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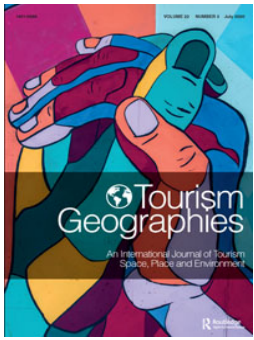
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# The COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for escaping the unsustainable global tourism path

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted mobility globally on an unprecedented scale, causing the neoliberal market mechanisms of global tourism to be severely disrupted. In turn, this situation is leading to the decline of certain mainstream business formats and, simultaneously, the emergence of others. Based on a review of recent crisis recovery processes, the tourism sector is likely to rebound from this sudden market shock, primarily because of various forms of government interventions. Nevertheless, although policymakers seek to strengthen the resilience of post-pandemic tourism, their subsidies and other initiatives serve to maintain a fundamentally flawed market logic. The crisis has, therefore, brought us to a fork in the road – giving us the perfect opportunity to select a new direction and move forward by adopting a more sustainable path. Specifically, COVID-19 offers public, private, and academic actors a unique opportunity to design and consolidate the transition towards a greener and more balanced tourism. Tourism scholars, for example, can take a leading role in this by redesigning their curriculum to prepare future industry leaders for a more responsible travel and tourism experience.

## 摘要

COVID-19 大流行以前所未有的规模中止了全球的流动性, 严重破坏了世界旅游业的新自由主义市场机制, 继而导致某些主流商业模式的衰落, 同时也导致其他商业模式的兴起。根据对近期危机复苏进程的回顾, 旅游业可能会从这场突如其来的市场冲击中反弹, 主要原因是政府采取了各种形式的干预措施。虽然政策制定者试图增强大流行后旅游业的复原力, 但他们的补贴和其他举措只能维持一个存在根本缺陷的市场。因此, 这场危机将我们带到了岔路口——给了我们选择新方向的绝佳机会, 并采取更加可持续的道路前进。具体而言, COVID-19 为公众、个人和学术团体提供了独特的机会来布局 and 加强向更绿色、更平衡的旅游业过渡。例如, 旅游学者可以通过重新设计课程, 为未来的行业领导者提供更负责任的旅行和旅游体验, 从而在其中发挥主导作用。

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## 关键词

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Since its emergence in early 2020, the rapidly-spreading COVID-19 (also referred to as Corona) pandemic has wreaked global havoc. While numerous communities have been facing lockdowns of varying lengths the economic consequences of the virus have been devastating. The effects on the global tourism sector, not to mention thousands of destinations worldwide, have been particularly harmful as our normally hyper-mobile society has ground to a halt. It is not only the major players in the tourism supply chain (e.g., airlines, cruise companies, transnational hotel chains) who have suffered unfathomable damage, which is estimated to amount to €400bn (Goodwin, 2020; Nicolás, 2020). In thousands of localities, businesses of all sizes, which depend either directly or indirectly on the visitor economy, have suspended operations and indications are that many of these will likely never reopen. The impact on the sector's labour force has been devastating, especially considering the precarious nature of numerous tourism and hospitality-related jobs at the lower rungs of the occupational ladder (Chanel, 2020; see also, UNWTO., 2020).

Both the scope and consequences of global immobility induced by the Corona-crisis have seriously perplexed tourism practitioners, policymakers and researchers (Miles & Shipway, 2020). While, just a few years ago, Hall (2015) anticipated the possibility of a global pandemic playing out as the "perfect storm", the interlinked social, cultural, psychological and economic effects of a crisis of this magnitude are leading us along unforeseen trajectories. On the one hand, there is already growing speculation especially in the mass media that the pandemic might trigger an enduring shift in market behavior, which could radically transform global travel patterns (Irwin, 2020). On the other hand, we recognize that in the past, following a particular crisis, including the outbreak of epidemics, the tourism industry has usually bounced back, demonstrating the sector's remarkable resilience to mitigate sudden breakdowns in demand or supply (Novelli et al., 2018; Papatheodorou et al., 2010).

Indeed, evidence suggests that memories following crises and disasters tend to be short and sooner, rather than later, things return to the status quo (Kontogeorgopoulos, 1999). For instance, although the SARS epidemic in the early 2000s initially led to a drastic fall in visits to China, the destination rapidly rebounded (Zeng et al., 2005). Meanwhile, in an exercise of "disaster capitalism", powerful stakeholders in destinations like Thailand and Sri Lanka, which were devastated by the massive tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 used the catastrophe as an opportunity to implement land grabs, leading to brand new large-scale developments that quickly enticed international visitors to return (Cohen, 2011). If a particular tourist destination is affected by an unforeseen sudden event such as a volcanic eruption or a terrorist attack, the major international travel suppliers (e.g., tour operators and airlines) substitute this with another one offering similar attractions and facilities (Ioannides, 1994). Obviously, this ability of footloose international players to shift their turf, aerospace or fairway around the globe is currently a moot point. Following the closure of international borders, almost all international passenger air traffic has been cancelled and transnational cruise-liners sailing underflags of convenience are refused entry into most ports.

The unprecedented circumstances that the travel and tourism sector currently faces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic signify that in an evolutionary sense, we have reached a fork in the road where at least two general outcomes are possible. The first

(based on extrapolations of past recovery history) is that the sector will gradually revert to the pre-crisis unsustainable growth-oriented trajectory. An alternative scenario entails a transition towards a radically different way of doing things (Loorbach et al., 2017). Arriving at this metaphorical fork in the road constitutes an opportunity for society at large to pause and ponder the way forward. After all, from an etymological aspect, the word “crisis” originates from the Ancient Greek ‘κρίσις’, which among its several definitions has to do with coming to a judgement or making a decision. Nowadays, a crisis implies that a turning point has been reached giving rise to the opportunity to institute varying degrees of change that may allow us to move away from the original trajectory and escape some of the problems associated with this (Miles & Petridou, 2015). As Thierry Breton, EU Commissioner of the internal market claims: “[...] there is an opportunity to take advantage of the current crisis to reinvent the tourism of tomorrow - towards a more sustainable, resilient and innovative sector” (Nicolás, 2020).

In the remainder of this commentary, we treat the disruption in global tourism as a prism through which we contemplate how broader transformations could play out in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. We admit it is dangerous to make predictions with limited facts, nor do we possess a crystal ball as to how things might evolve in the aftermath of the present crisis. Instead, by adopting a far less ambitious stance, we discuss how the present catastrophic effects on the tourism sector present an opportunity for reconsidering certain practices. Below, we present our reflections by contrasting the potential decline of mainstream tourism practices, which are currently severely disrupted by COVID-19, with emergent niche activities, for which opportunities might arise from the very same disruptions. Thereafter, we discuss potential avenues that policymakers may wish to pursue. Because of space constraints, we focus on just two issues, namely *mobility* and *resilience*.

## **Mobility**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the imposed mobility restrictions have been unprecedented on a local, regional and global scale. The shutdown of numerous communities and the implementation of major restrictions on border crossings has virtually eliminated the tourism economy in communities throughout the world (Goodwin, 2020). Places, which only a few months ago were suffering from extreme problems of over-visitation (Milano et al., 2019) are presently eerily quiet (Kimmelman, 2020). Museums, hotels and restaurants have closed, beaches and ski-slopes are empty and events of all sizes have been postponed or cancelled. Undoubtedly, the economic effects especially on localities or even countries depending heavily on tourism arrivals have been catastrophic.

Because at the time of writing it remains anyone’s guess as to when the crisis will subside one can only ponder as to whether or not we shall see major shifts in the global tourism system or whether things will largely revert to what they were before the crisis occurred. Certainly, this unprecedented situation has made one thing clear. It has given us, at least momentarily, a glimpse of a world of slow-paced, which does not entail traveling large distances by cars, trains or planes. For many, trips have been

confined to a few short blocks from home, while numerous middle and upper middle-class people can only reflect how privileged they have been to be able to travel to far-flung spots around the planet. Meanwhile, because of the significant reduction in both local and international travel but also the slowdown of manufacturing activities, there is mounting evidence that the air in several localities worldwide is far cleaner than it has been for decades since pollutants have dropped off (McGrath, 2020; Watts & Kommenda, 2020). This combination of facts opens up the possibility for people to view their immediate surroundings in a whole new way, especially when millions have been locked up for weeks within the confines of their homes. Newton (2020) discusses how the restrictions have created a surge of visitations to parks and forests.

Coupled with this, we can assume that the scope and depth of the crisis has challenged the economies of millions of households worldwide, effectively putting a major dent in their discretionary incomes. Thus, it could be a long while before leisure-oriented travel and especially long-haul flights reach their pre-COVID-19 levels. Further, companies in all sectors, which are facing massive losses due to fickle demand and reduced production might institute measures such as replacing most business travel with meetings on virtual platforms. The fact that over the last 2 months Zoom and Skype meetings have become the new norm for numerous public and private entities worldwide might accelerate a fundamental paradigm shift in the way of conducting business.

On a broader level, the current crisis could lead to shifts in the dominant logic of neoliberalism over the last few decades whereby numerous destinations around the world have persisted in pursuing growth-oriented strategies in a highly deregulated environment. For example, just a few months ago, despite rising accusations that tourists were loving them to death, European destinations were on a never-ending search for new strategic “emerging” markets (attracting long-haul travelers from China, India and Southeast Asia). Their growing middle class but also lower travel restrictions have been a major reason behind the massive increase in demand from these regions. With the advent COVID-19 and the imposition of draconian measures to restrict the virus’ spread, one must wonder whether we are entering a new era where risk mitigation might prevail over the logic of unrestricted growth. Rising concerns about the threats associated with the unrestricted circulation of goods and people across the world might mean that these imposed controls might take time to disappear while nervous consumers may not wish to venture far from their comfort zone until they are reassured that the danger has lapsed. A recent survey conducted by the Tourism Crisis Management Initiative at the University of Florida reveals that, at least in the early days after things eventually return to normal, most Americans who are able to and choose to travel are likelier to venture close to home. Most likely, these trips will be car-based (Glusac, 2020). Meanwhile, others may pursue leisure activities that do not require much mobility, due to both economic and risk considerations.

From a philosophical standpoint, these circumstances lead us to contemplate the possibility of a post-COVID-19 era where tourists’ mobility could be significantly transformed not only temporarily but over the long-run. Could we, for instance, envision a scenario where our endless neophilia and unquenching thirst for (often irresponsible) adventure in far-flung places are substituted by travel and leisure activities much closer to home? Media coverage of cruise passengers evacuated by their respective

national governments may induce an enduring risk-avoidance consumer trend, in which exotic travel and places with high population concentration lose their appeal. Moreover, could we see the reemergence of patriotic consumption (similar to the kick-start of post-WW2 markets), where citizens support domestic destinations and local tourism businesses as an act of communitarian commitment?

### **A word about resilience**

Resilience and the mobilization of adaptive capabilities have been addressed in organizational studies relating to sustainable transitions (Engle, 2011; Keskitalo, 2008, Tsao & Ni, 2016), which offer a glimpse of recovery responses. In the case of enterprises, a crisis may trigger the emergence of new business models and revenue strategies, which will ultimately define the survival chances of the firm. Innovative and adaptive capabilities play a key role in post-crisis recovery (Engle, 2011), yet numerous tourism businesses suffer from innovation deficiencies (Hjalager, 2002; Sundbo et al., 2007). Small operators, traditionally deemed as vulnerable market players, may prove to respond to the crisis in more flexible ways, especially due to their local embeddedness and community support. Previous research has shown local economies respond to crises with collaborative action and social bricolage (Di Domenico et al., 2010) while rural enterprises have better recovery outlooks than their urban counterparts (Johannisson & Olaison, 2007). This seems to be the case with Danish countryside inns and restaurants, which shifted to takeaway operations during the lockdown. Their revenues actually increased due to loyal guests from the local community (Skinbjerg, 2020).

What then, does the COVID-19 mean for various travel and hospitality firms? When it comes to larger-scale multinationals, these companies operate across long supply chains in order to minimize their production costs. As a consequence of the crisis, however, they may have to re-examine their practices and concentrate on shorter, regional or local supply chains. This may entail both contracting more local providers of food, raw materials and services, as well as instituting a shift in the labour force's composition (e.g., substituting low-waged migrants with domestic employees). Could such collaborative agreements be framed according to guidelines, which more closely adhere to the tenets of sustainable development such as green practices and fair labor conditions?

On another note, do current circumstances signify a reduction in the attractiveness of certain growth hotspots such as large and densely inhabited urban centers, which traditionally have drawn major international investments and visitors because these places may now be considered as too risky? If this is the case, it would open up the opportunity for less attractive, more sparsely populated regions to enhance their competitiveness as tourism destinations. Accordingly, would this create a scenario where smaller-scale, locally controlled and operated niche companies can step up to the challenge by flexibly catering to market demands?

### **Policy implications: design opportunity for sustainable transitions?**

To be sure, the tourism sector has traditionally shown considerable resilience in rebounding in the aftermath of crises and disasters, including previous regionally-

based epidemics such as SARS. Commonly, this recovery has been assisted through the intervention of local, regional or national governments, which create an environment whereby, in the prevailing spirit of neoliberalism, they entice investors through a series of incentives (tax breaks, lifting of stringent land use regulations, etc.) (Brouder, 2020). Even at present, due to the huge negative effect of COVID-19 on the airlines, the US government has committed to provide the industry a rescue packet amounting to 25 billion dollars (BBC, 2020). Similarly, the European Union, which notoriously opposes state subsidies to air carriers, has endorsed the Danish government's aid of 137 million euro to SAS to deal with the effects of the Corona virus (TravelNews, 2020). As tourism is a strategic economic sector in all Mediterranean countries, it is expected that the European Union will earmark about one fifth of its COVID-19 funds for tourism, making the industry the largest beneficiary of its recovery plan (Nicolás, 2020).

It is important, however, to recognize that unlike previous events, the present Corona pandemic qualifies as a sudden shock, which occurs on multiple scales (Lew, 2014). This is because the pandemic-induced crisis overlaps with several other crises, including those on socio-political but also production/consumer demand levels. In the situation of a pandemic, which has clearly been exacerbated because of the mechanisms of globalization and the mass circulation of goods and people, it is becoming increasingly clear that it is not enough to offer quick band-aid fixes to deal with the consequences. By bailing out only the large-scale travel and tourism players (airlines, multinational hotel chains and tour operators) there is a real danger that existing power asymmetries in the sector will prevail. What about the locally-based small and medium-sized businesses, not to mention the millions of lowly-paid workers who depend so heavily on international visitors? We should question the logic of handing out bailouts to companies (e.g., airlines and cruise lines) that are notorious for their dubious and, sometimes outright unethical, business practices when it comes to complying with guidelines on issues such the environment or workers' rights.

Recently, Robert Reich (2020) who served as US Labor Secretary under the Clinton administration penned an opinion piece in *The Guardian* lamenting the bailout of major US-based corporations because of the COVID-19 crisis. He argues that under the Trump administration, these companies have benefitted massively from huge tax cuts, using these to pay out bonuses for executives while many of their workers struggle to survive. His point is that such incentives do nothing to support middle class, lower-middle class and working class families and, as such, are "morally intolerable."

On a global scale, interventions such as these aim at keeping a capitalist market logic alive (Fletcher, 2011) and yet, this logic thrives on unjustifiable value capture in situations where the externalities are absorbed by the environment, the precarious labor force, host communities, and mom-and-pop businesses. Thus, we argue that any intervention must come with plenty of strings attached. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis opens up the unique opportunity whereby funders can request that recipient transnational companies must fix issues relating to resource and waste handling, labor exploitation and benefit redistribution.

## Closing remarks

*Sustainability, we have often said, will be achieved eventually – either by disaster or by design. As streets are emptied and planes are grounded, air pollution has gone down, and the global carbon footprint has decreased.* (Hanscom, 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2020)

The beneficial effects of the crisis on global emissions and air quality are immediate and palpable. However, instead of cheering, the CEO of the Global Footprint Network acknowledges the gravity of the situation triggered by COVID-19 and stresses that present circumstances run contrary to one of GFN's fundamental goals that *everyone* will eventually be able to “thrive within the means of our planet.” Nevertheless, despite her reservations, we believe that the present crisis has opened up an unprecedented situation, allowing us to grasp the opportunity and to rectify an otherwise defective global system.

While it is certainly not easy to shift path-dependent institutional mindsets, which are driven by the logic of capitalism's need to reinvent itself (Harvey, 2020), the pause we find ourselves in at this moment offers the possibility for sketching a new way forward in the years to come. We must, of course, caution that for us, the tourism scholars, this should not be limited only to intellectual reflections and scenario-building exercises. Rather, we should start taking responsibility by being active participants in enabling substantial changes to happen. As a beginning we must seriously think about redesigning our curricula and educational activities in order to train students to gain skills in complexity-thinking, knowledge of post-capitalist economies and collaborative business models.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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