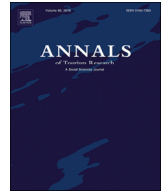
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## Viewpoint



## Debating tourism degrowth post COVID-19

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Post COVID-19, most in the industry see growth as an imperative (UNWTO, 2020; WTTC, 2020). For many academics, however, a 'new normal' that respects supposed natural limits and cultural boundaries in a fashion mass tourism has failed to do is needed (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder, & Salazar, 2020). Reform along degrowth lines, rather than recovery, is emphasised.

Post COVID-19 degrowth advocacy focuses on 3 themes. First, there is an assumed imperative to degrow the industry. 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 Latouche, that: '[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' (Latouche, 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. Milanovic (2017) and Phillips (2015) argue that degrowth involves extreme austerity, neither feasible nor beneficial to anyone.

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Second, the advocacy of tourism degrowth takes aim at the 'culture-ideology of consumerism' (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), through which consumption patterns that were once the preserve of the rich became endemic. 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).

This presents tourist culture as a negative reaction to the alienation of modern life, rather than a positive, aspirational choice. Tourists are 'comatose consumers' - objects propelled by growth obsessed companies - rather than decision making subjects. Degrowth reverses the assumption held by previous generations that raising the opportunities for more people to travel was *de facto* a good thing, marking social progress.

The cultural alternative offered by degrowth is Latouche's 'conviviality' (2009): a more authentic connection between people in a community through a slower, more localised society with much lower consumption. This view holds that economic growth limits our capacity to relate to one another authentically, hence a need to degrow, relocalise, and alter society fundamentally. Simmel offers a contrasting conception of 'conviviality' without these ascetic implications (Simmel, 1949): it is to exult in the sheer pleasure of the company of others, a pleasure contingent on it being shared. This will resonate with many who have missed happy holidays with family and friends, for whom mass tourism is constitutive of conviviality.

Third, COVID-19, in particular the impact on regions with a large tourism economy, is 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 disasterous implications for societies currently benefiting from international tourism.

Degrowth has become something of an orthodoxy in academic discussions of post Covid-19 tourism. Its advocates 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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