Chapter 64

Tourism and Crisis:
Clean Slates, Disaster Capitalism, and Vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

Numerous researchers have highlighted a relative lack of academic attention directly addressing the influence of political economy on achieving sustainability in post-disaster reconstruction (Klein, 2008; Hystad and Keller, 2008; Olsen, 2000; Faulkner, 2001; Glaesser, 2003; Ritchie, 2004). This chapter therefore extends existing academic debates and studies in a number of areas, drawing upon the context of Thailand in the post-Asian tsunami era. In existing academic debates concerning the political economy of post-disaster reconstruction there is a trend towards disaster capitalism (Klein, 2005; Harvey, 2007; Saltman, 2007a). However, this did not occur on Phi Phi. Despite claims of a 'clean slate' being offered by the tsunami in developmental terms (Pleumarom, 2004; UNDP, 2005; Dodds, 2011; Ko, 2005; Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994; Rice, 2005; Altman, 2005; Brix, 2007; Ghobarah et al., 2006; Dodds et al., 2010), this chapter provides explanation of why this did not and would never exist on Phi Phi, a finding that may be applied to other destinations in a post-disaster context.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will draw upon empirical research carried out in the wake of the Asian tsunami, intended to examine the role of a mega natural disaster upon tourism development and planning. This tsunami, which took place on 26th December 2004, triggered by an underwater earthquake of 9.3 on the Richter scale off the coast of Banda Aceh, Northern Indonesia (Ghobarah et al. 2006) affected nineteen countries including Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, resulted in over 300,000 deaths and left 1.5 million people homeless (Ghobarah et al. 2006). A specific focus upon Thailand will be taken, more precisely the island of Koh Phi Phi in the Southern Andaman, a popular backpacker and day-tripper destination, the epitome of a paradise location (Fahn, 2003; Cummings 2005), which, when struck by the tsunami,

suffered a tremendous loss of life and vast destruction of island infrastructure to support both tourism and local livelihoods (Bergman, 2005). The island's reconstruction is still ongoing today. This chapter intends to explore some of the following discussions and debates using the Asian tsunami as a primary focus but will also draw upon examples of other natural disasters that have affected the tourism industry in recent times.

Regarded as one of the most catastrophic crises of our times (Wong, 2009), the Asian tsunami left a long-lasting global footprint (Rice, 2005). This event was locally devastating, but also lingered in the global consciousness on account of the intense media coverage, and the fact that many of the areas affected were those that we have personal familiarity with through tourism (Rice, 2005). Historically, the development of Phi Phi, including tourism, had been subject to widespread criticism (Fahn, 2003; Hart, 2005; Dodds, Graci & Holmes, 2010), due to the unsustainable nature of infrastructure development and lack of strict regulation and planning, particularly with regard to the alleged 'sell-out' of Phi Phi Le's Maya Bay (part of Hat Noppharat Thara National Marine Park) following the filming of Fox's motion picture *The Beach* (Noikorn, 1998; Ekachai, 1998; Fuengprichavai, 1998).

The chapter will address four key concerns. Firstly, the observation within literature on the political economy of post-disaster reconstruction, of a trend towards 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2008) or 'smash and grab capitalism' (Harvey, 2007, p. 32) and 'attempts to accumulate by dispossession' (Saltman, 2007a, p. 57). The author's research found that this did not occur on Phi Phi. Despite claims of a 'clean slate' being offered by the tsunami in developmental terms (Pleumarom, 2004; UNDP, 2005; Brix, 2007; Ghobarah et al., 2006), this chapter will provide evidence and explanation of why this did not and would not occur on Phi Phi, a finding that may be applied to other destinations in a post natural-disaster context.

Secondly, in response to Blaikie et al.*'s* (2004) concerns that vulnerability is often reconstructed following a disaster and may create the conditions for a future disaster, this chapter will extend discussions of disaster vulnerability through an adapted application of Turner et al.*'s* (2003) Vulnerability Framework. The chapter will refine their work to identify a detailed framework of vulnerability factors intertwined with factors of political economy, presenting a post-disaster situation in Phi Phi that remains highly vulnerable and non-conducive to sustainability. This is also in response to Hystad & Keller's (2008) recognition that there are a lack of long-term studies, which not only show how disaster has shifted the nature of the destination and tourism product, but also identify successful strategic processes and actions in disaster response.

Thirdly, the strategic response to the tsunami in Thailand will be analysed, through an adapted Strategic Disaster Management Framework (Ritchie, 2004). This will identify the shortcomings of the disaster response and help comprehend how such a disaster has influenced tourism development and planning in Thailand, showing that this was a mirror opposite to how a disaster should be handled according to existing research (Ritchie, 2004; Miller et al., 2006; Coppola, 2015; Faulkner, 2001; Baldini et al., 2012).

Finally, the chapter will discuss the notion of 'strategic drift' (Johnson, 2009, p. 179) and 'boiled frog syndrome' (Richardson, Nwankwo & Richardson, 1994, p. 10) to explain how host attitudes to tourism may increase disaster vulnerability. These discussions will provide theoretical and practical insights that may support the process of identifying destination vulnerability and limitations in disaster response and recovery.

The objectives of the chapter are as follows:

- To examine the influence of a natural disaster upon destination redevelopment.
- To critically assess the prospect of a clean slate in development terms post-disaster.

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