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## **COVID-19: from temporary de-globalisation to a re-discovery of tourism?**

### **Abstract**

The processes of globalisation and time-space compression, driven mainly by the neoliberal agenda and the advancement of various space-shrinking technologies, have markedly re-shaped the world over the last 75 years in an almost unchallenged manner. Amongst the most significant outcomes of these processes have been the popularisation of international travel and the accompanying global expansion of the tourism industry. As the first major force ever to effectively stop (or even reverse) globalisation and time-space compression, the COVID-19 outbreak has also put on hold the whole travel and tourism industry. In this respect, the tourism as we knew it just a few months ago has ceased to exist. Although the price the world is paying for this is enormous, the temporary processes of de-globalisation offer the tourism industry an unprecedented opportunity for a re-boot – an unrepeatable chance to re-develop in line with the tenets of sustainability and to do away with various ‘dark sides’ of tourism’s growth such as environmental degradation, economic exploitation or overcrowding. However, the path of re-development and transformation which the global tourism production system will follow once the COVID-19 crisis has been resolved is yet to be determined.

### **Key words**

Globalisation, time-space compression, de-globalisation, tourism development, creative destruction, path-creation, sustainable tourism

The processes of globalisation and time-space compression that accelerated after World War Two have significantly reshaped the world over the last 75 years. Relative distances between places have markedly shrunk, societies have been stretched across space and time, the pace of life has increased and the significance of spatial barriers to economic, social, cultural and political relations has largely diminished (Agnew 2001, Dodgshon 1999, Harvey 1989, Warf 2011).

Two major forces have been driving these changes – the neoliberal agenda rooted in the Bretton Woods system and the emergence and popularisation of advanced transportation and communication technologies – the so-called space-shrinking technologies (Agnew 2001, Harvey 1989). While the former fostered a gradual withdrawal of the state from economic activity, sparked an elimination of barriers to foreign direct investment and stimulated increased liberalisation of international trade, the latter intensified the exchange of information and knowledge and the cross-

border movement of goods and people to unprecedented levels (Agnew 2001, Dicken 2011, Warf 2011). The processes of de-colonisation from the 1950s onwards and the disintegration of the former communist bloc in 1989 facilitated all these processes further. As a result, the world has become more interconnected than even before (Dicken 2011) and, although some disruptions to these tendencies did occur (e.g. the financial crisis of 2008-2009), no major force has effectively challenged or reversed globalisation. Until now.

While the COVID-19 outbreak in China in January 2020 was initially seen to be a local issue (albeit its worldwide economic effects were recognised very soon), the spread of the virus to other parts of the world in February and March 2020 started a major global crisis of an unprecedented scale and nature. As UN Secretary General António Guterres observed, the world is now facing the most serious global test since World War Two (BBC 2020a). The various extra-ordinary measures which many national authorities have resorted to in order to stop the plague have changed the world in a way that would have been entirely unthought of a few months ago. National administrations quickly realised that the ease of travel – one of the comforts of modern life in the era of globalisation – is a main factor facilitating the outbreak. As a result, national borders have been closed, cross-border movement of people has been stopped and international transportation has been suspended. All these measures have been accompanied by adequate domestic efforts ranging from banning mass events and encouraging people to self-isolate to restrictive lockdowns imposed on entire countries. Since all these measures have inevitably led to putting many forms of economic activity (mainly services) on hold, national administrations have concomitantly faced a challenge of saving their respective economies.

As a consequence, the world is now experiencing a temporary de-globalisation. Due to heavy travel restrictions and the suspension of international travel, geographical barriers between places have re-emerged, relative distances have increased and remote places have again become truly remote. Even though advanced communication technologies still interlink places and communities virtually, thus helping numerous individuals to stay in touch with their families and friends in these difficult times, most of other processes of time-space compression have been stopped or partly reversed. Moreover, the COVID-19 outbreak has also largely undermined the neoliberal agenda. As the market seems incapable of resolving the crisis (at least on its own), the outbreak has led to a stronger revival of the nation state than during the financial crisis of 2008-2009 (Dicken 2011). Indeed, national authorities are yet again proving to be a much more effective mechanism for implementing necessary life – and economy – saving solutions than what the market could offer. This is evident not only in reinstating border controls, but most importantly in developing far-reaching anti-crisis

economic packages for firms and workers – even in those countries where governments are known to strongly favour free market ideals (see BBC 2020b for the example of the UK).

The unquestionable importance of public health services in fighting the pandemic and the strategic role which other state-controlled industries play in mitigating its effects attest to the revived prominence of the nation state even further. For example, despite passenger aviation having been liberalised and deregulated, many national airlines have been called on by their respective governments to bring residents home from places where non-national carriers were no longer flying (see Spiegel International 2020 for the example of Lufthansa in Germany and Rudziński 2020 for the example of LOT Polish Airlines in Poland). The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the limits of the neoliberal orthodoxy, thus effectively undermining another important force that has been driving globalisation and time-space compression to date.

One of the most significant manifestations of globalisation over the last half a century has been the popularisation of international tourism. While the revolutionary advancements in transport (mainly the development of the jet aircraft) fostered the increase in international tourist traffic from 25 million in 1950 to over 1.3 billion in 2017 (UNWTO 2010, 2018), the cross-border expansion of capitalist relations and the dominant logic of capitalist accumulation allowed the tourism production system to gain a global extent (Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009). Not only have various tourism firms expanded internationally (mainly in transportation and in the hospitality sector), but also, at the same time, peripheral places previously unexplored by tourists have been increasingly drawn into the tourism nexus (Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009). Consequently, tourism developed to become one of the largest and most global industries, and, as Williams (2009) observed, this development seemed unstoppable, even by various tragic events such as wars, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters, or by major economic downturns such as the oil crisis in the 1970s.

The COVID-19 outbreak, however, seems to be a stronger force. Since all the important factors that made international travel easy and allowed the tourism industry to spread globally have now been stopped, the processes of de-globalisation have engulfed tourism almost entirely. The closure of hotels, restaurants, entertainment centres, and various tourist attractions has put on hold the whole tourism and travel industry. Simultaneously, with international travel largely suspended, and domestic travel also largely restricted, distances between ‘home’ and ‘away’ have grown to an extent that they are often impossible to overcome. As a result, tourism as we knew it just a few months ago has ceased to exist.

Tourism as we knew it, however, was a mixed bag. Despite bringing many positive economic effects for economies and communities (e.g., in 2017 tourism supported 10% of all jobs worldwide and accounted for 10% of the world's GDP; UNWTO 2018) and providing societies with an opportunity to travel and experience other places more easily than ever before, the global development of tourism also proved to have various negative effects (Hall and Page 2014, Mowforth and Munt 2009, Niewiadomski 2017, Sharpley and Telfer 2002, Williams 2009). Environmental degradation (e.g. Gössling and Hall 2006, Gössling and Peeters 2015), tourism as neo-colonialism (e.g. Hall and Tucker 2004, Tucker and Akama 2012), overcrowding and various other negative social impacts of tourism on host places (e.g. Popp 2012, Santana-Jimenez and Hernandez 2011, Tovar and Lockwood 2008) are only selected 'dark sides' of tourism's growth. Although the idea of sustainable development, formulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the 1980s (WCED 1987), fostered a pursuit of more sustainable forms of tourism and sparked a vast number of ambitious initiatives and strategies (see e.g., UNWTO 2003), the progress on the ground made on this front to date has been far from sufficient.

In this respect, it is conceivable to look at the current crisis with a degree of optimism. Although the price we are paying for this is enormous – measured in thousands of lives, millions of lost jobs, and a corresponding number of many other personal tragedies – the temporary processes of de-globalisation are giving the global tourism industry a unique chance for a re-boot – an unrepeatability opportunity to re-develop in line with the tenets of sustainability. To use the language of evolutionary economic geography (EEG), the world is experiencing a major shock – a true criticality that is likely to shift the existing system to a new configuration (Boschma and Martin 2007, 2010). The key question that still remains is: What is this new configuration going to be? Or, in the words of Schumpeter (1942, in: Boschma and Martin 2007): How 'creative' will this 'destruction' be? While we already know what is being 'destroyed', we are yet to see what will be 'created' to fill the void.

Once the crisis has been resolved, tourism and all of its sub-sectors will face unlimited path-shaping opportunities. If the opportunities are taken, we will see a meta-path-creation across the global tourism production system. The key point is to ensure that the changes will be for the better.

The very apt comment that "the world had to stop in order not to fall" (author unknown) is also fully pertinent to the case of tourism. There is a lot of evidence that in many respects tourism growth had gone too far and down a wrong path. Now that it has stopped, there is time for

reflection. Indeed, the crisis has created an exceptional window of opportunity which all advocates of sustainable tourism could not even dream about a few months ago – an opportunity to make tourism more environmentally sustainable, less exploitative and greedy, more respectful to host communities and their cultures and traditions, and more mindful. Fortunately, the springboard for this in the form of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (see UNWTO 2017) already exists, although undoubtedly more work needs to be done and a lot of good will is required to make it happen.

Perhaps there is a lot of wishful thinking here. Perhaps there are already corporations, governments and various other organisations lying in wait for all the opportunities to pursue their selfish political and economic interests which the current shock might create, even at the expense of those negatively affected by the pandemic the most. As Klein (2007) demonstrated, such risk is real and should not be ignored. The opportunity is still there, however, and it will be down to everyone involved (i.e., the tourism sector, policy-makers, tourists themselves, experts and academia) to inform the new path of growth as much as possible and make the post-COVID-19 tourism more economically equitable, more socially just, and more environmentally sustainable.

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