



# Tourism Geographies

An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment

ISSN: 1461-6688 (Print) 1470-1340 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtxg20>

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To cite this article: Mary Mostafanezhad (2020) Covid-19 is an unnatural disaster: Hope in revelatory moments of crisis, *Tourism Geographies*, 22:3, 639-645, DOI: [10.1080/14616688.2020.1763446](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1763446)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1763446>



Published online: 13 May 2020.



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## Covid-19 is an unnatural disaster: Hope in revelatory moments of crisis

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### ABSTRACT

The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has closed borders, grounded planes, quarantined more than half of the world's population, triggered anxiety en masse, and shaken global capitalism to its core. Scholars of the political ecology of disasters have sought to denaturalize so-called "natural" disasters by demonstrating their uneven consequences. Work in the political ecology of health similarly accounts for how risk of illness and disease are socio-economically mediated. While this scholarship has demonstrated the need to contextualize the unequal fallout from ecological and health disasters in ways that reveal the festering wounds of structural inequality, we know much less about how hope is cultivated in moments of crisis. The current revelatory moment of the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to find hope in the rubble through the deconstruction of framings of crisis as "error" and by homing in on the current and potential role of tourism to contribute to a more socially and environmentally just society. This reframing the pandemic as an "unnatural" disaster opens new debates at the intersection of tourism geographies and political ecologies of hope in revelatory moments of crisis.

### 摘要

不断扩散的新冠肺炎导致边境关闭、航班停飞，全世界半数以上的人口居家隔离，进而引发大范围的焦虑甚至动摇了资本主义的核心。灾难政治生态学学者研究发现所谓的天灾其实有相当大部分是起源于人祸，而健康政治生态学的相关成果也说明社会经济行为对于疾病感染与传播的风险有缓解作用。尽管此类成果已表明审时度势地采取措施应对灾难与疾病随机多变的后果很有必要，但在危机时刻有望解决的办法仍是寥寥无几。就像新冠病毒疫情暴露出愈益严重地结构性不公，而人们对这一未知事物也只是焦头烂额地疲于应对。不过，在此过程中我们认为可以从政治生态学的视角将危机事件解构为种种人为“错误”，然后从旅游地理学的视角寻根溯源，进而依靠旅游业当前与潜在的影响力促进社会公平与环境可持续，这为解读危机中的转机开创出学科间新的对话渠道。

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 April 2020

Accepted 27 April 2020

### KEYWORDS

COVID-19; crisis; hope; disaster; political ecology

### 关键词

新冠病毒; 危机; 希望; 灾难; 政治生态学

## Introduction

The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has closed borders, grounded planes, quarantined more than half of the world's population, triggered anxiety en masse, and shaken global capitalism to its core. Scholars of the political ecology of disasters have sought to denaturalize so-called "natural" disasters by demonstrating their disproportionate consequences, while work on the political ecology of health similarly accounts for how risk of illness and disease are socio-economically mediated. While this scholarship has demonstrated the need to contextualize the uneven consequences of disaster and health, we still know very little about how hope is cultivated in moments of crisis. This commentary integrates the aforementioned scholarship to not only account for how the unequal consequences of the COVID-19 disaster reveals the festering wounds of structural inequality, but also how, in this revelatory moment, we may find hope in the rubble. By deconstructing framings of crisis as "error" and homing in on the current and potential role of tourism to contribute to a more socially and environmentally just and sustainable society, this commentary opens new debates at the intersection of tourism geographies and political ecologies of hope in revelatory moments of crisis.

### *Crisis and the unnatural consequences of disaster*

Crises, on one hand, are historical judgments that mark epochal transitions (Barrios, 2017: 151). Marshal Sahlins (1972) describes how crises may be revelatory in so far as they lay bare the structural contradictions of the modes of production that can no longer be ignored (Sahlins, 1972), while Janet Roitman (2013) highlights how crisis narratives also produce meaning and initiate critique of a given condition. Commentators on the COVID-19 crisis have addressed its potentially transformational role. Thomas Friedman, for instance, suggested that "There is the world B.C. — Before Corona — and the world A.C. — After Corona" (Friedman, 2020). Disaster, on the other hand, accounts for "the end result of historical processes by which human practices enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of geophysical phenomena, technological malfunctions, and communicable diseases..." (Barrios, 2017: 151). In his seminal text, 'Man-made Disasters model', Turner describes the "disaster incubation period" by which he accounts for the how disasters rarely develop instantaneously, but rather are the result of an "accumulation over a period of time of a number of events which are at odds with the picture of the world and its hazards represented by existing norms and beliefs (Pidgeon & O'Leary, 2000: 16). Scholarship on the political ecology of disasters has built on these early observations, focusing on various forms of environmental degradation, most notably climate change (Barnes & Dove, 2015; McElwee, 2016; Orr et al., 2015; Nyaupane & Chhetri, 2009). Thus, the vulnerability and consequences that societies will bare from COVID-19, like other disasters, anthropogenic or otherwise, are not one of nature but a question of politics and economy (O'Keefe, 1976). Thus, as David Harvey writes, "There is... no such thing as a truly natural disaster" (Harvey, 2020), because "Capital modifies the environmental conditions of its own reproduction but does so in a context of unintended consequences" (Harvey, 2020). In this way, the pandemic has the potential to reveal the structural

inequalities through which differential health and economic outcomes materialize in, yet well beyond COVID-19.

The aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic will present us with an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine more resilient and equitable tourism forms (Lew et al., 2016). Yet, through the reframing of the COVID-19 pandemic as “error” or malfunction of current industry norms, it is also possible that this potential may be squandered. Those with the means to monopolize what will become the post- COVID-19 tourism industry will undoubtedly seek to do so. Smaller, locally owned tourist venues close daily while corporations that support tourism and are “too big to fail” receive state support to not only survive but thrive through consolidation with less fortunate competitors. Just as the top 1% of Americans captured 91% of the income growth after the Great Recession, we may find that the precarity of most tourism industry actors will follow suite. Indeed, as one *Forbes* commenter suggests, “this simply is the normal reaction of inequality to a recession. The rich lose the most in the recession and then gain the most in the aftermath and recovery. That second simply being a result of the first” (Worstell, 2020). The need for a new “normal” could not be more urgent and activists and academics around the world have sought for their audiences to heed this warning. As Edward Huijbens (2020) explains, “That is not tourism as business as usual. That is a completely different type of tourism that starts in our own backyards”. As states prepare for the economic fallout of COVID-19, we may also witness how crisis is appropriated as a political tool to stabilize existing political-economic structures as well as bridle efforts towards collective mobilization (Masco, 2017).

These responses are familiar tricks in what Naomi Klein (2017) describes as the disaster capitalist playbook in which she describes with disturbing clarity how power profits from disaster. She explains, “Shock tactics follow a clear pattern: wait for a crisis . . . , declare a moment of what is sometimes called ‘extraordinary politics’, suspend some or all democratic norms – and then ram the corporate wish list through as quickly as possible” (Klein, 2017). While Klein first described these plays more than a decade ago, they resonate deeply with the current response to the COVID-19 disaster. With one out of 10 people in the world working in tourism and the industry accounting for 10% of the global GDP, the effect of this kind of socio-economic restructuring could echo the post-2004 Indian Ocean tsunami recovery efforts where, as Rob Fletcher recalls, there was a deepening of privatization and corporate consolidation (Fletcher et al., 2020).

### **Hope in revelatory moments of crisis**

As a “world-making force” (Huijbens, 2020), tourism has the potential to play a pivotal role in the reshaping of society (Gibson, 2019). Yet, the story of how COVID-19 will restructure society is yet to be written and there is reason to believe that citizens around the world will push back against efforts to appropriate the crisis narrative in ways that consolidate power (Klein, 2020). Thus, finding hope in moments of crisis requires a recognition of the structural inequalities through which the uneven aftermath of disaster strikes. The tourism industry and progressive actors within it have begun contributing to this endeavor of finding hope in the rubble in creative ways.

"Pre-coronavirus travel and tourist industries," Andrew Evans warns us, "will not function in a post-coronavirus world" and everything including "our very concept of vacation may have to change" (2020). Tourism focused scholars have heeded these warnings and sought to identify the silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several have already offered points of departure for rebuilding a more sustainable and just tourism (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2020). In this vein, Alan Lew contends that "We need to take this opportunity to listen and learn what our larger planet-self is trying to tell us" (2020), while Pope Francis has suggested that COVID-19 may be nature's response to climate change (Wise, 2020). Indeed, reports (substantiated or otherwise) abound that describe how non-human earthly cohabitants are thriving as more than half the planet is quarantined behind walls (MacDonald, 2020): "Nature is taking back Venice" (Brunton, 2020), reads one headline. As air pollution plummets, globally, people have taken notice of the massive impact of human activity on the atmosphere. For instance, "In India, where air pollution is among the world's worst, 'people are reporting seeing the Himalayas for the first time from where they live,'" explained Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Helsinki-based Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (Gardiner, 2020). Similar observations have been made from Beijing to Durban to Paris (Associated Press, 2020). Commenters are hopeful that the current respite from toxic air "may offer lessons for the kind of world we want to build after the pandemic" (Gardiner, 2020).

In a similar vein, calls for global unity among tourism actors have proliferated from the UNWTO (2020) global tourism crisis committee which calls for a collective response to not only recover, but "grow back better" to a range of INGO and NGOs around the world. As iconic tourism destinations that were once overwhelmed with tourists have witnessed the emptying of streets and cafes for perhaps the first time in decades, people have come to rethink what a middle path might be for the renewal of tourism. In many global tourism destinations, residents are leading the effort to respond to the wave of xenophobic rhetoric triggered by the outbreak. For instance, the French Asian community created the hashtag, #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (#Iamnotavirus) that has since been translated into numerous languages around the world to fight racial prejudice. In a similar vein, Massimiliano Martigli Jiang, an Italian-Chinese citizen, produced a video of himself standing blindfolded in downtown Florence. He held a sign that read, "I am not a virus, I am a human being, free me from prejudice" as tourists and residents alike hugged him and photographed the encounter. The video has been viewed more than 300,000 times on YouTube and counting. In a similar vein, a Wuhan jiyayou! (stay strong Wuhan) solidarity movement developed during the months long quarantine of Wuhan, where global audiences posted pictures of themselves holding signs expressing solidarity with its residents. In major tourism centers throughout Asia, restaurants, shops and markets shared a collective concern for China as it weathered its COVID-19 peak. In a shop window in Phuket, Thailand, a sign read: "The Thai people pray for China and hope China will recover soon. China and Thailand are family!" (Reuters, 2020).

Hope, in these and numerous other mundane and extraordinary ways, circulates widely in this time of crisis. As a powerful antidote to fear, hope has the potential to galvanize social action in ways that support social justice campaigns such as access to

health care, livable wages, and affordable education (Pain & Smith, 2012: 209). Thus, as rather than a purely sentimental endeavor, in post-COVID-19 tourism, hope will also be creative practice of solidarity. As part of this practice, Evans (2020) asks tourists to ask themselves: “Who/What/Which resource am I exploiting? How can I make sure my adventure benefits the individuals, communities, cultures, and natural spaces I encounter? How can I support small and medium social enterprises? How can I help empower women around the world? How can I help protect the wildest bits of our planet and make sure they survive this century?”

In efforts to rebuild tourism around more socially and economically just relationships, we may adopt Arjun Appadurai’s “ethics of possibility” in order to account for “those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 295). Yet, it is important to recognize that hope itself is unevenly distributed and Appadurai cautions us to not lose sight of the broader “ethics of probability” in our rebuilding of society. While it has been suggested that COVID-19 represents “the end of neoliberalism” (Jose, 2020), it is important to proceed cautiously and not let our guard down against efforts to exploit crisis as an accumulation practice or mold it into the latest commodity frontier.

In the context of international development, Bebbington highlights how “[T]he question becomes not why are some people poor in society, by why some societies tolerate poverty as an outcome and for whom, and how this toleration becomes embedded within institutional norms and systems’ (Bebbington, 2007: 806). In the current context, hope is enacted not through normalizing institutions of structural violence through which disease circulates, but rather paying close attention to the political economic accounting of the value of some lives over others. Thus, as Berlant has taught us, “Social optimism has costs when its conventional images involve enforcing normative project of orderliness or truth. This kind of bargaining demands scrutiny, in that desires for progress in some places are so often accompanied by comfort with other social wrongs” (Berlant, 2014, p. 5). If hope for a more socially and environmentally just post-COVID-19 tourism is to be realized and we are to harness the potential of the current crisis to help us rethink how we live, work and travel, we must first recognize the unnatural consequences of the COVID-19 disaster.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 will reshape tourism as we previously knew it. Yet, while there are reasons to be hopeful, who will benefit from this restructuring is still an unsettled question. There are currently more than 10 special issues and five books currently being developed to address what COVID-19 means for tourism, many focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on the industry as well as how tourism can be reimagined and enacted in more sustainable and resilient ways. As we collectively seek a more equitable and socially just path forward it is important that we do not hide the forest in search of the trees; the consequences are too severe. We must denaturalize the political-economic drivers of disasters and their human and non-human consequences in ways that not only reveal the open wounds of structural inequality, but also offer

more than a band-aid to heal them. This commentary advances scholarship on the political ecology of disasters by adding a hopeful framing to debates surrounding the role of tourism in coping with the current and future challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Disclosure statement

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

## Notes on contributor

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