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Tourism, COVID-19 and Crisis: the case for a radical turn

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Abstract

While the tourism industries have been severely impacted by the economic collapse triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic has also revealed the degree to which the international tourism industries and associated mobility flows are deeply woven into the interconnected architecture of global capitalism, its fragilities and inequalities. Nevertheless, many have been quick to proclaim that the pandemic-induced crisis provides an unprecedented opportunity for reimagining and rebuilding the tourism industries in line with principles of sustainability, resilience and social justice. While there is emerging evidence of a desire to tackle previously unsustainable processes of tourism, its logics of growth and business models, this chapter critically examines the degree to which a radical, paradigmatic transition away from growth-led, corporate-managed and resource-intensive tourism development in the aftermath of the pandemic is possible. The chapter concludes that arguments for the socialisation of tourism should commence from a rigorous analysis and critique of the tourism political economy and attendant class relations of power which influence the potential scope for the kinds of coordinated collective action required to bring about alternatives to growth-led, capitalist tourism development.

Key words:

tourism, capitalism, political economy, sustainability, class, COVID-19.

Introduction

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In recent decades, such has been the unfaltering belief in the resilience of tourism as an export sector that in January 2020 the Secretary-General of the UNWTO predicted 3 to 4% growth for the coming year (UNWTO, 2020a). The rapid spread of COVID-19 quickly brought that optimism to an abrupt halt. The global scope and magnitude of the pandemic led swiftly to border closures and government-imposed national "lock-downs" resulting in a 65% fall in tourism in the first half of 2020 and concomitant decline of US$460 billion in export revenues (UNWTO, 2020b, p. 1). Depending on the continued time-scale and severity of the pandemic, together with the nature and efficacy of political interventions to both stem its spread and mitigate the economic fallout, it is estimated that international tourism receipts could fall by up to US$1.2 trillion with a resultant loss of 100-120 million jobs (Richter, 2020).

The pandemic has also revealed the degree to which tourism and its associated mobility flows are deeply woven into the unsustainable processes and interconnected architecture of international tourism, as well as demonstrated its capacity to act as a vector for the transmission of the disease itself (Oltermann, 2020). While the urgency with which the UNWTO (2020c) has sought to address the economic repercussions of pandemic suppression measures on tourism is perhaps understandable, the hasty re-opening of many destinations in the summer of 2020 undoubtedly contributed to the resurgence of infection rates across Europe and will likely forestall any immediate recovery. Nevertheless, a number of analysts have interpreted the crisis as an unprecedented opportunity to "critically reconsider tourism's growth trajectory" (Gössling, et al, 2020, p. 13) and to reimagine a post-pandemic tourism recovery within more equitable, environmentally sustainable and regenerative frameworks (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020).

The UNWTO (2020d) meanwhile has called for the tourism industries to "grow back better". However, the rebuilding of tourism for the most part centres on modest health-related innovations and tourist behavioural shifts, together with nods to the recipes of "inclusive" and "sustainable" growth, as outlined in the UNWTO's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (see UNWTO, 2017). Immediate and comprehensive measures are needed in the form of aid, debt relief and other mitigating measures to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and permanent loss of productive capacity in low-income tourism destinations. But to ignore the structural inequalities and systemic processes of exploitation that have been characteristic of growth-led, corporate, capitalist tourism development in recent decades, would signal to powerful political and commercial interests that a serious challenge to their profit-making is unlikely to materialise. Alternatively, to delay radical reforms in the interests of restoring tourism growth in the short-term would likely render attempts to address such concerns that much harder to achieve once developers have secured the capture of lucrative “tourism resources” and well-financed tourism business interests have reinforced their superior market position.

Many of the commentaries and responses thus far have failed to fully consider and critique the nature of the political and economic forces that have driven the growth and development of international and regional tourism and how these will continue to shape struggles to restructure tourism business models along more “sustainable” lines in its aftermath. Accordingly, any kind of reflection on possible alternatives to growth-led, corporate-managed, extractive tourism development together with the necessary forms of collective action needed to socialise tourism business models in line with distributed and equitable forms of ownership and control, must address the contested class relations of power and forces of accumulation that fuel tourism capital accumulation.

COVID-19, tourism and the political economy of disruption

That this constitutes a profound crisis and major turning point for the global economy and tourism is beyond doubt; one whose economic repercussions are global in scale and likely to be of greater severity than the 1930s depression (IMF, 2020a). Whereas the 2008 financial crisis constituted a crisis of financialised capitalism, leading to a sharp contraction of liquidity, the unique nature of the widespread economic repercussions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be alleviated by the usual recipe of macroeconomic interventions, thus increasing the likelihood of “a fundamental shift in the very nature of the global economy”

(Milanovic, 2020). Given the uniquely face-to-face nature of the tourism and hospitality industries and their dependence on cross-border mobility, these industries have experienced an unprecedented contraction in consumer demand and supply because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The value produced by tourism is constituted through a myriad of interconnected firms and service suppliers of different scale and geographical reach, through which diverse capitals flow and firms co-exist, from corporate-managed global commodity chains to informal traders (Gibson, 2009). Such complexity renders the intricate cross-border linkages and local networks of suppliers, all of whom are bound through their dependence upon the demand generated by tourists, at increased risk of a sustained downturn and potential collapse.

Tourism supply is by its very nature perishable and unsold inventory cannot be resold at a later date. Restrictions on overseas travel have thus led to an increased emphasis on domestic tourism, which accounts for around 75% of tourism in OECD countries, and is expected to recover more quickly (OECD, 2020). However, in export-oriented, low-income destinations domestic tourist markets cannot be easily substituted for international tourists nor can tourism and resort infrastructures be easily repurposed for alternative economic use, as demonstrated in the Maldives where a majority of hotels and resorts remained shut until mid-July (Liang-Pholsena, 2020).

Notwithstanding the contribution made by tourism to export earnings, employment and improved living standards in many countries, the pandemic has shattered “the myth of ‘catch – up development’ and perpetual growth” (Everingham & Chassagne, 2020, p. 2). As noted in a recent report by the UN Human Rights Council between 1980 and 2016, 27% of global real income growth was captured by the top one per cent of the world’s population (Alston, 2020, p. 15). Not only do the financial benefits of economic growth accrue unevenly, the construction of tourism resorts and infrastructure in many growth “hotspots” in the Global South and indeed elsewhere, often result in significant disruption to local economies, land dispossessions and environmental pressures (Diagne, 2004; Mittal & Fraser, 2018). In Africa, despite growth in international tourist arrivals (6% per year) and tourism export revenues (9% per year) between

1995–2014, poverty, unemployment and inequality remain high (UNCTAD, 2017, p. 15). Many destinations thus remain trapped by the competitive logics of export-led tourism which in turn exacerbates the unequal patterns of resource extraction (including atmospheric pollution from air travel by tourists), drives up local prices, increases inequalities and sustains precarious work.

Although it is too early for a comprehensive analysis of the industrial transformations and power coordinates of the international and regional tourism political economy that will emerge in the pandemic's wake, the social and economic distribution of the pandemic's impact on tourism firms and destinations worldwide underlines the coercive trade relations and inequalities of power and wealth that govern economic relations between the Global North and South. Salient among the inequalities and economic vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic is the very "need" to trade (in tourism), particularly in low-income states with few economic alternatives.

Only three years ago an UNCTAD (2017, p. 30) report on tourism in Africa identified tourism revenues as being "more stable and resilient to shocks than most other external and trade flows". However, the pandemic has laid bare long-standing inequalities and vulnerabilities in the export-led tourism development strategies pursued by "developing countries" under the aegis of Western development "experts" and agencies since the 1960s (see Wood, 1979, p. 274). Although tourism-related stocks of foreign direct investment (FDI) remain low by comparison with other sectors, a shortage of domestic capital and accumulated debt burdens - in themselves indicative of systemic trade inequalities (see Hickel, 2017, pp. 174-181) - has left many destinations reliant upon inward FDI flows to finance hotel and resort development. The lack of economic resilience is illustrated in the fact that between January and June 2020 inward FDI into tourism projects around the world fell from 373 to 141 while total capital expenditure fell by 73.3% from US$34.8bn to US$9.3bn (Dettoni & Conway, 2020).

These innate vulnerabilities have been most acutely felt in small island developing states (SIDS) given their extremely high dependence on tourism export revenues, which amount to approximately US$30 billion per year, high levels of external debt (72.4% of their GDP) and low levels of foreign reserves (Coke-Hamilton, 2020). Repayments on public external debt are estimated to reach nearly US$3.4 trillion in 2020 and 2021 (UNCTAD, 2020b). Many indebted states, including Belize where export revenues have fallen by half due to the collapse of tourism, will be hard pressed to finance a transition towards a decarbonised green economy without international financial assistance and debt relief (Farand, 2020). While these are eye-watering figures, consider for a moment that the world's advanced economies have thus far spent an estimated US$12 trillion on stimulus packages, or that the total value of capital in off-shore tax havens is currently estimated at approximately US$32 trillion (Christensen, 2020, p. 28). By way of comparison, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that US$45bn would help mitigate the worst effects of job losses in low-income states (Achcar, 2020, p. 5).

The impact has also been severe on such countries as Costa Rica, Greece, Morocco, Portugal, and Thailand with tourism revenue losses exceeding 3% of GDP (IMF, 2020b). Destinations in southern Europe, in which over half of all European tourism enterprises are concentrated (Eurostat, 2020), have also been particularly hard hit (Pasquale, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, the economic vulnerability of southern European economies had already been accentuated by the cumulative impacts of de-industrialization, neoliberal reforms and European monetary union. These stimulated a surge of tourism and real estate investment in housing and other property assets. In 2015 alone, 60% of hotel investments in Barcelona were realised through investment funds (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020, p. 28). Further, the EU-led bailout and austerity programme implemented in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2007-8, ostensibly to prevent default in southern eurozone economies, further eroded their economic resilience as housing was transformed into short-term property assets and digital platforms fuelled the unsustainable growth of urban tourism in such cities as Lisbon and Barcelona (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019).

Without sustained support it is estimated that up to 50% of small to medium-sized tourism enterprises in the OECD area are at risk of bankruptcy (OECD, 2020, p. 12). However, it is the millions of precariously employed, low paid tourism and hospitality workers, many of whom work in the informal economy in the Global South and for whom little or no safety net exists, who have borne the brunt of the pandemic's economic shock (Baum et al., 2020). In the global cruise industry, a sector noted for its high rates of labour exploitation despite revenues of nearly US$50 billion in 2018 (Crocket, 2020), the pandemic has left a significant number of low-paid cruise ship workers stranded at sea and unable to return home (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Notwithstanding access to state furlough schemes, tourism and hospitality workers in wealthy states have also not been spared. In the United States 98% of the members of the Unite Here trade union (representing hotel, casino and food service workers) had lost their jobs by early April (Bandler, 2020). Meanwhile in Europe almost the entire 12 million strong hospitality workforce has either been furloughed or been made redundant (Bragason, 2020).

Conversely, further to being able to access state financial support under the auspices of the European Union's "Temporary Framework" (CEC, 2020), many large-scale European-based tourism and hotel corporations have been able to benefit directly from state financial support. Hotel chains and resort investment companies with substantial real estate holdings may also be able to sell real estate assets to release liquidity. German-based tour operator TUI secured €3 billion in financing via state-owned bank KfW although this failed to prevent them shedding 8,000 jobs and freezing payments to hoteliers (Hancock, 2020a). Meanwhile smaller, independent travel firms have struggled to survive (e.g. *Hays Travel*).

Although occupancy rates have plummeted during the early pandemic some estimates suggest that global hotel supply would contract by a mere 2% largely thanks to the ability of large, US-based corporations to access state aid and lines of credit (Sperance, 2020). In contrast, the many thousands of small to medium sized firms which make up around 80% of the global tourism industries, have struggled to access emergency government assistance and thus remain particularly vulnerable to collapse (UNWTO, 2020b). These two factors combined are likely to drive an increase in mergers and acquisitions as smaller hotel companies and groups have little choice but to be absorbed by larger entities (Hotel News Resource, 2020).

Nor are the increasingly dominant corporate digital platforms immune. Expedia announced 3,000 job losses in February 2020 (Hancock, 2020b), and despite revenues of US$1.5 billion in the third quarter of the year, has accumulated losses of US$220 million (Eckstein, 2020). Nevertheless, the dominance of corporate, digital-tech companies is likely to accelerate and intensify, not least Airbnb, which intends to raise US$2.5 billion from its recent flotation (Karnevali and Kruppa, 2020), and Google, which has become a comprehensive meta-search platform for all manner of travel related services (Airport Technology, 2020). Amongst the hardest hit of all travel and tourism related sectors are the airlines and cruise industries. According to more recent estimates from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), global airlines face revenue losses of over US$84 billion and 25 million jobs out of a total of 65.5 million employed in the global air transport industries (IATA, 2020a; IATA 2020b). However, thanks in part to aggressive lobbying and their strategic importance, many of the world's major airlines have managed to secure vital state aid to stay afloat (Barratt, 2020). Indeed, while US lobby "Airlines for America" has consistently campaigned against aviation taxes and regulation on behalf of US airlines, passenger carriers have been amongst the major beneficiaries of state financial support (US$46 billion) made available to the aviation sector under the US Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Security Act (CARES) (Brenner, 2020).

However, in a sign of the schism between the interests of transnational corporations and states characteristic of the era of neoliberal globalisation, the three nominally US companies that account for 75% of the global cruise market (Crockett, 2020), were excluded from the US$500 billion state support programme by virtue of being incorporated in off-shore registries ("flags of convenience") which enables them to minimise US tax liabilities and circumvent other "restrictive" labour and environmental standards (Zeballos-Roig, 2020). There are signs too that the pandemic may hasten the geo-economic power shifts and growing distinctiveness of regional political economies that were already apparent prior to the outbreak. In this regard the pandemic has accelerated the move of the centres of tourism capital accumulation towards East Asia and other "emerging" economies as non-Western sovereign wealth funds move to purchase equity stakes in a range of aviation, hotel, cruise and entertainment companies (Massoudi et al, 2020).

From crisis to renewal?

Crises often serve to catalyse sharp transitions towards new political-economic orders. The degree to which the current rupture signals “the decline of mainstream business formats” and an unprecedented opportunity to adopt a “more sustainable path” in tourism (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020), remains uncertain and will depend upon various factors internal and external to destinations themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic does indeed have all the attributes of just such a crisis. However, while some have hailed the pandemic as the death-knell for neoliberal capitalism, crises [even pandemics] are not simply natural events but rather “socially constructed and highly political” (Gamble, 2009, p. 38). Given that ample evidence of unsustainable and exploitative tourism practices has existed for at least thirty years if not longer, the question is why would governments, developers and corporations choose to make substantive changes to capitalist business practices now?

There are indications that citizens and local governments are increasingly prepared to challenge the untrammelled growth of tourism in such cities as Barcelona (Blanco-Romero et al., 2018) and Venice (Croce, 2020). In Key West, Florida, citizens have recently also voted to prohibit large cruise ships from docking and limiting the number of disembarking passengers (Filosa, 2020). However, the struggle to define the precise parameters of new tourism business models and to catalyse a transformation towards a more equitable, just and sustainable tourism political economy has only just begun. Aside from these examples, thus far there are few signs that the pandemic will significantly lead to a major challenge to the legitimacy of the current political and economic order. If previous crises are any indication, such disruptions often provide an opportunity for corporate and state actors to gain or reinforce their access and control over common pool resources which may then be exploited as profitable tourism assets (Ratnayake & Hapugoda, 2017).

There are already signs that large, well-capitalised firms are positioned to exploit the crisis to accelerate and consolidate their market dominance. Accor, the world’s fifth largest hotel group by turnover, continues to expand its portfolio of hotels while Radisson has announced plans to expand their property portfolio in Africa by 50% (Atkins, 2020). The pandemic has also sharpened certain mobility injustices as, for example, wealthy urbanites in Europe retreated to second homes in the countryside while essential workers, including immigrant health, transport and delivery workers, were thrust into the front lines of the pandemic. Meanwhile demand for luxury tourism, yachts and private jets has soared as the wealthy seek out remote, exclusive, sanitary environments (Rodrigues, 2020).

One of the most marked effects of the pandemic has been to highlight just how vulnerable three decades of hyper-globalisation and market-led growth has rendered even advanced capitalist economies (Fouskas & Roy-Mukherjee, 2020). However, while many governments have stepped in to prevent the collapse of businesses and mitigate the effects of spiralling unemployment (IMF, 2020c), to conclude that we are witnessing the demise of financialised neoliberal capitalism would be premature. Moreover, the conditionalities attached to state aid and support for industry vary from country to country. State financial support (€10bn) for Air France-Lufthansa was conditional on a commitment to halving emissions by 2030, the elimination of certain domestic airline routes and suspension of divided payments. As modest as these provisions are, no such conditions accompanied the £300million British government loan to British Airways nor did the UK government seek to find ways to avoid the 10,000 job losses announced by the airline in August. It was only thanks to lobbying from trade unions that the airline reversed its decision to rehire remaining employees on reduced pay and worse contractual conditions (Georgiadis, 2020). Thus, while thousands of small businesses struggle to access state aid and/or lines of credit, large tourism-hospitality-leisure corporations (with the exception of the cruise industry) have seen their risks socialised and the upwards (re)distribution of wealth underwritten by the state (i.e. tax revenues). If anything, it would have been much simpler, and arguably fairer, to transfer much of the financial support straight into the pockets of workers themselves rather than channel it via corporate executives.

Beyond sustainable tourism: the politics of post-pandemic tourism development

The precise socio-political coordinates of struggle to rebuild and transform tourism in the aftermath of the pandemic will be shaped by the geographic variances of tourism and capitalist development. This includes, inter alia: the nature and character of the state, the class relations of power which shape the flows and composition of inward tourism investment and tourism divisions of labour, as well as the scale and character of tourism development in different destinations. One thing is certain however, as the pandemic subsides and destinations re-open, it will be hard for governments to resist commercial pressures to restore growth and profitability and to push back against corporate lobbying demanding the loosening of fiscal "burdens" and "restrictive" social and environmental regulations.

Democratic forms of public control over tourism capital and investment are needed in order to sever the grip of markets and capital on tourism governance and destination planning. Capital flight is a constant threat to the stability of tourism economies in the Global South. Indeed, it has often been deployed as a bargaining tool to forestall the threat of radical reform as Jamaican Premier Michael Manley discovered in the 1970s when tourism investors and their allies in the Jamaican capitalist class engineered a managed disinvestment in response to his progressive social and economic agenda (Editors, 2020). Similar outcries from the tourism and hotel corporate executives greeted the Balearic eco-tax in 2001 and its more recent iteration (Ultima Hora, 2019).

The dependence of destinations on the growth-led logics of tourism, at the expense of ecological degradation, residential displacement and socio-economic inequalities points to a series of inherent contradictions in the capitalist political economy of tourism which cannot easily be resolved without confronting the predatory modes of profit extraction. The perpetual promise of jobs and prosperity functions as the ideological handmaiden of growth-led capitalist tourism development while simultaneously foreclosing demands for redistribution or reducing the pressures of construction on fragile landscapes.

The complex and often opaque structure of corporate ownership across the tourism industries, the drivers of growth and systemic capital accumulation thus present a formidable obstacle to radical change. The pursuit of growth and concomitant expansion of urban development for tourism, with all the prospects for profiteering that this entails, often occurs at the expense of productive investment and acts as a substitute for innovation that may boost productivity and create the potential for a more inclusive tourism development model. While the land on which resorts and hotels are built can be subject to restrictive environmental ordinances to prevent the degradation of ecosystems, the corporate assets (hotel and resort companies) themselves are mobile and harder to regulate. Thus, any kind of paradigmatic shift in tourism will require a challenge to/dismantling of the tourism-real estate nexus that underpins the political economy of tourism in many, although by no means all, destinations worldwide. Neither are cities, whose urban property markets have increasingly proven to be lucrative investment vehicles, immune to the destabilising effects of speculative property capital.

The transition to sustainable, equitable and resilient tourism economies is thus not simply a question of fine-tuning regulation and imposing limits to tourism growth (although this may well be part of the solution). There is little use talking of “rebuilding” or indeed socialising tourism, if inequitable property relations, corporate ownership structures and exploitative labour practices are beyond critical scrutiny. The limited horizons of inclusive growth and use of technocratic digital technologies to manage “Covid-secure” post-pandemic mobilities, comprise neither adequate nor indeed sufficiently democratic responses to the range of structural problems exposed by the crisis. Technocratic, data-driven “solutions” reduce the question of the sustainable rebuilding of destinations and equitable tourism economies to one of choosing the correct algorithm. This approach risks promoting a technocratic, corporate-managed sustainable tourism in the absence of democratically agreed principles and values around which to frame the intended outcomes from tourism development going forward into the post-pandemic era.

Conclusion

The precise pathways to a sustainable recovery and equitable transformation will not be linear but will vary according to the local structure and organisation of tourism capital and its relationship to the changing tectonics of global macro-economic forces. The transition away from a growth-led extractive model of tourism capital accumulation will not be addressed through socialised, community-based tourism business models alone, many of which have existed at the margins of the capitalist political economy of tourism for some time (See Saglio, 1979). Rather, it presupposes coordinated transnational action to control disruptive flows of capital and diminish the power of predatory profit-making at a wider level. This will also necessarily involve state-managed transitions towards decarbonised, intermodal transport systems prioritising the training and re-deployment of workers from fossil-fuel dependent transport industries (see Descamps, 2020). Only in this way can the tensions between tourism growth and ecological limits, often invoked by developers to seek legitimacy for corporate-led tourism projects, be dissolved (see Boissevain & Theuma, 1998),

Tourism investments must be severed from the short-term logics of speculative real estate through the strengthening of democratic public control over tourism finance, resources and the productive capacity of destination themselves. For example, *land*, a relatively immobile resource and much sought-after commodity by financiers and tourism developers, can be brought under more equitable, distributed forms of ownership while remaining open to commercial use (see Christophers, 2019, p. 47). This will involve more than localising destination value-chains or simply calling for the inclusion of marginalised voices into existing decision-making apparatuses. It implies a progressive and robust politics of intervention at all scales in order to challenge and disempower the nexus of commercial-financial-political interests which have abetted the relentless growth of tourism and expansion of capital accumulation through land grabs, privatisations, regulatory liberalisation and real estate-driven strategies of tourism development. The re-engineering of their respective city economies away from speculative tourism and real estate driven growth by city councils in Barcelona and Lisbon, as well as support for restrictions on cruise ship docking in Key West, suggest that activist citizens, particularly where robust social movements exist, are prepared to challenge some of the most egregious consequences of untrammelled tourism growth if not the logic of profit-driven tourism economies altogether. However, the socialisation of tourism benefit structures cannot be sustained via the efforts of activist citizen coalitions to simply constrain the power of capital, but necessarily involve building alliances with those who labour in the tourism industries to democratise the economy itself.

Any challenge to the monopolistic concentrations of corporate power, speculative finance and offshore capital that flow through tourism destinations will almost certainly involve sustained resistance from capitalist business interests and perhaps the state itself. However, it should be recognised that much of the private wealth generated from tourist activity by corporate investors, landlords and speculators is in fact *collectively* produced out of a dynamic assemblage of use and exchange values while simultaneously obscuring the class character of capital accumulation (see Young & Markham, 2019). Many of those who “produce” the value that contributes to tourism revenues are often not directly involved in the “tourism industry” at all. For example, it is estimated that the fishermen in the town of Hastings, England, contribute £5m to the local economy through their mere presence (Toynbee, 2018).

With this in mind, there is potential scope to democratise the gains from the tourism economy through cooperative forms of ownership and equitable models of tourism revenue-sharing (e.g., Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2020). One such model exists in the form of the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend through which all Alaskan citizens receive an annual payment from the state (Widerquist, 2013). However, where this fund is based upon a portfolio of state-managed investments derived from oil and gas revenues, a similar annual collective “destination dividend” could be used to provide a guaranteed income to all residents of a destination regardless of whether or not they are employed in the tourism industry. A dividend of this kind could potentially help to socialise the revenues and enhance the distributive outcomes arising from tourism activities while reducing the pressures on destination ecosystems borne out of the competitive struggle to capture and exploit strategic tourism resources.

Despite scattered signs of change, the potential for socialising tourism beyond a few localised settings remains severely constrained by the current concentrations of economic power underpinning monopoly-digital capitalism and its influence on the political economy of tourism at all levels. Moreover, many of the prosed alternatives to the dominant paradigm of corporate-mass tourism remain disconnected from a more rigorous inspection of political economy and the contested class relations that shape and determine the creation of value and distributive outcomes in tourism. To paraphrase climate activist Bill McKibben (2020), progressive voices in tourism may have begun to win the argument concerning the need for an urgent transformation of tourism but are far from winning the struggle to catalyse the transformation towards a more ecologically sustainable and democratically-controlled tourism political economy.

Capitalist tourism development – in all its variants, not merely its "neoliberal" form - cannot be understood simply as a "project" consciously engineered by corporations and their political handmaidens which can therefore be transformed through an appeal to alternative *values* alone. Neither can a radical and just transition away from corporate-managed and extractive models of tourism development and the disciplinary constraints imposed on progressive governance by financial markets focus solely on questions of restraining tourism growth (much of which in any case derives from speculative financial and digital transactions rather than productive investment) or advancing its putative opposite, degrowth. Rather it is necessary to dismantle the grip of unrelenting logic of profit-making and destructive competition that leads to the massively uneven concentrations of wealth and environmental degradation through the constant expansion of tourism. Such a strategy must be built on a platform of the democratic civic and public management of tourism's material growth within agreed limits, in conjunction with the socialisation of the assets and cooperative use of the resources upon which tourism and associated local livelihoods depend. The COVID-19 pandemic has visibly revealed the manifold injustices and vulnerabilities in global capitalism as well as highlighted much of the hubris upon which the ceaseless expansion of growth and profit-making driving mass travel and tourism has been built. Now is not the time to surrender to the seductive deceit of pragmatism – it is time for radical change.

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