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The “war over tourism”: challenges to sustainable tourism in the tourism academy after COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is widely recognised as a challenge or even a game-changer for travel and tourism. It has also been a catalyst to serious debate in the “tourism academy,” as revealed by a discussion on TRINET Tourism Information Network via email in May 2020. The catalyst to this debate was an email by academic Jim Butcher announcing his work entitled “the war on tourism,” published in an online magazine. Presenting a binary between industry recovery and reform, Butcher’s article denounced a body of tourism work he portrayed as hostile to the industry and as using COVID-19 as an opportunity to attack it. He argued that this resulted in harm to tourism businesses, tourism workers and ordinary tourists. These TRINET discussions worked to present a binary in schools of thought, divided by being either for the tourism industry or against it. This analysis explains how advocates of industry rapid recovery stand opposed to wider efforts to reform tourism to be more ethical, responsible and sustainable. The struggle concerns both the proper role of tourism and tourism academics. Outcomes from this debate have repercussions for the development of the discipline, the education of tourism students and the future of tourism practices.

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Introduction

The coronavirus epidemic confronts us with something previously thought to be the impossible: the world as we knew it has stopped turning, whole countries are in a lockdown, many of us are confined to our homes facing an uncertain future in which, even if most of us survive, economic mega-crisis is likely (Žižek, 2020, p. 85).

The use of “war” as a metaphor in our popular discourse on various human endeavours is promiscuously prolific, but nonetheless significant. On 4 May 2020, tourism scholar Jim Butcher announced his article “the war on tourism” on TRINET Tourism Information Network. Some debate ensued concerning the legitimacy of criticism of tourism and the imperative to foster tourism recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. While arguably this email discussion sparked by an online article could be dismissed as not particularly significant to tourism scholarship, the critical analysis offered in this article will demonstrate that this single incident revealed an important struggle. In fact, the “war on tourism” article was a popular rendition of Butcher’s previous arguments presented in his book *the New Moralisation of Tourism* (2003) but the article rang with heightened alarm in response to calls to transform tourism in the aftermath of COVID-19.

This TRINET discussion occurred in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis which has had an unprecedented impact on travel and tourism. In 2019–2020, the global crisis caused by COVID-19 saw international borders around the world close, airplanes and other forms of transport grounded, tourists forced to return home and people in many parts of the world locked down and confined to their homes (Becker, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a). The crisis also had wider implications for tourism as it led to socio-cultural and geo-strategic tensions as anti-Chinese rhetoric and racism grew based on China as the place of origin and spread of the virus (see Jamal & Budke, 2020). Some within the tourism academy saw such extraordinary circumstances as a moment to reflect on the lessons from this pause in tourism and travel and use it to spark reform and transformations that place tourism on a more responsible and sustainable trajectory (more below). Others within the academy called for tourism academics to support the tourism industry in developing recovery strategies that could reignite stalled economies and restart tourism enterprises leading to a return to “business as usual” as soon as possible.

The benefits and impacts of tourism have been deeply disputed at least since the advent of modern, mass tourism (e.g. Butcher, 2003; Wheeller, 1991). Some advocates of tourism have supported a boosterist approach that has resulted in a pro-growth, expansionary orientation (see Hall, 2008). Proponents of responsible and sustainable tourism have challenged the advocates of boosterism for decades, arguing that tourism must be managed for sustainability including limiting its growth (see Bramwell et al., 2008). In more recent times, explorations of tourism degrowth have emerged to counter the boosterists’ promotion of continual growth in tourism (e.g. Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). In the tense and troubled context of the COVID-19 global pandemic with its serious damage to travel, tourism and affiliated sectors, the dispute concerning boosterism versus limits to tourism has erupted with renewed vigour.

Major crises such as COVID-19 may reveal dynamics that have gone largely unremarked and thereby spark both moments of reflection and movements for change. Roitman studied crisis narratives in her *Anti-crisis* work, arguing: “[...] Crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or to designate ‘moments of truth’; it is taken to be a means to access historical truth, and even a means to think “history” itself” (2014, p. 3). Arguably, the group of TRINET emails of May 2020 we might call the “war on tourism” debate revealed a moment of truth in the tourism academy suggesting two distinct and opposing schools of thought.

These schools of thought are designated the pro-industry boosterists and the pro-limits critics in this article. This article analyses Butcher’s pro-industry boosterism in his “war on tourism” article which sought to counter those calling for reforming tourism, as well as the debates that followed on TRINET after the article’s posting. It interrogates the use of militarised language and the logics of declaring critical challenges to contemporary tourism as an undesirable, anti-tourism ideology. The discussions based on a binary logic effectively worked to delegitimise a whole segment of the tourism academy. This use of rhetoric of “war on tourism” reveals hidden dynamics uncovered by COVID-19 and responses to it within the tourism academy. This debate raises critical questions of who defines tourism, who benefits from tourism, who sets agendas and how they are perceived. The stakes are important as the incident under analysis effectively worked to delegitimate efforts to reform tourism to achieve greater sustainability in tourism, including limiting it to not exceed the finite context of larger ecological systems, controlling it to be compatible with societies and cultures and harnessing it for not only economic purposes but also for well-being goals of all stakeholders.

Methods

This article follows in the long line of ethical and critical analysis built in the tourism academy, including Ryan (2002), Tribe (2006, 2008), Higgins-Desbiolles (2006), Bramwell and Lane (2011) and Chambers and Buzinde (2015). Tribe argued “critical research is essential for setting an

agenda for ethical management, governance and coexistence with the wider world" (Tribe, 2008, p. 245). Critical theory is a body of work that seeks to diagnose the problems of current society and identify the nature of the social change required to secure greater justice, equity and empowerment. It holds a belief in the efficacy of social action for social change to achieve emancipation and well-being. The debate sparked by the "war on tourism" piece is a debate about the very legitimacy of efforts to pursue such an agenda in tourism thought and practice.

The knowledge underpinning this work is derived from engaged and reflexive approaches (Bechara & Van de Ven, 2007) developed over two decades of tourism research. Extended work with Indigenous tourism operators, tourism and hospitality small business entrepreneurs, tourism non-governmental organisations, social enterprises and communities has resulted in the pursuit of a research agenda interrogating who benefits from tourism development and who bears the costs. As Bechara and Van de Ven described engaged research: "One clear implication is the need for researchers to be reflexive in clarifying whose interests and values are served in their research engagements" (2007, p. 68). This body of work has aspired to achieve "triangulation" on the understanding of tourism and its impacts by working to engage relevant stakeholders in the formulation of research, theory building, and problem solving through many diverse studies (as per Bechara & Van de Ven, 2007). However, this is not the engaged scholarship strategy that some management scholars promote in order to be of service to the industry (see McKelvey, 2006). Instead, it is engaged research to both contain and harness tourism to the benefit and well-being of the local community in which it occurs. Such work is not unbiased or neutral; as it is affiliated with critical tourism scholarship praxis, the justice, equity and emancipatory goals are transparently declared.

This article is based on a qualitative, critical analysis of the article "the war on tourism" and the email debate that it generated on TRINET in May 2020. There were some 18 emails that were generated from the debates and discussions. Authors of these emails were mainly academics or retired academics; a small number were positioned in multiple roles as academics/tourism consultants/tourism industry; and one represented a non-governmental organisation. These communications generated approximately 8000 words of communications that were subject to critical discourse analysis; the identities of contributors have been anonymised (with the exception of Butcher) in the interest of ethical best practise.

Critical discourse analysis undertakes an analysis of text and talk to uncover "[...] relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). This is not the first work to analyse the discourse of a TRINET debate; Isaac et al. (2012) analysed a debate that occurred over a tourism conference planned to be held in contested Jerusalem. There are many different ways to undertake critical discourse analysis; the approach selected should be based on the specific context (van Dijk, 1993, p. 279). This work will briefly describe the context in which the debate occurred to understand the assertion of power and influence at a moment of flux caused by the pandemic. It then analyses the text of the online article to identify the over-arching themes which then set the terms of the subsequent debate that occurred on TRINET. This identifies the use of binaries as a way to fix and determine the dynamics of the discussion. Next, the TRINET email debate is analysed to understand the way discourse was deployed to contest ideas. Finally, the analysis takes a critical look at considerations of responsible and sustainable tourism to better understand the socio-cultural dynamics pressing for change in the tourism system. This is an adapted approach to Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis, which included: (1) analysis of the text; (2) analysis of discursive practices; and (3) analysis of sociocultural practice.

COVID-19: Back to business as usual or transformative opportunity?

From early 2020, the COVID-19 crisis was widely seen as a potential moment of transition (e.g. Friedman, 2020; Roy, 2020). One articulation from the media explained: "Now, one form of

unregulated, free-market globalization with its propensity for crises and pandemics is certainly dying. But another form that recognizes interdependence and the primacy of evidence-based collective action is being born" (Hutton, 2020). Indian novelist and public intellectual Arundhati Roy stated: "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (2020). Those that agreed that the way the world worked before the crisis was undesirable, could see that the crisis was a possible transformative moment. Because travel and tourism were arguably the hardest hit sectors globally in the crisis, transformational thinking was particularly evident in sections of tourism academia.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis was devastating in its impacts on travel and tourism, as well as the hospitality, arts and events affiliated sectors. The United Nations World Tourism Organization has estimated: up to an 80% decline in international tourism in 2020; a possible US\$1.2 trillion loss in tourism export revenues; and a risk to up to 120 million direct tourism jobs (UNWTO, 2020). As Becker (2020) noted:

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, few industries have fallen as far and as fast as tourism. The technological revolution that brought us closer together by making travel and tourism easy and affordable—a revolution that fueled one billion trips a year—is helpless in halting a virus that demands we shelter in place.

While recognising the devastation of the pandemic, many in tourism studies looked to the COVID-19 crisis as a potential catalyst to essential transformation (e.g. Ateljevic, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020b; Nepal, 2020). For instance, Professor Alan Lew, Editor of the journal *Tourism Geographies*, was quick to respond to the challenge that COVID-19 represented to the tourism discipline. He convened an extraordinary special issue of *Tourism Geographies* focused on "visions of how the events of 2020 will transform our planet in potentially positive ways, with travel and tourism being among the most significant areas to be impacts [sic] (Lew, 2020). Higgins-Desbiolles (2020a) argued: "Considering human activities need to change if we are to avoid the worst effects of human-induced climate change, the coronavirus crisis might offer us an unexpected opportunity." Other tourism scholars argued that the crisis called into question a pro-growth, boosterist approach to tourism that benefits certain individuals, businesses and organisations:

The COVID-19 crisis should thus be seen as an opportunity to critically reconsider tourism's growth trajectory, and to question the logic of more arrivals implying greater benefits. This may begin with a review of the positive outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020, pp. 13–14).

Gretzel et al. (in press) seized the opportunity to challenge the trajectory of eTourism and call for a transformative research agenda:

The COVID-19 crisis has put e-Tourism research at a crossroads. One path leads us to focus on research that subscribes to existing scientific paradigms, conventional notions of technology and growth-driven thinking and, thus, supports bringing back tourism as we knew it. The other path takes a critical stance at what was before and how things were done and helps envision a better future. The latter path requires "transformative" research (p. 10–11).

Such visioning projects were not the focus of most tourism industry leaders. Leaders of airlines, cruise industry and tourism corporations were looking for their share of large government bailout packages (Keating, 2020) or access to government funds allocated for small businesses and workers' safety nets (Martin & Remeikis, 2020). In many statements and press releases, there was a clear emphasis on getting back to normal as soon as possible. For instance, Roger Dow of the US Travel Association was quoted as saying: "Over the long term we will return and come back to business as usual. People have short memories and there will be a pent up desire to travel" (Becker, 2020). Some leaders in the tourism industry urged authorities to not overplay the pandemic threat because of lockdown's more significant threat to the economy. For instance, Ariel Cohen of business travel agency TripActions warned: "If people will not travel, the economy

will grind to a halt" (Orbach, 2020). Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz analysed the industry push to re-open the economy quickly as a way to prevent demands for social change:

The capitalist class, those who benefit most from the unequal system, they know it's not sustainable. They're desperate not to stay locked down too long, so people get used to fresh air, breathing air without carbon in it. People might get ideas of a different kind of world (Beckett, 2020).

This was the context in which the article "the war on tourism" was written. A global pandemic of extraordinary impact on travel and tourism resulted in a pivotal moment. With travel and tourism halted, sharp dividing lines between calls to return to business as usual versus those that would pause for reflection and reset became evident.

"The war on tourism"

Academic Jim Butcher responded to these efforts to rethink and transform tourism in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis with an article published in *Spiked*, an online current-affairs publication. *Spiked* describes its vision: "We are committed to fighting for humanism, democracy and freedom" (Spiked, n.d.). Investigation by *the Guardian* newspaper has exposed funding by the Koch brothers' Koch Foundation (described as a toxic empire (Dickenson, 2014) supporting right wing politics in the United States and elsewhere). Journalist George Monbiot asserted:

Spiked magazine, edited by O'Neill, appears to hate leftwing politics. It inveighs against the welfare state, against regulation, the Occupy movement, anti-capitalists, Jeremy Corbyn, George Soros, #MeToo, "black privilege" and Black Lives Matter. It does so in the name of the "ordinary people", whom, it claims, are oppressed by the "anti-Trump and anti-Brexit cultural elites", "feministic elites", "green elites" and "cosmopolitan politicians" (Monbiot, 2018).

Spiked's content has been described as anti-environmentalist and climate change denialist in orientation by an investigative media outlet (Small, 2018). Current circumstances witness climate change being one significant site of conflict in the ongoing cultural wars (Hoffmann, 2012). As Hoffmann explained: "The public debate around climate change is no longer about carbon dioxide and climate models. It is about values, culture, worldviews, and ideology" (2012, p. 30). This background assists in establishing the context in which the discourse occurred.

Butcher's article "the war on tourism" offered a brief exposition arguing that an emphasis on reform over recovery in response to COVID-19 amounted to a war against tourism that threatens tourism businesses, tourism jobs and millions of happy holidaymakers. This setup the discussion in terms of binaries, including the use of the war metaphor and the contrast between recovery and reform.

Butcher started his article with the assertion:

Covid-19 spells disaster for the tourism and hospitality industries. In the short term, millions of jobs have been lost and businesses have been devastated. In the medium and longer term, a deep recession is likely and that will have a sustained impact on luxuries such as tourism and hospitality (2020).

Despite this devastation, Butcher noted that not everyone supports recovery:

... rather than redoubling efforts to help prospective recovery, some industry commentators see the pandemic as a chance to hit pause, rewind a little, and change the track. Reform is emphasised over recovery. And that reform often looks forward to a diminished industry and lower levels of leisure mobility (2020).

Butcher charged that these reformers form a "significant lobby," made up of individuals in academia, NGOs and environmental groups. He delineated the battlelines: on one side are the tourism industry and its supporters that "[...] have brought greater freedom and liberty to many"; and on the other side are the tourism reformers who champion "degrowth, challenging 'consumerism' and the promotion of localism."

Butcher's argument seems to be focused on the work of a few particular analysts whose work supports degrowth, anti-consumerism and localisation strategies in tourism (including Higgins-Desbiolles and the Political Ecology Network). Butcher characterises such work as irresponsible at a time when tourism businesses are devastated and tourism workers unemployed and facing hardship and uncertainty. But in fact, his aim is much wider than those narrow strands of tourism work:

The claim that tourism reform is an ethical position, or even a realistic one, is false. Our efforts should focus on the recovery of tourism as soon as possible. And we should champion growth, ambition and freedom to that end (Butcher, 2020).

This latter statement indicates that Butcher's work in this article (as well as in his larger exposition in his book of 2003), is really targeted at the ethical, responsible and sustainable tourism agendas which seek to mitigate the numerous negative impacts of tourism by regulating it, limiting it and demanding that it be reformed. Critical discourse analysis asks us to be attentive to what is not addressed in text as well as what is addressed. Missing in this championing of the freedom of millions of holidaymakers and the interests of the tourism industry are: all of those who are not free to travel, including asylum-seekers and those without excess wealth; all of those workers that are subject to poor pay, precarity and bad working conditions; and those local communities who find themselves pressed to serve as destinations against their own interests.

This article takes part in a larger discursive practice. It matters that this article was published in an online journal that has an association with a particular voice in politics (whether libertarian or "right-wing" as attested to by Koch funding). It is advancing a political argument that is part of the larger cultural wars that have occurred over multiculturalism, immigration, gender rights, identity politics and environmentalism (Monbiot, 2018); what might be called "Other-oriented" ethics (see e.g. Hammond, 2007). Butcher's article brings in this political dynamic to tourism debates when such work is published in a media outlet that is playing an active role in current cultural wars (noting it was labelled as a "culture" piece on the Spiked website).

In the interests of transparency, I note that my work was part of the body of work challenged by Butcher in his "war on tourism" analysis (i.e. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). In using the discourse of war to set out the rival views on tourism after COVID-19, Butcher's article worked to delineate two schools of thought that have become particularly important in discussions of the future of tourism after COVID-19.

Schools of thought: Pro-industry boosters and pro-limits critics

There are many schools of thought, paradigms and worldviews visible in the complex field of tourism studies (see for instance, Camargo et al., 2016; Munar & Jamal, 2016). However, the binary rhetoric of "the war on tourism" encourages us to think about two competing schools of thought termed here as "pro-industry boosters" and "pro-limits critics." These two schools can be identified in the binary discourse of the "war on tourism" as those supporting industry recovery versus those advocating industry reform.

Butcher's analysis in "the war on tourism" can be described as subscribing to pro-industry boosterists thinking. In this work, he outlines lines of thought including: tourism as a "liberating phenomenon for millions" (2020); tourism and hospitality as offering invaluable jobs and income in the developed and developing world too important to not support; viewing calls for reform as threatening to vital return to business as usual; viewing the tourism industry as worthy of support through all means necessary because of this value; and an emphasis on growth as a goal in these efforts.

Boosterists of tourism adhere to what Jafari (2001) called the "advocacy platform" of tourism. This approach was originally championed by economists following the boom in mass tourism

after World War II and “[...] focused on the contributions of the ‘industry’ to growth and development” (Jafari, 2005). Boosterism is one approach to tourism policy and planning:

[...] that represents a simplistic view that tourism is inherently good with automatic benefits. Within a “boosterism” approach to tourism planning, analysis and goal setting are approached within a purely marketing context that closely parallels the desires of hoteliers, restaurateurs, and travel business interests (Marcouiller, 2007, p. 28).

The World Tourism Organization is perhaps the most influential agent of boosterism in the global community, with many of its resources touting tourism’s contributions to gross domestic product, share of total exports and metrics of visitor arrivals (e.g. UNWTO, n.d.). In his book, Butcher (2003) argued that modern mass tourism brings benefits in terms of economic development, leisure pleasure for tourists and a pathway to modernisation and prosperity for developing countries that should not be diminished by the “moralisers” and “doom merchants” (p. 142). A great deal of tourism economics and development analysis considers tourism to be a “successful tool to promote rapid economic growth” (Marsiglio, 2018, p. 945). As a result of the conviction that the tourism industry is a pathway to development (Jenkins, 1991), many countries and multilateral agencies have advanced tourism dependency particularly in developing countries. There has also been a concern that tourism academics have been reticent to work with the tourism industry creating an alleged divide between academics and practitioners (Harrison, 2004).

The pro-limits critics of tourism criticise tourism from a variety of perspectives, particularly for failing to deliver the promised benefits as well as for the negative impacts it may bring in economic, socio-cultural and environmental terms. Jafari’s concept of tourism platforms (2001, 2005) labelled this body of work the “cautionary platform,” which he described as emerging in the 1970s. He explained: “articulated mainly by anthropologists and sociologists, it spelled out socio-cultural consequences, questioning whether this ‘phenomenon’ as practiced actually helps the development process” (Jafari, 2005, p. 1).

The pro-limits critics have expanded the basis of their concerns with tourism to include, for example: environmental limits and ecological concerns (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018); human rights and inequality (Cole & Morgan, 2010); worker rights (Cole & Eriksson, 2010); Indigenous rights (Johnston, 2006); and the rights of local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). There is also a body of work critically analysing the ways tourism supports and sustains capitalist growth agendas that results in significant negative outcomes, including greater inequality and ecological damage (e.g. Bianchi & de Man, 2020). This body of work has grown more evident as neoliberal forms of governance have impacted the capacity to manage tourism for sustainability. For instance, Büscher and Fletcher (2017) discussed tourism as a form of structural violence and looked forward to forms of tourism that would contribute to an anti- or post-capitalist politics.

This briefly outlines the two competing schools of thought that have been highlighted by the work the “war on tourism.” Of course, Jafari’s (2001, 2005) model of tourism platforms offered other approaches to tourism management in addition to the advocacy and cautionary platforms, including the adaptancy platform, knowledge-based and public platforms and Macbeth added an ethics platform (2005). These approaches to tourism are acknowledged as not mutually exclusive and co-existing. However, the binary lens of “the war on tourism” served to spotlight the pro-industry boosters and the pro-limits critics as the most relevant to planning in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. With this lens of two proposed schools of thought which have emerged from the “war on tourism” argument, we can examine the TRINET debate which followed.

The TRINET debate: You are either with the industry or against it

Jim Butcher posted his email on TRINET on 4 May 2020 announcing his *Spiked* article and inviting comments. TRINET was founded by Professors Jafar Jafari and Pauline Sheldon in 1988; it serves:

[...] as an electronic bulletin board that ... connect[s] the international tourism research and education community...[and] is probably the largest listserv for international tourism researchers. This network enables them to exchange information and participate in discussions or debates on issues related to tourism education and research (Xiao, 2013, p. 292).

In terms of employing discourse to shape tourism studies, TRINET is arguably the most important platform on which to exchange ideas.

Butcher's "war on tourism" article set the terms of the discussion by establishing industry recovery versus industry reform as the main focus. The statement of problematisation was focused not on the impacts of the crisis but rather the advocacy of reform in the context of COVID-19 as a threat. After receiving one response to his initial email, Butcher clarified his aim and reinforced his argument that recovery and reform are binary choices in our response to the pandemic crisis:

My article is a simple defence of the importance of an expansive, growth-oriented approach to tourism, and an emphasis on recovery rather than the reforms suggested by some academic commentators. This is worth debating given where we are ... (email 4 May 2020).

In the emails that responded to Butcher's posting on the 4th of May, a number of themes were identified that followed from Butcher's over-arching framework of recovery versus reform as an appropriate response after COVID-19. Indicative texts are provided to illustrate the theme.

Themes

The irresponsibility of advocacy for reform in the face of COVID-19

Butcher suggested choices made now to promote reform threaten the future of how we emerge from this global crisis:

From Lowell Juilliard Carr in 1932 up to Frank Furedi today, there is a recognition in disaster studies that how a society responds to a disaster is key in determining it's [sic] the impact of that disaster upon society. If "degrowth, anti-consumerism and localism" inform our response, we will only compound the grave consequences of the pandemic in my view. Yet we should ensure people who prioritise recovery or advocate reform respectively continue to discuss these issues (email 4 May 2020).

The email invites debate and discussion and presents as an invitation to a positive dialogue between the two schools. Yet, the reference to alleged lessons from disaster studies tries to shut this off by declaring the reformist position as gravely detrimental to the future. This accomplishes an ironic twist where the reformers are positioned as retrogressive on building positive futures.

One contributor wrote an email arguing that proponents of reform show a lack of concern for the significant suffering that businesses and tourism employees will be experiencing:

Such comments also reveal an immense lack of respect for, and sensitivity toward, a global community of small-to-medium sized businesses that purposefully cater to visitors – many now thrust into sudden bankruptcy, unable to survive. And what about the millions of people who are no longer meaningfully employed (yes, meaningfully), people with mortgages and bills to pay, so many verging on poverty? (email 5 May 2020).

The implication is that the crisis presents only binary options and that efforts to advance reform of tourism along ethical, responsible and sustainable lines undermines efforts on industry recovery. It is a call to loyalty to the industry and commitment to seeing it return to business as usual.

Relevance to the tourism industry

In a context where travel and tourism had been brought to their knees, a key focus of commentary supporting Butcher's ideas addressed the lack of relevance reformist tourism academics

allegedly have for the tourism industry. One commentator noted that an anti-tourism growth stance was untenable in the aftermath of the destruction of COVID-19:

[The] TRINET network can no longer afford to stand apart from (even act as if it is superior to) the millions of advocates for travel and tourism. Like it or not, recovery has to entail a rebound or re-growth of revenue streams. It is going to be an extremely tough slog, and, I'll tell you, very few in the industry are going to call on the university community for help because their relevancy at this point in time is not deemed important (email 8 May 2020).

Another email expressly stated that tourism academics should not oppose boosterism in the tourism industry:

If TRINET members are to truly assist in both recovery and reform, they must demonstrate a willingness to listen and really understand the "booster" community. Don't set yourselves apart or be viewed as the proverbial exclusionists you despise. Tone down the antagonism. Earn your seat at the table... How you respond to this post-COVID disaster will ultimately determine whether you will earn recognition as being "essential" partners in the struggle to reform and revitalize tourism... In closing, I hope that more TRINET members would stand in support of travel and tourism as the true means of encouraging connectivity, engagement, gatherings, festivities, learning, and conviviality. It need not be the bogeyman so many portray or make it out to be" (email 5 May 2020).

These comments suggest the pro-industry commentators here are very close to interpreting the position of the pro-limits critics to be more properly described as anti-tourism critics.

Legitimacy to teach tourism students

In light of an alleged anti-industry and anti-growth bias on the part of the designated pro-limits critics, some of the debate questioned their legitimacy to teach cohorts of students studying tourism in our universities. One respondent questioned:

What message is being sent to all those students striving for careers in hospitality, travel and tourism? Given the surfeit of disparaging comments about travel and tourism that I read in many of these postings, I certainly worry about what is being taught in universities, and how well-prepared students are to tackle the challenges and respond to the opportunities, especially brought about through crisis situations... (email 5 May 2020).

These discussions illuminate a critical question: are tourism academics in the service of the tourism industry? The allegation from some of the protagonists in this debate was that if one was not a full supporter of the tourism industry and its growth, one's legitimacy to be a university academic located in tourism studies was in doubt. Such a stance seeks to eject a whole community of scholars from the disciplinary fold for being too critical. As Tribe noted: "Discursive formations perform an including and excluding function, legitimizing what counts as knowledge and what does not, so that the ideas and interests of some groups are given authority whilst those of others are not supported" (2006, p. 366).

This debate is also significant in implications for the status of tourism studies. Since tourism began to be more frequently situated in business schools rather than social science departments, this pressure to be relevant to industry has increased (see Tribe, 2006, 2010). But pressing tourism studies in such a direction may work to undermine claims that it is legitimately an academic discipline rather than a vocational field of study. The recent drive by universities to prepare graduates to be job-ready for the industry risks transforming universities into vocational-training colleges. This risks pitting critical thinking skills against industry ready skills in a crowded and contested curriculum (see Belhassen & Caton, 2011).

Additionally, this discussion raises the issue of the public good and public service roles of universities. Are tourism academics responsible for fulfilling a public good role in their work, especially those working for institutions that are incorporated under state legislation and/or receive public funding? As Hall has argued (2008), our ultimate focus as tourism scholars should be the

public good rather than advocating narrow industry interests. The idea that a public good form of tourism should emerge after COVID-19 is a new claim made in the work of Higgins-Desbiolles (2020b).

Unfair and incomplete

The responses against Butcher's thesis in the TRINET debate argued that Butcher's characterisation of the issue and the reformers was unfair and incomplete. One commentator wrote: "I was offended by what I read in the *Spiked* piece, caricaturing the critical tourism community as some kind of idiot, unsympathetic, radical elite who'd rather let tourism workers and entrepreneurs starve" (email 7 May 2020). Another responded:

Critics of tourism growth (not of tourism!) could hardly be described as a "lobby" – the real lobby we know about is Airbnb-type speculators or cruise operators that have hijacked the policy agendas, from local to the EU ... Until relatively recently at least, when it was made clear that the mainstream management recipes tend not to work in tourism-regimed places whose structure of governance is heavily biased to represent corporate agendas, and then you also have to face some deeper "systemic" approach to economic regimes (email 4 May 2020).

Another academic presented a response to Butcher's work that argued that the industry is diverse and Butcher's assessment simplified:

Notwithstanding there exists a significant spectrum of business models and enterprise types with different modus operandi/ownership structures, as well as diverse destination management/governance regimes in tourism ... to hold up tourism as simply an "industry" that has "brought greater freedom and liberty to many", is to dismiss the real and significant problems that tourism has brought in its wake, and to favour letting untrammelled markets and disruptive capitalism (whether of a neoliberal or statist variant) to rip through destinations (email 5 May 2020).

This respondent also referred to his own experience to note that recent critics of tourism are diverse and their views of significance:

[...] listening and learning from scholars, residents and activists in that part of the world, I have witnessed at close quarters not just protests from the "usual suspects" but also from amongst farmers, fishers, workers, residents and yes, tour guides, taxi & bus drivers, tourism entrepreneurs themselves who were being pushed aside or whose interests were ignored, while developers strong armed local communities and complicit town councils to push through construction projects whose primary benefit was to accrue enormous profits[...] (email 5 May 2020).

A holistic approach

One key difference in these discussions concerned the ways in which tourism is considered; that is, whether the tourism industry is the focus or whether tourism is analysed in its wider context. One critic of Butcher's article tackled the accusation that critics of tourism do not have legitimacy to teach tourism studies at university:

... What do we teach to our students? we teach them to be good destination managers and planners that put the best interests of communities at the centre. We teach them to be emphatic[empathetic] with tourists as much as with those who lose jobs and houses in the context of a crisis like this or until three months ago, and plan for more resilient tourist places. We also teach them that to be competitive entrepreneurs and to be committed to sustainability as an element of value creation for their business. What I hope I don't do is to teach them to become pro-growth lobbyists (email 7 May 2020).

While another critic of Butcher's analysis tackled the valuing of tourism solely for its economic benefits and also the lack of care for those who pay the costs of such developments; he responded by addressing Butcher's direct words in the article:

"Though it is an industry that has brought greater freedom and liberty to many" (... and pain and suffering to so many others -probably in even higher quantity).

"The expansion of consumption of air travel over the past 60 years has been a truly liberating phenomenon for millions" (... as well as emitting x tons of CO₂ in the atmosphere ...).

It reads like tourism is only relevant because it is an economic activity. It reads like those defending "herd immunity" such as the President of my country [...] for who... so people may [sic] die with the virus? So what? Economy can't stop (email, 6 May 2020).

This marks an important point of disagreement in these discussions as the pro-industry boosters adhere to a view that the concerns of tourism academics should be to advance the success of the tourism industry while the critics look to understand the impacts of tourism at a larger level and to undertake a more full assessment of it beyond the economic measurements.

Visioning

The debate was also taken as an opportunity for visioning beyond the narrow parameters originally established for the debate. Occurring in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, many scholars had already seized it as an opportunity to consider ways tourism might be transformed (see above), and this also featured in this discussion. One academic noted:

If we are to meet the challenge of the moment, we must re-discover and embrace the positive, be patient and far more respectful. We can do this by revealing how everyone can benefit from tourism that represents and follows a more moral form of stakeholder capitalism. To do so, it would help if more of us assumed the role of leaders (not just critics) and dedicate ourselves to working with and within our communities-as-destinations to help develop a manifesto for a moral imagination that would jettison so many [of] the ills associated with tourism, and bring about a recovery based on a "Great Realization" (email, 7 May 2020).

Another offered a view from the social tourism position:

I feel the best we can hope for from this crisis is a recognition from governments of all political flavours of the importance of their tourism industries to their economies, as a sector worth investing in for long-term recovery, and vital to mental and physical health and wellbeing of citizens and to the prosperity of their rural and coastal regions. That way, they might see that the road to recovery must involve ensuring access to basic tourism opportunities for all in their societies.

My worry with the implications of degrowth and recovery is that the inevitable consequence will be return to an industry that is prohibitively expensive and exclusive ... The short term for the industry recovery must be local, equitable, safe (for residents' health too) and socially-motivated - it may lead to a fairer and more sustainable tourism industry as a by-product of necessity, leaving those hot-spots of overtourism in a worse-off position due to a drop-off in rich, globe-trotting, over-consuming types of consumer (email, 5 May 2020).

This brief TRINET debate marked a significant contest of ideas on the role of tourism scholars and tourism scholarship, the legitimacy of critical scholarship approaches and the value of ethical, sustainable and responsible approaches to tourism development, management and governance.

Characterising this contest of ideas as a "war on tourism" had the effect, however, of constraining and manipulating the debate. Presenting the reformists' work as a "war on tourism" and presenting the agenda as a binary between recovery and reform, worked to delegitimise critical voices and undermine the claims of those who support a serious rethinking and reform of the tourism industry in the wake of COVID-19. The fact that this debate was performed on the TRINET platform before more than 3000 subscribers situated the contest of ideas as a struggle for the hearts and minds of this readership.

“Manning” the defence lines: Use of the metaphor of “war” in the debates on tourism

Classic work by Susan Sontag (1978) analysed the use of the metaphor of war in treating illness. Since then, Sontag’s work has been a touchstone in critical thinking on use of the war metaphor and the negative impacts that can result. Lule argued: “Neither good nor bad, metaphor may be the only way for humans to comprehend profound and complex issues, such as life, death, sickness, health, war, and peace” (2007, p. 180). However, Lule cautioned: “metaphoric language shapes thought and that calling something by another name can have profound implications” (2007, p. 179).

What does it mean to characterise the proponents of ethical, sustainable and alternative tourism as metaphorically waging a war on tourism? The implications of the use of this war metaphor include: combatants are fighting implacably for their cause; that death and destruction are inevitable outcomes; and that the discussants line up neatly along set battlelines. There is also a play with words to connect this “war on tourism” to the earlier and very significant “war on terrorism” with all of its geopolitical implications. Just like the geo-politics of global domination was the stuff of the war on terror (Jackson, 2004), the war on tourism concerns the politics of tourism. This could be viewed as a “volley” against the influence of voices in the tourism academy that would champion limiting tourism and curtailing the exercise of privilege, through: alternative models (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2020), decolonisation of the tourism academy (e.g. Chambers & Buzinde, 2015), Indigenous rights (e.g. Johnston, 2006) and ecocentrism (e.g. Burns et al., 2011) and the rights of other-than-human beings (e.g. Carr & Broom, 2018), for instance.

The choice of the word “war” for what is in fact a contest of ideas is intentional. Not only is the use of the war metaphor violent, patriarchal and divisive, it falls into false binaries; you are either with us or you are with them. This effort works to delegitimize the voices of alterity, alternatives and other-oriented approaches. As Derrida (1981) contended, binaries do not enjoy a “peaceful coexistence,” but instead exist as a “violent hierarchy” in which “one term governs the other ... or has the upper hand” (p. 41).

Brooker and Joppe (2015) conducted a study of the use of binaries in tourism research by analysing their use in the three leading tourism journals over a five-year period. The binary developed by Butcher (2020) between recovery and reform must be added to the many binaries Brooker and Joppe (2015) explored in their study. Brooker and Joppe argued that social sciences is more prone to a binary view of tourism and they question if business-oriented approaches to tourism studies would be more nuanced:

It would appear that particularly in the social sciences, the study of tourism gives rise to binary analysis. Further research would be required to determine whether these binary patterns suggest that additional entrepreneurial, creativity, and business perspectives may be in order to balance the noted shifts, or perhaps business and geographic perspectives are more nuanced and lend themselves less to the “black and white” view of the world. The research also highlights the need for more ternary, or three-fold, examinations of relationships to introduce additional considerations beyond a binary (2015, p. 7).

Brooker and Joppe’s work demonstrates a similar attitude to the critical social science perspectives opposed by Butcher and others of the pro-industry booster school. Rather than understanding the critique of tourism as ultimately a positive force for driving greater responsibility and ethics, it is viewed as a binary worldview that is possibly anti-tourism. They judge it must be countered with business perspectives in the interest of greater nuance and ability to develop middle way approaches. They did not explore the possibility that tourism studies based in business schools might be blinkered and binary by being pro-business and boosterist in outlook.

The binary presented in the Butcher article is a false binary and in a simplistic argument. The claim that members of TRINET and the tourism academy are either with the industry or against it is inaccurate and unhelpful. There are many facets to the tourism industry to date, including

the criticised large multinationals, small to medium enterprises, community-based tourism, social enterprises, cooperatives, NGO tourism operations and many more.

There are also many facets to the tourism phenomenon which is much greater than the tourism industry perspective that Butcher champions. As the comment, from one commentator above noted, there is a whole social tourism system that ensures that access to holidays and leisure is not limited by ability to pay and has its own organisations, infrastructures and processes (see Diekmann & McCabe, 2011). Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) drew attention to this and other initiatives she designated as “tourism as a social force” in an effort to ensure that a narrow view of “tourism as an industry” did not overshadow and undermine these important efforts for ethics, equity and sustainability.

Additionally, the current standard approach is to define tourism by the businesses that make up the tourism sector who provide goods and services to the tourists. Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) argued that such an approach renders the local community largely invisible in the equation and allows for their marginalisation. This approach makes possible a pact where the big corporates of the tourism industry can secure profits and the privileged tourists can access inexpensive holidays at the expense of underpaid, exploited and precarious workers and the “host” community who too frequently fail to receive the promised benefits of tourism while having to tolerate the disbenefits and damages. As a result, Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) called for a redefinition of tourism centring it around the local community and their rights (more below).

The key to addressing the concerns raised in the debates sparked by the “war on tourism” incident is to raise critical questions: who defines tourism, who benefits from tourism, who sets agendas and how they are perceived. Power and privilege are the foundations of such critical questions. Thus, this comment from the TRINET debate provided above in which one respondent noted that: “[...] the “we” in question is largely a wealthy or middle-class elite (historically and still predominantly white, Western, but also increasingly now Asian markets), whose consumption patterns contribute the majority of the problems associated with the growth model” (email 5 May 2020).

Finally, while Butcher claims his target is the advocacy championing degrowth, anti-consumerism and localism, it is in fact efforts to press the industry towards greater sustainability that is the underlining issue. As he said in his email, his is an expansive, growth-oriented approach. If sustainable tourism is understood as limiting tourism growth in the interests of social and ecological integrity, the Butcher agenda of pro-industry boosterism is anathema.

Rocking the status quo: Responsible and sustainable tourism

It has not often been explicitly stated that efforts to promote ethical, responsible and/or sustainable tourism are “at war” with the current status quo in tourism, as indeed “the war on tourism” article does. Quite often, such efforts have been presented as mildly reformist seeking to make the consumer and the industry more responsible in their choices and practices. However, some efforts are indeed radical because these efforts challenge not only the way we do tourism but they also might call for significant re-orientation.

Responsible tourism gained prominence when Jost Krippendorf presented his analysis in *the Holidaymakers* (1987) arguing the need to address the negative impacts of tourism. It was with this work and the efforts of a number of NGOs that vocal criticism of tourism as an industry began to be expressed. Responsible tourism advocates criticised exploitative forms of tourism and bridged NGOs, communities and academia at this time (e.g. Botterill, 1991; McLaren, 2003; Pleumarom, 1994). Such efforts have been largely sidelined, in some cases as the NGOs that supported such work have been shut down (including recently, Tourism Concern of the UK).

Following on from this, were the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism. Since the release of the document *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), or the Brundtland Report as it became known, sustainability has become a buzzword affecting every field of human endeavour, including tourism. While there have been numerous definitions and terms over the decades, sustainability discourse has been a main driver of a movement advocating “doing tourism differently” by highlighting tourism’s negative environmental, social and even economic impacts and proposing concomitant tactical approaches to mitigating these impacts.

Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) asked the question, however, whether our efforts are directed at merely sustaining tourism or rather sustaining the larger society, making reference to the classic work of Butler. Butler (1999) distinguished sustainable tourism from tourism in the context of sustainable development. Butler defined sustainable tourism as “tourism which is in a form which can maintain its viability in an area for an indefinite period of time” (1999, p. 36). He explained that “tourism in the context of sustainable development” is:

Tourism which is developed and maintained in the area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes (Butler, 1999, p. 35).

Mihalic opted for the term “responsustainable” tourism in an effort to activate and operationalise sustainable tourism:

Merging the words responsible (behaviour-based) and sustainable (concept and values-based) produces the new term responsustainable tourism. It is argued that this new term fully reflects the academic and practical debate and action that is increasingly labelled “responsible” tourism, yet de facto based on sustainability. In this context, paper proposes a Triple-A Model as a tool that helps to understand the process of how a responsible tourism destination or firm actually implements sustainability agenda (2016, p. 469).

Some recent work in sustainable tourism analysis has begun to address the questions of who else might benefit from our efforts to secure greater sustainability in tourism. For instance, Cisneros-Martínez et al. (2018) have argued social tourism initiatives may assist in the achievement of sustainable tourism goals by addressing seasonality problems while supporting social tourists.

Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019, p. 1936) have presented a new definition of tourism to place local communities at the centre of the phenomenon:

Tourism for sustainability and degrowth must focus on the needs and interests of the local community; what tourism industry interests have usurped for themselves under the label of the “host community.” A redefined tourism could be described as: the process of local communities inviting, receiving and hosting visitors in their local community, for limited time durations, with the intention of receiving benefits from such actions. Such forms of tourism may be facilitated by businesses operating to commercial imperatives or may be facilitated by non-profit organisations. But in this restructure of tourism, tourism operators would be allowed access to the local community’s assets only under their authorisation and stewardship.

However, like Wheeller (1991) before her, Higgins-Desbiolles (2020b) has argued that in the post-COVID-19 era, responsible tourism is not the answer to concerns with sustainability in tourism. Her argument was premised on the fact that sustainable and responsible tourism will remain elusive until we address the structural injustices underpinning our current economies (see also Büscher & Fletcher, 2017). Bianchi and de Man explained this well in their work assessing the agenda of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs):

The UNWTO’s SDG-led agenda is contradicted by the logics of growth, competitiveness and profit-making that drive the continued expansion and development of tourism. Rather than addressing the structural injustices that entrench inequalities and reproduce exploitative labour practices, the notion of sustained and inclusive growth reinforces the primacy of capital and market notions of justice and continues to perpetuate a growth driven tourism development model (2020, p. 1).

When taking this analysis together with Butler's conceptualisation of tourism within the context of sustainable development, what we better understand is that the long-term, equitable and sustainable development of tourism requires we situate tourism in the larger context within which it operates in order to arrive at real sustainability. In other words, we put tourism in its place, at the service of local communities and societies. Tourism is not an end in itself; thus sustaining tourism is not the ultimate goal. If we fail to address the larger context in which tourism operates, what we in fact do is assume a myopic view which works to sustain tourism, the tourism industry and tourism consumption with insufficient concern on how this may enact social and ecological injustices.

Similarly, this intervention by Jim Butcher in *Spiked* needs to be viewed in the larger political struggle in which it is occurring. With the threat of global climate change, the reaching of various environmental limits to growth and societal protests on inequities and injustices (see Beck, 2010), there is a possible threat that the current marketised and capitalistic approaches to organising our societies is under challenge and up for replacement (Hutton, 2020). In terms of tourism, COVID-19 exposed the empowering insight that we can reset our approaches, reduce our consumption and rethink our future; this "war on tourism" rhetoric is a concerted effort to counter the potentiality of this moment.

While Hall et al. (2020) are very sceptical that such a reset or transformation is likely as we emerge from the pandemic, others that have written in the *Tourism Geographies* special issue curated by Alan Lew are generally much more hopeful (see Lew, 2020). What is of great importance is that the thought, analysis and imagining of the possibilities do occur. Sustainability, equity and justice are not readily given; they must be fought for and won (Hall, 2008).

In addressing the debate catalysed by the "war on tourism" article, it is important to think about how debate occurs within tourism studies. The intellectual challenge to bodies of thought are a sign of a vigorous academic climate in a discipline but the use of language such as "war" is not conducive to engaged, reflective and critical analysis. As Bramwell et al. explained:

It is useful to remind ourselves that different research perspectives can alter our viewpoints on the issues. Each provides different insights and critical understandings, and each emphasises different directions for normative prescription and policy work. Significant benefits might result from combining these perspectives in our research (2009, p. 253).

As we emerge from the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, different schools of thought and different paradigms offer concerns with different aspects of a complex phenomenon such as tourism. But the skill of critical questioning concerning who defines tourism, who benefits from tourism and who sets agendas is universally valuable.

Conclusion

The reasonable man [person] adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man [person]- George Bernard Shaw (Shaw, 1903, p. 124).

The questions explored in this article are about the desirability of reform, exploring critical questions about who benefits from the status quo and how things might be different. Butcher asserted in the opening of his article that: "Travel and tourism have liberated mankind – we cannot afford to lose them to the pandemic" (2020). Such hyperbole in a biased, online media outlet may not seem worthy of the full attention of an academic article. However, utilising the evocative metaphor of war and pressing the work into the academic domain of TRINET, worked to establish an important divide in academic studies that has significance to efforts to build analytical and critical work on sustainable forms of tourism. Butcher and his supporters on TRINET presented dividing lines between those they characterised as industry and jobs supporting agents of recovery in tourism and those disconnected critics that called for reform and transformation

for greater, long-term sustainability and fairness. Such efforts might be seen to work to discredit, delegitimise and thereby silence those with a commitment to bring about an entire rethinking of tourism so that it could be reoriented to ecological and social sustainability.

If one views the COVID-19 crisis as a potential moment of systems change of global significance, as does Roy (2020) and Žižek (2020), the stakes are high and the cultural wars are in play. In this analysis, the “war on tourism” article is viewed as a “volley” against the influence of voices in the tourism academy that would champion limiting tourism and curtailing the exercise of privilege. With the momentous challenges the global community confronts in terms of reaching ecological limits, global climate change and the socio-cultural tensions that arise from economic systems that create greater inequalities and injustices, the future of tourism will be highly contested. The COVID-19 crisis inspired transformational thinking among some tourism academics as a moment of great potentiality. The debate sparked under the title “the war on tourism” is better seen as a contest of ideas over tourism, between those that support the status quo through a return to business as usual versus those that envision possibilities for greater sustainability, equity and justice. The future of tourism post-pandemic is not a given and it is our task as members of the tourism academy to play our part, not as combatants but as scholars.

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