

Case Report

Habeas Corpus: Argentinean Tourists Stranded

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Abstract: COVID-19 has doubtless generated a great negative impact in the tourism industry. The measures disposed by governments to contain the virus included strict lockdowns and the closure of borders and airspaces, without mentioning the imposition of social distancing. As a result of this, thousands of tourists were stranded abroad, without food or financial assistance. The recovery of the industry is slow, and gradually Europe and the US have returned to a new normal. In Argentina, rather, things have become worse. At the end of June, President Fernandez disposed a new border closure that left thousands of Argentineans stranded again. This case report focuses on the testimonies, fears and expectancies of those stranded tourists.

Keywords: COVID-19; the tourism industry; lockdown; new normal; stranded tourists



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1. Introduction

SARS-CoV-2 (known as COVID-19), a virus outbreak widely reported at the time to have started in Wuhan (China), has caused not only the tourism industry but also global trade to grind to an unparalleled halt. To contain the infection, governments immediately disposed restrictive measures which included the closure of borders and airspace, as well as the cancellation of international flights, without mentioning the imposition of the strictest lockdowns [1]. Some voices suggested that the tourism industry is the main disseminator and victim of COVID-19. The current technological breakthroughs, as well as the infrastructure of high mobilities associated with overcrowded cities, accelerated a rapid dissemination of the virus, creating a situation that was almost impossible to reverse [2]. This global pandemic negatively affected the tourism industry, changing the current travel behavior as well as the geopolitical relations among nations [3]. To some extent, globalization gives way to a new fractured world where foreign tourists are treated as undesired guests. Foreign tourists have been blamed for being carriers of the virus or disinterested persons who are insensitive to the disposition of health authorities. Interesting studies suggest that long-dormant racism against foreign or Asian tourists have surfaced in the West [4–6]. To this grim landscape, we must add the thousands of tourists stranded worldwide, some of them surviving without shelter, food or financial assistance. In Jacques Derrida's terms, they are the “new parasites” of a miscarried (failed) hospitality; so to speak, they are citizens who remain in a liminoid space of hybridization without identity and belonging (place of origin) [7]. To put this simply, exiled travelers struggle to survive while dwelling “in the riddles of the non-places” [8].

On 26 June 2021, President Alberto Fernandez—in consonance with the Migratory Office—sanctioned a new resolution reducing the quota of Argentinean tourists who can arrive at Ezeiza International Airport (Ministro Pistarini). This quota, originally set at 2000 persons, was cut to 600 passengers per day coming from abroad. As a result of this, thousands of Argentinean tourists were stranded in different countries worldwide, with some of them forced to live in inhumane conditions. Unlike other instances, where consulates were firmly instructed to assist these expatriates, currently there are no clear efforts of the government to assist expatriates abroad. Health authorities enthusiastically applauded the resolution, arguing that four out of ten who come from the US and Europe violated the lockdown. Furthermore, the Argentinean government took steps to impose

a new mandatory quarantine of 10 days for all Argentinean citizens coming from any geographical point where the Indian Delta strain of coronavirus predominates. Health authorities reported that this was an efficient measure to avoid the Delta strain entering the country. The resolution in dispute was suddenly made, causing panic and confusion in Argentina simply because the number of international flights accepted to land was ultimately reduced to only three commercial planes per day.

From the previous background, two research questions arise. What are the real motivations and problems of Argentineans who fly to the US to be inoculated? Additionally, what are the effects of the recent disposition that reduced the quota of Argentineans able to come back?

The present case report gathers some testimonies and interviews of stranded tourists in Europe and the US. We used the snowball method which suggests each interviewee recommend the next person to consult. Although the sample is not statistically representative of the universe and the outcome cannot be extrapolated it still gives interesting outcomes which describe a situation to be studied in future approaches. The degree of discontent of these tourists was a real obstacle to drawing the sample. Therefore, we carefully sampled the respondents according to a snowball method.

2. COVID-19 and Tourism: A Short Introduction

Doubtless, the literature discussing the effects of COVID-19 in the tourism industry abounds. Some studies emphasized the pandemic as an outstanding opportunity to re-start the industry in a more sustainable way that helps mitigate the negative effects of climate change [9,10]. Whereas others emphasized the need for adopting new methodologies to understand tourism in a new normal. Further, digital technologies offer a fertile ground to explore new dimensions of virtual tourism in a post-COVID-19 world- [11]. As Vanessa Gowreesunkar et al. put it, the current pervasive crisis accelerated by the pandemic includes not only the economic factor but also the multiplications of different social maladies which harm daily life. In normal conditions, the industry seems to be subject to an ongoing competitive spirit which leads to unsustainable conditions of exploitation. Though the pandemic gives a new (great) opportunity to the tourism industry, classic management and marketing—as managerial disciplines—are insufficient to find innovative solutions in an uncertain world [12]. The combination, if not synergy, of different theories with clear (adjusted) diagnosis is vital to expand the current understanding of the real effects of the pandemic. In consonance with this, Francesc Romagosa eloquently observes that the pandemic gradually ushers globalized capitalism into bankruptcy. The future of tourism depends on many factors. Specialists have no certain horizons on how long the crisis will last [13]. Tourism-phobia may very well be one of the feasible signs which mainly mark the future of a post-COVID-19 society. Having said this, travel behavior is gradually changing, adopting the proximity tourism mode. More domestic—and less risky—tourism is a tendency which has come to stay. In consequence, domestic tourist destinations are prone to enhancing their resilience while reducing their dependency on external (international) markets. Last, but not least, Korstanje coined the term “wicked gaze” to denote a much deeper process of hostility against foreign tourists as long as the pandemic lasts. British sociologist John Urry used the term tourist gaze to explain the rise of a new cultural matrix that frames what can be gazed at or not. Here, we have to dissociate the tourist gaze from the gaze on tourists [14].

In a hyper-globalized world, tourists are valorized as ambassadors of democratic and prosperous societies. In a post-COVID-19 scenario, tourists are now demonized as potential carriers of a lethal virus. To put this bluntly, in the post-COVID-19 world, tourists are undesired guests who are closely monitored and controlled. The globalized landscape, which originally inspired Urry, has been replaced by an emerging feudalized world fraught with geopolitical tensions and separatist movements as well as inter-ethnic disputes. It is safe to say that tourists are burdened with further travel bans and restrictions that impede their mobilities. Although the literature advanced a lot just after the original outbreak,

little is known on the connection of COVID-19 and tourism-phobia, above all partisan or chauvinist expressions directed against Chinese (Asian) tourists. In addition, less attention was certainly given to the expectances, hopes and fears of those stranded tourists abroad. In the next section, we fill the gap, providing a firm study case based on some interviews conducted with Argentinean tourists stranded in the US and Europe during the end of June of 2021.

2.1. *Tourists Abroad: A Study Case*

Habeas corpus is a legal term normally invoked to protect individual and constitutional liberties and rights when they are threatened illegally by authorities. The free choice of moving as well as traveling abroad is a basic right protected by the constitution. COVID-19 not only suspended part of these rights temporarily but also pressed the legal system to balance between the health protocols and constitutional rights. Due to the lack of vaccines in the country, thousands of citizens flew to Miami to be freely inoculated. As explained in the introductory section, by the end of June, President Fernandez changed the quota of incoming Argentinean citizens from 2000 to 600 persons per day. The presidential resolution created not only unparalleled chaos in international companies but also forced many compatriots to be stranded at their destinations. The government adduces that the resolution corresponds with health issues oriented to stop the Indian strain propagated in the global north. Some critical voices suggest that this resolution is at least unconstitutional, deriving from partisan and ideological discourses. Whether for kirchnerites Miami Florida is seen as the doorstep of the American Empire, no less true seems to be that tourists who travel there are demonized as traitors who betray the homeland. Alberto Fernandez reached the presidency as a candidate with Frente de todos (Everybody's Front) in the 2019 elections. The present section contains a small portion of the ten interviews conducted through Zoom, Google Meet and Skype with different families stranded in the US and Europe just after Fernandez's polemic resolution.

2.2. *I Feel Abandoned by My Government*

As stated in an earlier section, thousands of tourists have been stranded in Miami, Florida as well as in different airports worldwide after President Alberto Fernandez's resolution to reduce the quota of incoming tourists to Argentina from abroad. The term abandoned or stranded was strictly used by respondents. For example, Marcelo (male, 28 years old) claims "I am stranded in the US without financial support and food. I am living with what some friends give me. I feel abandoned by the government, by the state. I have never thought President Fernandez makes a disposition like this. I am thousands of miles away from my home, my family ... fully disappointed of this! If you ask, I do believe the government wants to punish us because we opt for being vaccinated in the US". This coincides with Marcela (female, 35 years old) who overtly says "I am calling to the Aerolineas Argentinas [Argentinean Airlines] since this morning and my flight was scheduled to August 4. I called several times to change that but without any result. I am desperate! I need to come back urgently. Like me, almost two hundred compatriots are sleeping everywhere at the airport ... this is a clear implicit sanction of this communist government, we live like in Cuba people flies but cannot return".

These interviewees feel abandoned by the state adducing partisan ideologies to castigate those citizens who flew to the US or first-world destinations. For them, the US is considered a vaccine tourist destination preferred due to the easier process to get inoculated. The scarcity of vaccines in Argentina pushes many tourists to travel abroad to be vaccinated.

2.3. *Travelers Abroad: The Banality of Tourism*

The crisis provoked by the global pandemic divides public opinion into two sides. Those who are in support of the government and the travel bans distinguish themselves from those who demand for their liberties and rights to be respected despite the situation.

In the same vein, tourists were trivialized as hedonistic and naïve travelers who maximize their pleasure no matter the health condition of the country. On different occasions, President Fernandez and his ministers raged against tourists who violate the lockdown or were kept insensitive to the current sanitary context. Juan (male, 59 years old) exclaimed, “I am annoyed with this government. They treat us as citizens of the second class. The government discriminates against us thinking we are leisure travelers who are part of a privileged elite. I was working in the US when my work visa expired. Now I need to come back to Argentina. The Government closes the doors to us because they hate us”. Maria (female 22 years old) is stranded in London given the fact that she was a postgraduate student. She replies “this pandemic divides the world in two, those who can travel (like us) and those who lost their jobs (because of the failures of the governments to stop the pandemic). This government retaliates on the mobile citizens who can travel abroad. This is more complex than hating it is a new state of the world where tourists are demonized as potential evildoers or carriers of the COVID19”. In both interviews, participants claim that the government undermines them as second-class citizens, marginalizing them into a peripheral position. Lastly, the government is still insensitive to their needs for assistance abroad. Strong terms like discrimination or marginalization are used by the participants.

2.4. *The Fear of Traveling*

Some other interviewees evinced a dormant fear of traveling, particularly after the government restrictions. In sharp contrast with other participants, the consulted persons do not have a bad image of the government. Contrariwise, they are part of a minority that exhibited fear of traveling in the past. This seems to be the case of Jose (male 35 years old) who says “I do not believe that Fernandez should be blamed for this. The problem is that I have a manifest panic to travel after the pandemic. It looks like I will never travel again in the future. What I feel now, is the same I felt after 9/11 (the attacks to the World Trade centre). I was almost four years without flying . . . now I feel the same sentiment of panic in my veins and body”. Similarly, Rose (female, 45 years old) casts some doubts on the possibility to start a leisure journey in the future: “I planned this trip to the US over months I know it is not the best time. We are facing a pandemic! I suffered agora-phobia in the past for what my therapist suggested to me to make this travel. I do not know when my flight will be placed. I am desperate without money and lodging, I am sleeping at the airport”.

This suggests that events like 9/11 or the COVID-19 crisis activate some traumatic experiences which paralyze travelers. This sentiment of aversion seems to remain stable over years, until another similar traumatic event takes place.

2.5. *Limitations and Future Research*

The present case report describes the fear, anxieties and expectancies of Argentinean tourists stranded abroad, an exciting and novel theme, but further research is needed. Unfortunately, we were unable to draw a larger sample of interviewees not only because of COVID-19 restrictions which impeded face-to-face interviews in Buenos Aires, but also participants were too upset, anxious or avoidant to be interviewed. In addition, the technique is based on qualitative methods and cannot be inferred or extrapolated to other samples or universes. It remains to be seen whether future approaches include other nationalities and age cohorts. In consonance with recently published studies, such as Chen, Huang and Li [15], and Korstanje [16], it is suggested that stranded tourists of many nationalities were rescued by their governments while paying the repatriation costs.

3. Conclusions

The effects of COVID-19 in the tourism industry seem to be long lasting. The specialized literature focuses on the opportunity for the rebirth of the tourism industry, as well as the importance of laying the foundations towards a new epistemology, but less is said about stranded tourists, which means the set of tourists who are unable to return to their homes because of COVID-19 restrictions. We have conducted exploratory

research, finding three indicators: the sentiment of abandonment citizens feel when they are preventing from returning because of airspace (border) closure and a deep process of marginalization that divides the “good” citizens who passively accept the lockdown from those who planned to travel abroad (bad citizens). In this token, participants said that they feel discriminated against by the Argentinean government because they traveled to the US. Lastly, we came across those who had a type of phobia or aversion to travel. As with 9/11, the crisis accelerated a dormant fear of flying, a point which merits further research in other approaches.

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