). Notably during the 1970s, Israel's tourism policy redirected its attention from the Mediterranean coastal resorts towards making Eilat "a major winter-sun destination for European tourists" (Hazbun, 2008, p.94) and promoting international investment there, as well as towards tourism in the Dead Sea area and the Sea of Galilee (Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2004; Givton, 1973; Hazbun, 2008; Mansfeld, 2001; Shaari, 1973). Eilat's growth into a sun, sand, and sea destination for European tourists was underpinned by the setup of charter flights that started in 1975 (Azaryahu, 2005; Hazbun, 2008; Mansfeld, 2001; Zerubavel, 2019).

The policy focus on promoting Eilat as a sun, sand, and sea destination for European tourists was driven by objectives of diversifying the country's export base and generating foreign exchange revenues, seizing Eilat's climatic advantages as one of few winter destinations close to European markets, and softening the local economic impact of the closure of regional mines (Achituv, 1973; Blizovsky, 1973; Givton, 1973; Gradus, 2001; Mansfeld, 2011; Shaari, 1973). The government promoted tourism development in the city through infrastructure investments, allocation of state-owned land to national and international investors, and financial incentives (Blizovski, 1973; Federmann, 1973; Krakover, 2004; Mansfeld, 2001; Shaari, 1973).

1980s: path importation

On the domestic market, Eilat's transformation into a mass tourism destination largely replaced the 1960s' to 1970s' beach camping of nonconformist youth which reflected the changing preferences and rising purchasing power of Israeli tourists (Azaryahu, 2005; Belhassen, 2012; Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2004), although the city kept a certain romantic image up to the 1980s (Kaplan, 2020). Mansfeld (2001) describes how this policy led to an expansion of supply, notably through the emergence of the national Isrotel chain backed by a British investor with experience in the Spanish hotel market which since the early 1980s built a series of large-scale hotels on the marina that became the core of Eilat's tourism zone (Isrotel, n.d.).

After 1982 when Israel's pull-out from Sinai was completed, Eilat again turned into the country's liminal "frontier town" (Azaryahu, 2005, p.119), although neighboring Taba was disputed for several more years and handed over to Egypt after international arbitration in 1989 (Hazbun, 2008; Kemp & Ben-Eliezer, 2000). In 1985, the Israeli government granted Eilat a special status as a free zone that brought with it exemption from value-added tax (Gradus, 2001) and customs which further reinforced Eilat's liminal image (Azaryahu, 2005). Legislation passed in 1988 provided for financial incentives for young people discharged from military service when working in hotels for a limited time which led to an influx of workers to Eilat (Belhassen, 2012; Belhassen & Shani, 2012; Mansfeld, 2001; Stylidis et al., 2015).

1990s and 2000s: path downgrading and extension

During the 1990s, the Fordist model of standardized sun, sand, and sea tourism (Hazbun, 2008) in Eilat was further entrenched by large-scale tourism development and investment as the city's hotel room capacity doubled (Mansfeld, 2001; Zerubavel, 2019; see also Krakover, 2004).

Mansfeld (2001, p.172) considers the massive expansion in Eilat's hotel capacity during the 1990s an "uncontrolled development process" that resulted in low unemployment at the time but also in disadvantageous long-term effects such as massive dependence on tourism and particularly on low-skilled and low-paid jobs, social problems, inward and outward migration, environmental damage, a certain degree of antagonism, and a reputation of a lower quality of life (Azaryahu, 2005; Belhassen, 2012; Belhassen & Shani, 2012; Kaplan, 2020; Kliot, 1997; Mansfeld, 2001; Schmidt & Altshuler, 2021; Stylidis et al., 2015; 2017). The consequences of uncontrolled development included a loss of attractiveness to international tourists due to dissatisfaction with service quality, the limited choice of attractions, and the perception "that Eilat looks more like a building site than a tourist destination" (Mansfeld, 2001, p.176), a problem an interviewee mentioned even about present-day Eilat. Further, environmental degradation caused the exit of German tour operators during the 1990s (Mansfeld, 2001).

In the wake of the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, ambitious plans for regional cross-border tourism cooperation between Eilat and neighboring Aqaba including a joint airport, theme parks, or a casino emerged but did not materialize (Gradus, 2001; Hazbun, 2008; Kliot, 1997; Mansfeld, 2001). Eilat's 1990s boom in large-scale sun, sand, and sea tourism lasted until the breakdown of international tourism to Israel caused by the second *intifada* in 2000 (Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2004; Hazbun, 2008; Israeli & Reichel, 2003; Zerubavel, 2019).

While Eilat's tourism generally sector relied both on domestic and international tourism during the 1980s and 1990s (Ergas & Felsenstein, 2012; Krakover, 2004; Mansfeld, 2001), in the early 2000s Eilat turned into a primarily domestic tourist destination with domestic tourists accounting for about 85 percent in total visitors in 2010 (Ergas & Felsenstein, 2012; see also Belhassen & Shani, 2012; Stylidis et al., 2015; 2017). When international tourism broke down and international hotel chains left Eilat, Israel's tourism policy turned away from supporting international package and charter tourism to Eilat stopped. Among Israelis, Eilat kept its position as a holiday "counter-place" (Zerubavel, 2019, p.113) far away from daily life in the densely populated center of the country (Azaryahu, 2005; Belhassen, 2012; Belhassen & Shani, 2012; Kaplan, 2020; Stylidis et al., 2015).

After 2013: path diversification, importation, extension, and branching

The period after 2010 is marked by the impact of the aviation agreement between the EU and Israel liberalizing air traffic that was signed in 2013 and implemented until 2018 (European Commission, 2021; Reich, 2015) and the recovery of international tourism to Israel after the 2014 Gaza war. The liberalization lowered airfares not only for incoming European tourists but also for outgoing Israeli tourists. To promote international tourism to Eilat, the government started subsidizing flights to Eilat's airports, an incentive that was initially co-funded by the local hotel association, and began widening its focus in international tourism marketing from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to include Eilat and the Negev. However, while the subsidization policy did attract a number of European airlines, the impact on Eilat's tourism sector is generally regarded by interviewees as disappointing because a significant part of arriving tourists are believed to move on to other destinations in Israel or neighboring countries or to resort to low-price apartments or other accommodation options.

Eilat's small inner-city airport used mainly for domestic flights due to its limited capacity and inadequacy for international aviation and the civilian part of the Ovda airbase used mainly for international flights were replaced by the new Ramon airport located north of Eilat designed to accommodate larger aircraft and to increase the capacity for arrivals by air (Ergas & Felsenstein, 2012; Gradus, 2001; Stylidis et al., 2015; 2017).

To increase Eilat's appeal to international tourists, tourism policymakers over time initiated a wide range of festivals and hosted sports events. Special-interest niches targeted include bird-watching tourism driven by an international research center located in the region and Eilat's favorable location along the routes of migrating birds. Interviewees mentioned embedding Eilat into a wider regional tourism product that includes the Sinai, Aqaba and Petra, and the Negev, although regional tours have been offered before (Gradus, 2001; Hazbun, 2008; Mansfeld, 2001; Shaari, 1973; Zerubavel, 2019). The recent market entry of a national hostel chain and tour operator to Eilat that offers tours to the wider region seems to have given an impetus to this path. In contrast to the package tour, charter flight model dominant from the 1970s to the 1990s, this path targets young, international independent tourists and backpackers likely to use low-cost carriers and accommodation and to combine a beach vacation with small-scale, community-based tours (see also Noy & Cohen, 2005). According to one interviewee, "the concept was again to

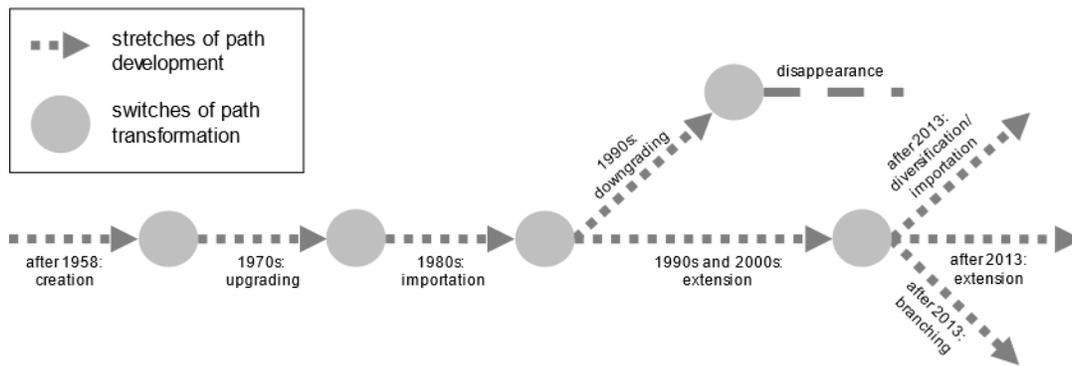
create a hub for independent travelers in the city center of Eilat, to have a lot of activities, a lot of day tours, multi-day tours, packages that will depart from [the hostel]” (interview #17, 2020). Another interviewee referred to the help the municipality provided in finding a suitable property for the hostel and highlighted the difference to the institutionalized large-scale hotel model: “It was very difficult to find a hostel or such a building which is not in the Northern beach because they didn’t want to be there with all these big hotels” (interview #1, 2020). Hence, this example shows how innovative entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship, and place-based-leadership are intertwined in the initiation of this new path, and an interviewee expected the appearance of further hostel brands in Israel.

Still, the largely domestic sun, sand, and sea mass tourism path prevails. While the COVID-19 pandemic was not in the scope of the present study, an interviewee mentioned that limited possibilities for international travel in 2020 strengthened domestic tourism to Eilat (see also Schmidt & Altshuler, 2021). Further, interviewees indicated that despite some signs of downgrading, domestic demand for Eilat has not suffered much from the increased international competition in the wake of the aviation agreement because (i) lower airfares enabled Israelis to travel more, (ii) domestic tourism offers advantages hard to find abroad such as the availability of kosher food, and (iii) visits to Eilat remain in part linked to trade union vacation offers, corporate incentives, or conferences. For these reasons, Eilat’s domestic tourism experiences path extension.

Discussion

While a precise historical account of events contributing to the long-term development of Eilat’s tourism sector is beyond the scope of this article, Fig. 2 represents this sequence as a stylized path development track. Because of difficulties in precisely distinguishing and delimiting patterns of agency, path development forms, and path transformation stages empirically due to the idealized nature of these analytical categories (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al. 2021b; Blažek et al., 2020; Jolly et al., 2020; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Miörner & Trippel, 2019), Fig. 2 necessarily involves simplification and interpretation that depends on judgments about the degree of path development processes and agency patterns.

Fig. 2: Eilat tourism path development track



Source: author's elaboration.

While it seems too early to evaluate interpath relationships between the paths evolving since 2013, a plausible presumption is that the branching path towards special-interest tourism and the imported and diversifying path towards a small-scale collaborative regional tourism model support each other, but how they relate to the extending path of large-scale domestic tourism over time remains to be seen.

The period since 2013 demonstrates the changing patterns of agency in a path transformation switch and in subsequent initiating path development stretches. The regional, small-scale, collective model aimed at international independent travelers that the market entry of the national hostel chain and tour operator brings to Eilat is a clear example for emerging institutional entrepreneurship (Benner, 2021a) as well as for innovative entrepreneurship and can indeed mark the inception of path importation and diversification that might accelerate if and when emulated by other agents. The subsidization of flights to Eilat represents an act of place-based leadership that might underscore this incipient path. These patterns confirm the agency framework proposed (Tab. 1). It will be interesting to observe in the future if and how consolidation of these paths through a critical mass of agency (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021b) happens in the future.

The interpretation is less clear for the other paths. As for domestic tourism, reproductive and maintenance agency seems to drive the continuing sun, sand, and sea model (Benner, 2021a) and, hence, path extension. Path branching into special-interest tourism seems to be based more on reproductive agency than on change agency but may still be seen against the backdrop of the subsidization of flights (place-based leadership). Thus, the changing mix of agency suggested in Tab. 1 may be more pronounced in more radical path transformation.

Hence, path transformation since 2013 can be interpreted through a gradually changing mix of agency. Apparently, the place-based leadership of subsidizing international flights to Eilat was not sufficient to overcome the predominance of maintenance agency that supported the prevailing sun, sand, and beach mass tourism model that was not sufficiently adapted to international tourism. It needed both innovative and institutional entrepreneurship or reproductive agency *in addition* to place-based leadership to drive transformation towards incipient patterns of path importation/diversification and branching, respectively. This interpretation is consistent with the assumption behind the railroad track model that it is gradual changes in the *mix* of agency that tips the balance towards a new path. In particular, the results show how different agents drive this changing mix of agency through market entry or exit which emphasizes the role of a changing agent composition in a changing agency mix and the competitive struggles during transformation. However, the patterns of agency visible in this particular transformative episode seem to focus on creation instead of destruction which may be due to the growth opportunities afforded by air-traffic liberalization (Benner, 2021a; Reich, 2015).

Limitations, methodological implications, conclusions

This article sought to demonstrate the merit of understanding path development and transformation as a long-term track of stretches and switches. By showing that shifts in agency do not occur automatically at any stage but are related to the dynamics of the agent scene, the article contributes a more nuanced perspective to pre-existing path-as-process conceptualizations (e.g., Bækkelund, 2021; Martin, 2010). However, more in-depth empirical work is necessary to refine the changing patterns of agency illustrated in Tab. 1 to distinguish in more detail how and under which conditions path transformation leads a specific subsequent form of path development and not to others.

The empirical illustration demonstrates the usefulness of temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999) to identify stretches of path development and switches of path transformation in a long-term single case. The method's focus on agency Langley (1999) emphasizes makes it particularly suited for further empirical research on the role of agency in critical junctures (see also Stephens & Sandberg, 2020). However, due to its methodological limitations, the Eilat case as presented here can be seen primarily as an approximation to empirically illustrate the railroad track model and highlights the difficulty in pursuing such a strategy. Reconstructing changing patterns of agency

during past switches in more detail than could be done in this article is difficult and requires adding methodological competences in economic history to the toolbox of evolutionary economic geography (Henning, 2019). For example, two studies drawn on (Azaryahu, 2005; Zerubavel, 2019) offer excellent examples for reconstructing historical processes by drawing on long-term media discourses (see also Grillitsch et al., 2021a). Qualitatively redrawing the long-term history of regional paths risks rationalizing events *ex-post* and selectively interpreting them (Henning, 2019; Jolly et al., 2020; Steen, 2016). This is another reason why understanding changing patterns of agency in path development and transformation is important. If we can sharpen our understanding of what changes in agency patterns are likely to induce path transformation, our methods in observing path development as it happens (Steen, 2016) could significantly improve. Why such changes occur and how their occurrence varies merits further research. For instance, structural institutional conditions of regional industries might play an important role (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2020). While much needs to be done to fully understand the role of agency in regional development, the railroad track model provides a framework for embedding specific patterns of agency more closely into path development conceptualizations and can help refine empirical research designs.

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Annex

Table A1 illustrates the coding structure for the interview analysis and the number of coded segments to provide an overview of how the empirical material was structured.

Table A1: Coding structure and number of coded segments

Code		Number of codes segments
Timeframe		
	before 1948	1
	1948-1958	2
	1958 to end-1970s	9
	1980s	13
	1990s	13
	2000s	16
	2010s	185
	after Feb. 2020	28
Episode (of tourism in Eilat and its immediate surroundings)		
	Path transformation (not further specified)	30
	Initiation	27
	Acceleration	33
	Consolidation	6
	Path creation	2
	Path importation	17
	Path extension	69
	Path branching	61
	Path diversification	87
	Path upgrading	6
	Path downgrading	22
	Path contraction	0
	Path delocalization	0
	Path disappearance	7
Form of agency (in relation to tourism in Eilat and its immediate surroundings)		
	Innovative entrepreneurship	16
	Institutional entrepreneurship	15
	Place-based leadership	11
	Maintenance agency	27
	Reproductive agency	41
Total		744

Source: author's elaboration.

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