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The paradox of tourism extremes. Excesses and restraints in times of COVID-19

Claudio Milano  ^{a,b,c} and Ko Koens  ^{c,d,e}

^aDepartment of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Barcelona, Spain; ^bOstelea Tourism Management School, Barcelona, Spain; ^cFaculty of Creative Business, Inholland University of Applied Sciences, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; ^dAcademy for Hotel & Facility, Breda University of Applied Sciences, Breda, The Netherlands; ^eSchool of Tourism and Hospitality Management, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to highlight underlying issues of the tourism system that have led to tourism extremes of too much or too little tourism. Five phases are recognized that reflect different ways of dealing with too much tourism over time, after which the impact of a sudden lack of tourism is investigated in light of future renewal processes. This discussion highlights the remarkable capacity of the tourism industry to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances and crises, even when these cause anguish to individuals and within societies at large. The paper thus seeks to contextualize the current discussions regarding the transformation of tourism post COVID-19. It highlights the complexity of changing a tourism that multiple stakeholders depend on or have grown accustomed to. To come to a more balanced tourism, it is necessary to not only come up with alternative visions and strategies, but also to engage with the political economy nature of tourism development. A future research agenda should therefore also discuss facets of entangled power, social exclusion, inequalities and class differences to come to new reference points of what actually constitutes a more inclusive tourism success.

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Introduction

Historically, placemaking has fostered the conversion of places into destinations. In terms of public policies, tourism growth has represented the perpetual need to create new references of consumption, expenditures and fresh capital accumulation (Bianchi, 2018; Britton, 1991). In this way, tourism offered new scenarios for mobilities, mobile assemblages of humans, technologies and capital to shape the complexity of contemporary societies and help deal with their economic struggles. The touristification of everyday life, that has grown in parallel with the commodification and reinvention of 'local' and 'localhood' for new consumer behaviour, is an example of how places previously deemed uninteresting for visitors now could be used for commercial gain (Russo & Richards, 2016). The 'live like a local' slogan, as used by tourism companies within the new frontier of the sharing economy after the financial crisis of 2008, epitomizes this development. Such phenomena are an invitation to rethink the elsewhere notion in the contemporary tourism experience. At the same time, the consequences of the touristification of everyday life can be related to the overexploitation of resources and the

CONTACT Claudio Milano  claudiomilanouab@gmail.com

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liberalization of common goods, markets and services in society. As tourists, leisure and events started to compete more with other city usages, this led to place changes, as facilities and services that are commonly used by other city users gave way to those focused more on visitors (Mansilla & Milano, 2019; McKercher et al., 2015). This has brought about social discontent and led to the booming of the neologism overtourism to describe a variety of tourism excesses, with little notion of the nuances and differences that exist and underlie them (Koens et al., 2018).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in Europe revealed another side of an excessive reliance on tourism as a source of income, and the subsequent organization to accommodate its growth. Nearly overnight the world went from a situation of overtourism to no tourism, which has led many people who depend on the visitor economy for their income to suffer financially. Similar to the debates on overtourism, media reporting on the current situation is narrow in its focus and fails to shed light on the multifaceted and complex picture of colliding interests and international impacts on a highly localized scale. Although academia has quickly engaged with this issue, much more so than with the overtourism debate, it remains unclear what tourism will look like in the future (Gössling et al., 2021). A further understanding of the impacts of both types of extremes can help to get a clearer perspective on how to come to a more inclusive and balanced form of post COVID-19 tourism development, which sidesteps potential pitfalls and helps regenerate destinations in an equitable justice way (Brouder et al., 2020).

Methodology

This paper aims to provide such an analysis by means of three interrelated topics. First, it analyses the evolution of critical discourses on excesses of too much tourism, as it provides an analysis of different stages and theoretical frameworks which have been used to assess tourism's impacts. Second, the paper offers an overview on different theoretical and empirical approaches on tourism crises and challenges, prior to and including the COVID-19 pandemic as well as their impact on tourism development. Finally, the paper looks at the political economy of tourism in relation to issues of too much and too little tourism. Taken together this allows the paper to provide insights and a short research agenda with regards to shedding light on and achieving the rapidly unfolding challenges in tourism research resulting from the pandemic.

The approach taken is that of a narrative review of relevant existing literature. It focuses on an analysis and interpretation from a theoretical and contextual perspective of the three topics mentioned above. This includes a synthesis of different topics and strands of literature (including literature from beyond the Anglo-Saxon academic research community). Narrative reviews have been found to be particularly suitable to tackle broad, more abstract questions and underlying processes that provoke thought (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006). By interpreting information from multiple sources and highlighting specific evidence put forward in these sources, new insights are gained that can help increase understanding on the issue, including underlying relevant processes (Perkins et al., 2020).

To ensure the quality of the work, predominantly peer-reviewed academic journal articles were used, with the exception of a small number of relevant and influential other sources. To synthesize information, papers were analysed to determine relationships between the studies and results were translating into one to find (in)congruencies and create synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This interpretative approach has allowed us to shed light on historical and current perspectives on tourism extremes within tourism studies, as well as an outlook for future debates.

The well-trodden path of too much tourism: a historical perspective

Overtourism is not a new phenomenon and it is necessary to recognize the seminal work that, since the 1970s and 1980s, has warned of the side effects and externalities related to tourism. When it comes to understanding the processes and impacts of excessive tourism growth, the roots of the renewed critical debate on tourism dispossession ought to be based upon these 'radical scholars

who have long critically analysed the socio-ecological costs of tourism' (Fletcher et al., 2019, p. 1758). To clarify the changing nature of the debate on these tourism excesses, we recognize five distinct, but overlapping phases: exploration, analysis and initial activism, management approaches, reframing as overtourism, and beyond tourism. These phases exemplify the changing dominant lenses with which tourism excesses have been looked at over time.

Exploration

From early on in the discussion on tourism excesses, it was suggested that destinations may not always be well served by the arrival or increase of tourists (MacCannell, 1976; Turner & Ash, 1975). Initial ethnographic research described the early phenomena of 'hippy' tourists in the 1970s popularizing destinations off the beaten path such as Valle Grande del Rey in La Gomera island in Spain (Macleod, 2004) or Arembepe in Brazil (Kottak, 1992). These tourism ethnographies allowed for the observation of everyday life changes and transformations of host communities' due to the rapid tourism growth, which led to what can now be considered 'classic' works and models on local perspectives on tourism development (Boissevain, 1979; Doxey, 1975; Pizam, 1978; Smith, 1977). The critical stance of such work is reflected in provocative and controversial discussions, in which the arrival of 'alternative' tourists, backpackers and drifters was described as a 'pious hope or trojan horse' (Butler, 1989). In a city context work on the rise and decline of UK coastal tourism cities led to what may be the most cited model in tourism studies: the Tourism Area Life Cycle (Butler, 1980). What unites this body of work is that it sought to shed light on the side effects of the uncontrolled tourism growth, a theme that was much more developed in an urban context in the 1980s.

Analysis and initial activism

As it became acknowledged as a valid field of study, urban tourism studies experienced a rich period of empirical research in the 1980s, as academics furthered their analyses of tourism excesses by measuring and quantifying tourism impacts (Ashworth, 1989; Jansen-Verbeke, 1986). This resulted initially in concepts such as carrying capacity, which relates tourism impacts strongly to numbers of visitors, drawing parallels to the overuse of natural resources on the land (Canestrelli & Costa, 1991; O'Reilly, 1986). Possibly as a result of this emphasis on tourism numbers, the most commonly derided type of tourism soon became so-called 'mass tourism', where large numbers of visitors come together for leisure purposes, either as a collective (e.g. at beaches) or in individual groups (e.g. coaches). Even in some of the seminal works of critical academic literature, such tourism is seen less desirable than tourists that 'travel' to enrich their lives and explore new ways of thinking (Krippendorff, 1987). Later work questioned the overtly numerical approach of carrying capacity and, instead advocated more value-driven frameworks to encourage dialogue among those in destinations about what is important and how to protect it (McCool & Lime, 2001).

Around the same time, research also started to draw more attention again to the rise of protests and social unrest in relation to tourism, especially in Europe (Boissevain, 1996), also in relation to ecological activism (Kousis, 2000). In a sense, the political economy of tourism in the Mediterranean represents a great example of this combination of approaches (Bianchi & Selwyn, 2017). The unplanned tourism developments of Spanish regions such as the Costa del Sol were already described in some of the earlier pioneering works, as a form of colonization (Jurdao, 1979; Mandly Robles, 1977), and the Mediterranean region and Spanish autonomous communities have long served as an emblematic example of how mass tourism negatively impacts on local communities (Gaviria, 1974; Pi-Sunyer, 1989). However, throughout the years the legacy of this work has continued to seep through in overtly critical work regarding tourism in this region (Blázquez, Cañada, et al., 2011; Boissevain & Selwyn, 2004; Buades et al., 2012; Cañada & Murray, 2019; Murray, 2015), even when the tides turned towards more management-oriented output that better fit with more (neo)liberal governance doctrines.

Management approaches

From the early 2000s onwards, a more managerial approach was taken towards tourism excesses, in that the emphasis shifted from being critical to tourism towards accommodating growth in a way that prevents or mitigates negative impacts, for example by extending visitor capacity or by stimulating a better understanding of local stakeholders (Saarinen, 2006). After the economic crisis of 2008, this perspective became even more dominant, as tourism was hailed in society as a ‘clean’ industry with continuous growth potential (Russo & Scarnato, 2018). What is striking in this period is the apparent depoliticization of tourism, as emphasis was put on the personal responsibility of companies, and more importantly, individual tourists. This approach, favoured by tourism organizations like UNWTO, allowed for ill-defined concepts like pro-poor tourism and responsible tourism to be made to fit with the neoliberal growth agenda (Scheyvens, 2007). As such, lofty slogans such as ‘Better Places to Live, Better Places to Visit’ were able to become a staple among practitioners seeking (academic) guidance on how to develop tourism in a responsible and sustainable way, even when in practice these developments can be argued to oppose each other (Burrai et al., 2019).

After the economic crisis of 2008, Smart City approaches furthered this managerial thinking, as they were seen as a pragmatic solution to many tourism problems (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013). This ignored the political economy nature of smart city discourses, which reflect and reinforce the existing socio-political system aimed at economic growth, often by means of generic supply-driven data solutions (García Hernández et al., 2019). Indeed, in practice such approaches have strengthened instrumental thinking among practitioners or even technological solutionism, with insufficient attention to the political and social aspects of tourism impacts (Cohen & Hopkins, 2019). Ironically, it can be argued that technological innovations were also major contributors to what has been termed ‘overtourism’, as digital short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb, online low-cost airlines and social media disrupted the tourism industry.

Reframing as overtourism

A fourth phase in the work on tourism excesses came in the form of the overtourism debate, which had been simmering for several years, but appeared to explode when the term overtourism was popularized in 2017. Whilst the emphasis on overtourism has been on European destinations, there is also a strong literature in Iberoamerican academia and the Global South, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. The mass tourism model of the Mediterranean region was exported to these regions through the internationalization of Spanish hotel companies (Buades, 2009). This phenomenon has even been called *Latinoamericanization* (Murray, 2015), Atlantic Leap (Aledo et al., 2013) or *Balearization* (Blázquez, Murray, et al., 2011). Often visited locations at mature tourist destinations have received the most attention when it comes to protests against tourism pressure (Milano & Mansilla, 2018) and overtourism is sometimes equated with mass tourism. However, secondary cities and new tourist destinations now also report side effects of tourism excesses. In fact, the impact of tourism on destinations at the edge of beaten paths of global tourism by modern day ‘alternative tourists’, may be just as dramatic (Maitland & Newman, 2014; Matoga & Pawłowska, 2018).

Initial contributions on overtourism consisted of descriptive cases and reinterpretations of destinations using existing concepts such as carrying capacity, Doxey’s Irridex model, or the Tourism Areas Life Cycle. Recently a number of studies have also started to contribute to new theoretical conceptualizations of the causes of overtourism and how to deal with it (Clancy, 2019; Koens et al., 2021; Milano, Cheer, et al., 2019; Peeters et al., 2018). The critical claims against tourism-oriented policies on a destination level coincide with a renewed urgency of the global climate justice movement. Special emphasis has been given to the aviation sector and the unsustainable emissions of tourism air transportation (Dubois et al., 2011). In essence, the mitigation dilemma and the climate emergency share underlying principles relating to finite natural and/or human resources

(Gössling et al., 2010). Paradoxically, some have raised concerns that the overtourism debate has been so dominant that these other, highly relevant tourism concerns, have gone somewhat under the radar (Aall & Koens, 2019), even when both argue for a profound paradigm shift that goes beyond the tourism industry (Steiger et al., 2019).

Beyond tourism

Within the discussion on overtourism, it has become increasingly obvious that the main concerns with regards to tourism excesses are not only related with the externalities and imbalances provoked by tourism itself, but rather with deeply rooted inequalities that are entrenched in our societies (Koens et al., 2018). In a sense, tourism amplifies and boosts such disparities. The contemporary development of increasing wealth and the resulting mobility of certain groups of society has reduced symbolic and physical distances, while digitization has provided increasing opportunities for connecting with like-minded others. The rise of overtourism cannot be seen separate from these perspectives. As such, new theoretical developments with regards to tourism excesses have crossed over from other disciplinary backgrounds to the tourism literature. The theoretical frameworks and perspectives arising from this work have only just been started to be applied to tourism but may contribute to a more detailed comprehension. In particular, three approaches have started to enrich this debate and help gain a better understanding on how to observe and analyse overtourism (Milano, Cheer, et al., 2019).

Firstly, contemporary placemaking of tourist destinations represent a resourceful way for accumulation of capital and the consequent spatial fix (Harvey, 1981), through tourism-focused and real estate investments. These spatial solutions enriched the debate on the change in the use of city and the flourishing of urban tourism. In a similar way, the idea of social transitional change through design, stemming from innovation studies and urban planning has drawn attention to the need for a more systemic perspective and integral city design, which starts with building coalitions and creating shared ownership, also with stakeholders from outside of tourism (Koens et al., 2021, 2020). Secondly, the social unrest, discontent, resistance and protest in tourist cities have repositioned many grassroots organization claims (Colomb & Novy, 2016) and the foundation of the SET Network of Southern European Cities against Touristification (Milano, Novelli, et al., 2019). This phenomenon shows the background of social movements and grassroots organizations in this region and the roots of the overtourism debate in Southern European countries. More than an academic trend, the emergence of this debate has been fostered by a bottom-up approach of social movements, neighbourhood associations and grassroots organizations. Thirdly, the mobility paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) and the blurry frontiers of post-structural binary oppositions in tourism (Cohen & Cohen, 2012) added new layers of complexity in the comprehension of coexistence and copresence in tourism spaces. These new forms of mobilities changed the way in which places are performed, used and consumed (Urry, 2012). Examples of this are digital nomadism and lifestyle migrants in tourist destinations and the so-called residential tourism (O'Reilly, 2013).

In concordance with these approaches, the last decade has seen a rapid increase of academic discussion on a degrowth discourse in tourism, as a political and economical alternative to the tourism growth ideology (Andriotis, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2019; Hall, 2009). In the context of this paper, it is important to reiterate that tourism degrowth argues for a political paradigm shift towards a more balanced redistribution of fluxes, benefits and rights among different players and agents. This is different from promoting no-tourism conditions that we have seen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises, as further outlined in the next section.

The other side of the coin: too few tourists and the renewal debate

Issues stemming from a (sudden) lack of tourism (i.e. undertourism) have not been reported on as much as excesses stemming from too much tourism. However, tourist dependent destinations

suffered under a sudden absence of tourists long before the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. related to safe and security issues and political unrest). For instance, there is a body of literature on crises in tourism settings (Ritchie, 2004) while previous studies on disease and health outbreaks also have highlighted crises and short-term impacts on tourism (McKercher & Chon, 2004; Novelli et al., 2018). Indeed, these disruptive episodes and the consequent travel limitations or even restrictions to such areas have caused crises before, even when these were mostly on a local scale, temporary and in non-industrialized countries. Analysis on undertourism conditions in the Global South highlighted issues ranging from vertical growth, foreign investments, dependency and vulnerability since the 1980s (Britton, 1982; Ioannides, 1995). Most of the concerns were related to the fragility of such territories and 'off-the-beaten-track' destinations. Here tourism led to transformations of land use and the physical landscape as well as conflicts with local dependency cultural norms and values, with destinations struggling at least initially after tourism declined. To provide theoretical grounding to this work, neo-Marxist theory has been used, particularly the uneasy power relations resulting from the unequal interdependence among local actors, international business and tourists in a global tourism geographies development (Mowforth & Munt, 1998).

With regards to tourism crises and recovery processes, it is useful to view tourism as a dynamic functional network with a wide variety of industry stakeholders in that, as certain businesses go bankrupt, others pull together to overcome the effects of the crisis and new ones arise to find their place in the reshuffled tourism ecosystem (Scott et al., 2008). Even so, in response to crises the emphasis appears to be on market-led and supply-oriented strategies, promotion and marketing approaches in order to boost tourism development after a crisis. There is precedent that large tourism companies, most notably airlines, seek government bailouts to continue operations (Goetz & Vowles, 2009). Indeed, this happened again after the COVID-19 pandemic, when, among others, airlines and Booking.com received millions or even billions of euros in support measures (Dube et al., 2021). At the same time, support for smaller businesses, many of which were ill-equipped to cope with a crisis of this nature, was much more limited. As such a great number of local businesses often go bankrupt or are sold off, either to outsiders, or other local entrepreneurs, which have been able to wither the difficult tides and seek to expand their business (Cushnahan, 2004). This last point highlights that, whilst undertourism and crises provoke severe rise in inequalities, negative impacts and suffering for individuals and societies at large, they also provide opportunities. As such, not all crises are tourism crises *per se*. If anything, the industry has shown itself remarkably capable of changing to fit with rapidly changing circumstances through spatial fixes (Harvey, 1981).

The current pandemic crisis has led to outpourings of hopeful transformatory perspectives and degrowth claims by grassroots organizations in popular media and even in academic work (Lew et al., 2020). However, previous crises have more often been used as a way to engrain tourism further in wider economic and social systems, rather than contribute to a positive change. For example, in Mediterranean economies, the period of austerity following the economic crisis of 2008 fostered and stirred a context of uncertainty and broader sense of precariousness. Following the crisis, tourism boomed due to the relative lack of political scrutiny as governments were preoccupied mostly with starting up the economy (Russo & Scarnato, 2018). The crisis also boosted platform capitalism and companies such as Airbnb or Uber. In the post-crisis landscape, these businesses developed faster and to a more extreme extent than previously thought possible, thus changing the face of tourism.

As such, caution is warranted with regards to suggestions that the transitional dynamics that are brought on by crises can be used as a means to instigate systemic change. The current COVID-19 pandemic may be different, given that this is a crisis where travel has also been identified as a cause, rather than merely as a victim. Also, the global aviation industry, a key driver of tourism, has been severely impacted by the pandemic and its recovery is going much slower than initially expected (Dube et al., 2021). Thus there may be more time and impetus to make fundamental changes to the tourism system, compared to previous crises. At the same time the lack of tourism due to the pandemic has also already led to global and local anxiety about economic consequences,

unemployment and tourist tax loss. Politicians and policymakers are already under intense pressure to ‘kickstart’ the tourism economy. If such a tourism recovery strategy will be pursued without a proper evaluation and change of priorities with regards to the future of tourism development (Gössling et al., 2021), a paradigm shift with regards to the political economy of tourism and a systemic change of the tourism industry after the pandemic is unlikely.

The political economy nature of tourism (re)development

Only a relatively limited set of work has dealt with the nature of tourism as a power display (Bianchi, 2018; Mosedale, 2011; Nogués-Pedregal, 2019). However, at least some of the negative impacts of tourism can be related to the way in which tourism mobility has historically served high income classes with the opportunity to consume territories of others for purposes of leisure or business. As tourism produces new meanings and creates new senses of place, it also destroys existing ones that may be equally valid. Far from being a mere leisure class phenomenon, the broader political economy nature of tourism concerns is linked with multiple agents and aspects that go beyond the realm of tourism. Research has already shed light on the dialectic between the right to housing and the *Airbnbization* of housing markets (Freytag & Bauder, 2018; Mermet, 2017), public space privatization (Sans & Russo, 2016), commercial or tourist gentrification (Blázquez et al., 2019; Cocola-Gant, 2015), gender equality (Cole, 2018) and employment and decent work (Cañada, 2018). Housing, public space, common goods, gender, environmental concerns, work and employment are only some of the transversal areas related with tourism excesses. Tourism-related issues and externalities are interwoven with many aspects of everyday life. To be able to deal with these issues, they need to be added to a broader political agenda in order to look and reshape the wider mobility justice contemporary paradigm.

At the same time, while discussions questioning side effects of tourism excesses such as class struggle, inequalities, division of labour and dependency remain important, other issues need to be added to the agenda (Bianchi, 2018), as they are very much related to tourism excesses too. The fluidity of human mobility and phenomena such as digital nomadism (D’Andrea, 2006), lifestyle migrations (Janoschka & Haas, 2013), seasonal tourism workers, ‘travelling workers’ and the ‘working tourists’ (Uriely, 2001) and the growing flux of international students (Malet Calvo, 2018) need to be problematized beyond the mere tourism development debate (Cresswell, 2006). This will require a broad analysis of (im)mobile societies complexities and a more wide-ranging analysis that integrates the study of those ‘discourses with agency’ in tourism and beyond (Bianchi, 2009, p. 498).

Indeed, the discussion on the extent to which people should have a right to leisure time requires attention. The democratization of tourism, travel, transport technology developments, and accessible mobilities has fostered broadmindedness and a more profound understanding of cultural pluralism and alterity. This has led organizations like UNWTO to advocate the right to travel as a human right (Gascón, 2019). However, these benefits remain deeply embedded in structural inequalities and class differences. The increase of global socio-economic well-being may have fuelled tourism growth, but it has done little to alter the capital concentration or decrease the structural inequality between tourists and hosts and between different stakeholders at destinations. These still remain at the heart of tourism practices and can be seen as important causes of issues related to both kinds of tourism extremes. In fact, tourism growth may have actually increased inequalities (e.g. for example house owners and investors renting out accommodation for short-term rental services). If tourism and travel is accepted as a right, any policy to reverse the political economy of tourism growth loses legitimacy (Gascón, 2019; McCabe & Diekmann, 2015), even if this may be necessary to prevent excesses.

Discussion and setting the tourism research agenda

As argued in this paper, both overtourism and undertourism, including the current COVID-19 pandemic, are the result of underlying issues of the current tourism political economy, which

increasingly results in paradoxical tourism extremes of too much or too little tourism. As the world has gone from a situation of saturation to one of scarcity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism is in a state of flux. With a cynical hat on, one may even argue that the pandemic has provided a perfect experiment to analyse the impacts of tourism while a more hopeful perspective is that the current situation provides the opportunity to create a better tourism without excesses. The current paper has sought to offer an overview and insights on extremes on both sides of the spectrum. Its contribution to the literature stems from providing a historical perspective on tourism excesses and highlighting underlying causes that can lead to situations of imbalance in tourism development (too much as well as too little), with an eye on helping to better understand the impacts of tourism in a post COVID-19 world. It may also serve as a point of reference for those advocating forms of tourism that are more inclusive and sustainable (Lew et al., 2020), by highlighting difficulties in achieving such a form of tourism mobility.

Our analysis illustrates the problem of tourism is not just a matter of volume, but of extremes, excesses, and sudden change. While too much tourism brings imbalances, capital concentration and inequalities, too little tourism in an area where the system and a great number of stakeholders have grown accustomed or dependent on it, is also harmful for the quality of life in a place. Whilst it may be that tourism needs to become less reliant on the visitor economy in certain places, it is important to beware of the consequences of losing too much tourism too quickly. This can be just as unhealthy and undesirable, as exemplified by the COVID-19 travel restrictions. In addition, the sudden lack of tourism may be an impetus to focus on a quick recovery. Driven by business interests and the desire to bring in tourism taxes to fill municipal budgets, this may bring about an unordered and fast increase of tourism. Unless key issues related to the tourism excesses mentioned above are dealt with, it is a question of when rather than whether tourism mobilities will become problematic again.

In other words, the tourism of the third millennium requires a more balanced mobility and justice. In order to find this steadiness, the main discussion might focus on promoting social justice and recalibrating the political economy of tourism beyond the merely relation with tourism capital development, accumulation and concentration. Tourist fluxes and mobility for leisure purposes have grown rapidly since the 1950s as an expression of mass consumption. Many of the proposed solutions can be blamed for reducing the issues to poor 'management' or individual fallacy, rather than a systemic flaw of the current socio-economic system. In this way attention has continued to be drawn away from the way locations are reshaped predominantly as destinations, rather than as place where different actors can live and thrive together.

When analysing the excesses of tourism and the extremes faced by tourist flows in times of abundance or austerity, elaborations of overtourism, undertourism and/or tourism crises' phenomena often converge with blurry discussions on mobility and immobility, fixity and motion. More than in a dualistic perspective, this relationship should be understood 'as dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices and relational meanings' (Sheller, 2018, p. 28). Currently, tourism mobility extremes are spread in an unequivocally imbalanced way across the globe, carrying with them multiple facets of entangled power, social exclusion, inequalities and class differences that require closer attention. The present crisis has shown the importance of reshaping the global (im)mobility tourism political economy addressing 'the systemic forces of accumulation, constellations of class power and models of innovation that will continue to radically restructure complex, multi-scalar modes of industrial organization and profit extraction in contemporary tourism' (Bianchi, 2018, p. 99). This importance is likely to only increase in the future, given looming crises related to the climate emergency, large numbers of political or environmental refugees, terrorism threats or, on a local scale, urban mobility conflicts. The climate emergency debate has been the prelude of the outbreak of the social movements claims' and the pandemic crisis induced global no-tourism, forced de-acceleration and physical immobility. These debates open up new physical and symbolic spaces of tourism disputes.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic may introduce a political window of opportunity to enable tourism to recover in a more balanced way, an absence of clear alternative visions and strategies may mean incumbent interests and short-term concerns are likely to prevail (Loorbach & Lijnis Huffenreuter, 2013). As an example of this, the concept of degrowth can be looked at. Whilst the concept has started to gain importance among social movements and tourism scholars (Fletcher et al., 2019) and has provided a theoretically rich and conceptually highly engaging debate, it has struggled to catch on within the industry, or even among other stakeholders and policymakers.

The lack of political will to engage with degrowth may be because it gets perceived, incorrectly, as an extreme form of anti-tourism. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has already been described by critics as an example to highlight how a systematic implementation of degrowth would lead to disaster for the sector and those who derive a living from it (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). By creating a dualistic perspective of overtourism vs. degrowth and no-tourism, it becomes impossible to create any sort of balanced perspective that engrains the complexity and political perspectives that are inherent to destination development (Boom et al., 2021). In essence, doing this makes a caricature out of the concept and can be seen as a form of depoliticization of the debate, when degrowth and similar alternative visions, are a response to tourism specialization and monoculture, require a profound political approach. On the contrary, degrowth has been clearly delineated as a nuanced concept that can be followed through with clear strategies of economic diversification and reshaping the social and economic fabric of contemporary societies to help tourism to flourish more equative in the long run.

Whilst engaging with stakeholders is key, care needs to be taken not to lose a critical perspective. The tourism industry has long proved itself highly creative in commodifying critical trends into tourist products, as the examples of responsible travel, transformational travel and slow tourism highlight, and this should not be ignored and underestimated. A decade ago, Raoul Bianchi pointed out that tourism studies and the so-called critical turn was not paying enough attention to 'the study of the working of markets, capital and the state in tourism to the very industry-led institutions and analysts it professes to challenge' (2009, p. 498). More than 10 years on, there is still a pending need to rethink the way people travel, how to measure tourism successes and, finally, how to reframe the precariousness, outsourcing, gender inequalities and working conditions in the tourism and leisure sector. As such, the post-COVID crisis and future research agenda on the political economy of tourism should be aligned with these debates.

In sum, fostering a paradigm shift in the contemporary tourism political economy is not an easy task. However, there is a clear need to provide new layers of understanding on the current tourism model which will help to rethink and reshape concepts such as the right to rest and leisure, the right to stay, the structural inequalities and class differences, social exclusion, capital and labour relations and the working conditions within a global (im)mobility political agenda.

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ORCID

Claudio Milano  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4349-367X>

Ko Koens  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2803-0098>

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