**Why the pandemic’s aftermath is a good time to broach a critique of mass tourism’s critics.**

In the previous ATLAS review I wrote about what we have missed (and are still missing) during the Covid 19 pandemic – conviviality. In this one I want to briefly challenge what has rapidly become an orthodoxy in the journals; that a ‘new normal’ post-pandemic should be informed by degrowth, or at least adopt a wary approach to mass tourism and a more leisure mobile society. Many writing on this see Covid-19 as an opportunity to challenge ‘overtourism’ or ‘travelitis’, and hence see some sort of silver lining to the pandemic: a lesson for hubristic humanity. I don’t agree. It has been an unmitigated disaster for the tourism and hospitality industries, and in every other respect.

The lesson that we are supposed to learn from the experience of Covid-19 is that we can get by with less, that having stuff is overrated and that ‘degrowth’ is needed to rebalance the relationship between human culture and the natural world. I see the lesson in very different terms. The pandemic reinforces the need for systematic economic development, which will involve a future oriented, optimistic and liberatory vision for a richer society in which more people can travel to see the world and enjoy all it has to offer.

The expansion of travel and leisure are a product of, and integral to, modern economic development. It is through modern development that pandemics and natural disasters no longer devastate in the way they have in the past. Look at a table of the deaths through pandemics (or fires, floods or famine for that matter) and it becomes clear that, contrary to the purveyors of doom currently lying in the road to stop traffic in the UK, and the elites fawning over Greta Thunberg’s calls to decimate the economy in the formerly great industrial city of Glasgow, systematic industrial development has some redeeming features.

Economic growth (for all its faults and limitations – I am no Panglossian), is less of a problem than lack of economic growth. It is lack of economic development that means for many furlough payments are a pipe dream, vaccines are in short supply and modern healthcare is not available. It is poverty that means so many people live cheek by jowl with nature, relying on wet markets lacking proper refrigeration facilities to buy their food, multiplying the risk of animal to human viral transmission. It is also poverty that means an illegal trade in Pangolins continues despite the possibility that one of these creatures may have been a link in the viral chain. Richer nations, and the growing wealthier classes in poorer nations, go to the supermarket, not a red tooth or claw in site.

Yet it is degrowth, not growth, that has become a motif of modern ‘critical tourism studies’, and an orthodoxy in journals keen to go green with little regard paid to global underdevelopment. For the Political Ecology Network: ‘we cannot afford to return to levels of travel experienced previously, particularly by the wealthiest segment of the world's population. This is not only because of the social unrest overtourism provoked, but also because of the industry's environmental damages […] which were already beyond unsustainable’ (Fletcher, Mas, Blázquez-Salom, & Blanco-Romero, 2020). They argue for ‘voluntary tourism downsizing beyond the current crisis as part of an overarching society-wide degrowth programme in pursuit of post-capitalism’ (ibid.), and call for ‘direct restrictions on the quantity of mass transport– and especially airplanes – reaching a given destination’ (ibid). Other tourism scholars echo degrowth guru Serge Latouche: ‘[d]egrowth must apply to the south as much as to the north if there is to be any chance to stop southern societies from rushing up the blind ally of growth economics’ (2004).

Yet the World Food Program points out that a ‘hunger pandemic’ could eclipse the effects of COVID-19 (Anthem, 2020). Tourism and hospitality employment looms large in this. The economist and poverty expert Branko Milanovic (2017) and Marxist science writer Leigh Phillips (2015) concur that degrowth involves extreme austerity, neither feasible nor beneficial to anyone.

Others make a cultural case for degrowth, highlighting a corrosive ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’ (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Pernecky argues that ‘our momentary loss of tourism may bring with it a renewed appreciation and care, which has been eroded by rampant commodification and comatose consumerism’ (Pernecky, 2020: 657). Everingham and Chassagne (2020) also see COVID-19 as an ‘[o]pportunity to both politically and publicly change our lifestyle, and the failing economic model that supports it’ (Pernecky, 2020: 564).

But tourists are not ‘comatose consumers’ - objects propelled by growth obsessed companies. They are autonomous decision makers, with desires and morals of their own. As I wrote in the previous ATLAS review, the conviviality and pleasures of tourism are worthy of celebration, and will be important in getting society back on its feet post Covid-19.

COVID-19, in particular the impact on regions with a large tourism economy, is also seen as a reason to ‘… re-localize economic activity to make destinations less vulnerable to vicissitudes of global markets …’ (Fletcher et al., 2020). Whilst there is a case for reigning in globalisation (Gray, 2020), COVID-19 has hit all forms of tourism and hospitality, local and national. Relocalisation also carries disastrous implications for societies currently benefiting from international tourism. Better to confront the unequal and uneven growth that characterises the world economy than to stand against growth itself.

The advocates of degrowth are correct that growth is not the *sine qua non* of a free and fulfilled society. But whilst growth is not a sufficient condition for a better tourism, it is a necessary one. Effectively proposing the reversal of economic growth is unrealistic and misguided. It would contribute greatly to poverty, adding to the dire effects of COVID-19. It also involves a retreat from mobility, economies of scale, division of labour, specialisation and scientific innovation. The aftermath of COVID-19 is a good time to broach a critique of the critics.

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