A "New Normality" for Residents and Tourists: How Can a Disaster Become a Tourist Resource?

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Abstract Although Italy is ranked as one of the five European Countries with a high probability of being exposed to a natural hazard, 75 % of Italian housing stock does not meet any anti-seismic criteria. In addition to this already fragile scenario, the fact that Italy is one of the countries characterised by a rich cultural heritage opens new issues regarding the impact of a disaster on this territory. The current social science debate is already pointing out that the disaster's recovery phase needs to move on from a physical and economic dimension towards a social and cultural one. However, much needs to be explored—especially in Europe—about how to deal with a tourist destination during and after a disaster. A "new normality" has to be found for the residents as well as for tourists and visitors. Beyond dark tourism, the recovery phase for a destination can work on finding new meanings and policies aimed at reshaping a new imagery which could encapsulate the tragic memory. The aim of this chapter is to present two Italian cases that in different ways have worked on the recovery/reconstruction phase within a touristic frame: the town of Longarone (1963 Vajont disaster) became a destination of a collective memory and the town of Comeglians (1976 Friuli earthquake) turned into an innovative tourist destination. Were these examples successful and can a lesson be learned from them?

Keywords Disaster tourism • Dark tourism • Tourist destination • Vajont • *Albergo diffuso* • Comeglians

1 Introduction

In the last decades the impact of natural hazards has increased due to the growth of population density in hazardous zones along with the increase of the frequency and intensity of extreme events as a consequence of climate changes (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2013). According to the statistics produced by UNEP (United Nations Environment Program 2010) regarding the occurrence of

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catastrophes worldwide from 1950 to 2008, this figure has increased threefold in the last 30 years. Or more precisely, as Wisner et al. (2003) stressed, what has increased is the number of disasters in terms of declaration of disaster areas, economic losses and the number of victims. Alexander (2005) reminds that "on average about 220 natural catastrophes, 70 technological disasters and three new armed conflicts occur each year" (Alexander 2005, p. 25).

However, not all places are affected by disasters in the same way; the disaster entity varies drastically depending on the local context. There is an important relationship between natural elements and the cultural, social and economic organisations of the affected society (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). As recent literature points out, the probability of a disaster having more devastating effects in one place than another depends on the local vulnerability of the place (Cutter et al. 2000). In other words, there is a correlation between the potential risk and the social resistance and reliance of a specific place (Kasperson et al. 1995; Cutter 1996).

This approach has been commonly used to argue that socially excluded communities or deprived areas are more in danger than others—implying geographical, social and economic disparities.

This theoretical approach can also give us the chance to provide an interesting contribution to the tourism debate. The tourist industry and tourist destinations are not immune to disasters. In general terms, in tourist destinations tourist and local communities are seen as two separate and sometimes conflicting populations; the question is to understand whether this might change if a disaster occurs.

The chapter aims to explore the social impact of a disaster and the innovative role that tourism can play. Although some tourist places do not have a low social vulnerable index in the pre-event phase, they might result as being more vulnerable and with a lower social reliance in responding and recovering from the event.

A tourist destination can become vulnerable to disasters from different perspectives:

- From the economic point of view, a tourist destination in a pre-disaster phase can have a very flourishing local economy which can be badly affected by the disaster. The economic organisation of the tourist industry is often characterised by a local or small and medium size local business (Cioccio and Michael 2007) which, in itself, is not an indicator of vulnerability but it can be seen as a risk factor. Moreover, if the tourist economy is based on international investors, these investors might no longer find economic benefits in investing in a devastated area.
- From a physical perspective, a disaster can have a strong impact on a tourist destination: besides damaging private houses with the high risk of people becoming homeless, a disaster in a tourist destination can also destroy parts of cultural/natural heritage that are core icon attractions of the area or core symbols for local identities. The tsunami that hit the Maldives in 2004 irreparably destroyed the coral reef; the 2005 Nepal earthquake caused thousands of victims, destroyed entire villages, left millions of homeless and also annihilated an inestimable cultural heritage.

- A sociological dimension should also be taken into account. A tourist destination is populated by various social groups such as local communities, temporary workers, temporary residents, tourists, etc. The impact and the consequences of a disaster on each of these populations might vary. A tourist destination has a high presence of temporary populations represented by both tourists (Burby and Wagner 1996) and seasonal or temporary workers who are less able to prepare or respond to a disaster. With respect to tourists that "are more vulnerable than locals because here they are less familiar to local hazards and the resources that can be relied on to avoid risk, and they are less independent". With respect to the seasonal workers again Faulkner stresses that "the level of staff turnover has not been taken sufficiently into account in the consideration [. . .]" (Faulkner 2001, p. 20). Several studies argued that in the rescue phase temporary populations are more difficult to help; i.e. it is more difficult to have access to information, the degree of local knowledge regarding safer places and so on.
- Last but not least, a tourist destination can result as being more vulnerable also from a symbolic viewpoint. The change in the image that a tourist destination might have after a natural disaster is a big price to pay (Cassedy 1991). A place that was a symbol of entertainment and holidays might suddenly become a place of death and destruction and this vision of mass devastation might be quite difficult to wash away (Chew and Jahari 2014).

In these terms, the idea of a *disaster tourism* is a pretty new concept in social sciences. As Nagai clearly reports quoting Hiji (2012), we find disaster tourists when "tourists can (1) see disaster heritages from which they can witness the gross intensity of the disasters, (2) experience the local treasure which existed before the disaster, (3) appreciate the reconstruction process through observing the state of the residents and the industries, (4) listen to the stories of the survivors, (5) learn something" (Nagai 2012, p. 10). In other words, this concept can highlight different aspects and combinations that affect tourism, places and the impact of the event. Tourism, therefore, might be seen, according to Nagai (2012), Korstanje and Ivanov (2012), as a cultural means to react and face the disaster in an innovative way. The multidimensional impact that disaster has on a tourist destination is incredibly complex to detect due to features already mentioned. The chapter argues that post-disaster phases might be seen as "a new normality", where the disaster might become a "new companion to live with", more than an enemy to avoid. Places and communities that have to deal with the memory of the disaster have even used it as a resource for new local development. In light of these preliminary considerations, it is necessary to define better what makes a tourist destination vulnerable and how tourism "interacts" with the different phases of a disaster in different ways, bridging the gap that is still wide between tourism and disaster literature.

2 Tourism Industry Within a Disaster

The relationship between the tourist industry and disasters is a rather unexplored topic (Cohen and Cohen 2012). The little systemic research that has been carried is mainly related to how a tourist destination can respond to a disaster. First of all, a disaster configures itself as a *continuum* that is longer than the actual event and its post-period (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). A commonly used model of emergency management is characterised by four temporal stages: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery (National Governors' Association 1979).

In accordance with this heuristic model, the tourist industry also has to deal with the fact that "disasters [. . .] are frequent occurrences and require management, preparedness and response" (Hystad and Keller 2008, p. 152).

However, some research has been carried out and minimal proactive planning for the tourist industry was made (Drabek 1995; Faulkner 2001; Glaesser 2003; Hystad and Keller 2008; Kash and Darling 1998; Ritchie 2004). In this debate, the creation of a model on disaster management strategy to respond to disasters (Faulkner 2001) seems to be a central issue along with the need to create a governance system that allows the tourist sector to collaborate with the emergency unit. Nonetheless, some authors, as we will see in the next paragraph, have underlined unprecedented interrelations between tourism and emergency and shelter stage, as well as the recovery one.

We will take four dimensions into account: tourism, the place, the event and the temporal distance from the event. Looking at the interactions between those dimensions might shed new light on the debate. There are indeed some tourist places that have been hit by a disaster, other places that were not tourist destinations and that have turned into a dark tourism destination after a disaster or that are using the tourist economy as a regenerating tool for the area, even in cultural ways. Or, as Pezzullo (2010) has underlined in the case of the Katrina Hurricane, in New Orleans tourist facilities were useful during the emergency phase (i.e. tour buses were also used to evacuate survivors and tourist structures used as first aid bases); or touring was used as "field reports" for journalists and as a "lobbying tool" by politicians, becoming "a vital mode of interaction between political leaders making decisions about resources for disaster recovery" (Pezzullo 2010, p. 30). And, in the recovery phase, a new form of tourism—the *voluntourism*—was emerging and becoming very important. Volunteer tourists (students, religious associations, professional conferees) that travelled to and throughout New Orleans helped people to rebuild their houses and also "to re-image New Orleans" (Gotham 2006 in Pezzullo 2010, p. 32). As we noticed, tourism can be a resource even in unexpected ways and during the different phases of a disastrous event: a place might turn into a tourist destination in order to develop strategies of emergency management or as a part of the recovery process.

Furthermore, the desire of both local and national organisations and residents for a "new normality" could have different meanings and strategies, according to both previous characteristics and vulnerabilities of the place involved in the disaster and

the management of the disaster itself. In the case of a tourist destination, a "new normality" turns into a "rehabilitation" of the physical, socio-economic and symbolic landscape, in order to restore the flow of tourists and the image of the place as "safe" and renewed. In other cases, the tourist dimension could upset the place: in the emergency phase, whether *voluntourism* does not really meet local needs or is perceived as inadequate; in this regard, dark tourism may just hinder the local desire for a "new normality", emphasising a not yet repaired trauma or an undesired present. On the contrary, it can contribute building a collective commemoration of the event or a celebration of the recovery phase. In this respect, the case of "dark tourism" related to Wenchuan earthquake (2008) is rather well known. The Chinese Government opened seismic memorial sites in 2010 in order to celebrate the recovery process driven by the Communist Party. In their visits, tourists experience feelings of "obligation and commemoration mixed with curiosity" (Tang 2014, p. 1338) at the same time, and "*gratification, appreciation and satisfaction* for economic and social recovery from the earthquake" (Tang 2014, p. 1338).

The role of tourism might be polyvalent in a place that might turn into a destination because of a disaster: the tourism industry can help and can even be used for the production of a collective (or partial) memory of the event, at both a government and resident level (as in the Wenchuan or Vajont cases—see next paragraph); from a different perspective, tourists can improve local economies and produce a "new normality" not even imagined or desired by survivors before they were hit by the "tragedy". In extreme cases, a locality can paradoxically disregard prevention or safety, in order to exploit tourism or the beauty of a hazardous place (i.e. tourism related to volcanos areas): in these cases, a "new normality" is presented within the conflicting values at stake.

3   Disaster Tourism Beyond Dark Tourism

The case of Hurricane Katrina, cited in the previous paragraph, is also relevant because it is one of the first cases in which the disaster has become a pivot for a peculiar form of tourism: *dark tourism*. Indeed, in the recovery phase, many tours were organised in the hardest hit zones of New Orleans, performing "public histories of the present" (Pezzullo 2010, p. 34). Indeed, according to Pezzullo (2010) tourists visiting the disaster areas were paying a *moral* tribute to the local community and to one of the most important cities in America by listening survivors' storytelling.

Dark tourism has recently been seen also as a recovery strategy for post-events. This term was first used by Foley and Lennon (1996) to define "the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites" (Foley and Lennon 1996, p. 198), connecting this phenomenon to Western modernity and mass media exposure of tragic events, too (Korstanje 2015). According to Stone and Sharpley (2008), they seem to follow the concept of *black spots*, the first notion of dark attractions connected to the mass *spectacularisation* of death, first

introduced by Rojek (1993) and defined as "commercial [tourist] developments of grave sites and sites in which celebrities or large numbers of people have met with sudden and violent death" (Rojek in Stone and Sharpley 2008, p. 577): it can be a pilgrimage to Jean Dean's fatal car accident or Lockerbie, in Scotland, where a Pan Am plane crashed in 1988. In this regard, various authors distinguish different shades of "dark", according to various types of location, performance and empathy involved in the journey: for Miles (2002), for example, there is a difference "between 'dark' and 'darker' tourism based upon the location (. . .) between sites *associated with* and sites *of death*" (Stone and Sharpley 2008, p. 578), and this means that it is darker visiting Auschwitz than the US Holocaust Memorial in Washington DC.

More recently, dark tourism has become a more inclusive term. Dark tourism can include either visiting a spontaneous or official (Rittichainuwat 2008, Podoshen 2013) commemoration place or folk epigraphy practices (i.e. in the World Trade Center after 9/11, Sather-Wagstaff 2009) or museums dedicated to the death event (i.e. Holocaust museums in Cohen 2011), or even visiting a place specifically because it was hit by mass destruction (see for example Phuket 2 years after 2004 tsunami, Rittichainuwat 2008).

Therefore, what these cases have in common could not be only "death" (Seaton 1996) but the impact of an event on a place producing consequences that could represent a disaster; that is why we could go beyond dark tourism, trying to dissociate the implicit equivalence between "dark" and "death" and to better define specific cases in which disaster and tourism interact.

Considering disaster tourism as tourism in a place affected by a disaster (Kelman and Dodds 2009), we can interpret tourism within a disaster management framework, looking deeper into which strategies are elaborated by residents and tourists to reconfigure a new sense of *hereness*, useful in transforming a location into a destination (Chew and Jahari 2014, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998); furthermore, precisely because of the need to rebuild a horizon of meanings after a disaster, death may paradoxically better hide or encapsulate "a second life as heritage" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998) to places that were hit by a disaster in different ways.

A "new normality" or "a second life" can, therefore, take different shapes. We will now present two Italian case studies that in different ways have worked on recovery and reconstruction phases using tourism as a pivot: the town of Longarone (1963 Vajont disaster) has become a destination of an alleged collective memory; the town of Comeglians (1976 Friuli earthquake) has turned into an innovative tourist destination. Therefore, we will focus on the relationship between tourism and the different phases of an event, beyond the concept of dark tourism.

3.1 The Vajont Case: Tourism as a Narration of Contested Memory

On October 9th, 1963, a massive landslide on Mount Toc (Veneto Region, North-East of Italy) provoked a *megatsunami* on an artificial lake (250 m high waves) that overtopped the Vajont Dam, swept away the town of Longarone and damaged (on the other side of the Mount) the town of Erto, causing around 1917 deaths. The reasons of this disaster, thanks to a long trial and different investigations, were finally attributable to negligence by the scientists that projected (at that time) the biggest Dam in the world: they were mainly interested in economic gains of the SADE company (that right in those years became ENEL, a State-owned firm) thanks to political complicity at all levels (Merlin 2001). Local communities were not involved in the project and all the clues (landslides, earthquakes, local knowledge) and scientific research suggesting that the Mount could have collapsed were systematically ignored—starting from the meaning of the Mount's name, that in the local language means "ill" (Merlin 2001). Even though there were some dark tourists immediately after the tragedy, some years later, during the trial and the reconstruction process, the Vajont valley was already "assuming another dimension for public consciousness: it became a tourist place to visit. With curiosity, perhaps with pity, never with rebellion"[1] (Merlin 2001, p. 166).

The process of defining responsibilities and producing a memory of the event was extremely conflictual (Ventura 2015): immediately after the disaster a "Committee of *survivors* for the defence of Vajont's rights" was formed in order to claim justice during the criminal trial against ENEL. The criminal trial established in 1971 that an ENEL and a State manager were accused of multiple manslaughter and unintentional disaster.

It was only the final sentence of the civil trial that set a compensation for damages for the survivors in 1997. And it was after this event and after the reconstruction process (Erto was divided in 1966 between the new Vajont Municipality and a 1971 New Erto. Longarone was rebuilt between 1967 and 1975) that an institutionalised memory was created in the Vajont valley. A new "Committee of *survived* people" (not "survivors") was created, in order to "pursue the aim of solidarity and moral and psychological support to the survived people to the tragedy of Vajont, as well as the right to disseminate the knowledge and preserve the memory of occurred events"[2] (Ventura 2015, p. 5); in 2003, the Vajont Foundation was created and in 2009 it contributed to the opening of the *Longarone Vajont Museum—Flashes of history*; in 2003, the Vajont victims' cemetery of Fortogna was rebuilt and "became a national monument" (http://www.prolocolongarone.it/) and in 2007, the top of the Dam was opened for guided tours carried out by

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[1]The authors' translation of the original text.

[2]The authors' translation of the original text.

Informatori della Memoria (Memory informants), volunteers properly trained and educated in order to transmit the collective memory of the tragedy.

A tourist experience was built upon a combination of the local "*survived*" Committee's stories and the impressions given by the visitors about "places of memory" like the Dam, the Museum, the Cemetery, the new Longarone Church and the old Town bell of Longarone (the only building survived to the wave). Those two elements work together to build a dialectic circle of representations that configures a "new normality" for tourists. Since the 2000s, Longarone has been identified more and more by tourists with the Dam and the Dam has become the symbol of a history that is narrated through the Museum and by the *Memory informants*: in the tourists' experience, it is a heritage that exists if narrated through an institutionalised memory created at a local level that transmits the cultural efforts of survivors/ survived in facing the disaster in order to reconstruct their own *history*. A part of this memory could now exist only with the distance encapsulated in the heritage; tourists can contribute to cultivate this distance and this memory. The museum is defined by the local association that manages it as "a tool of knowledge of local history, indelibly marked by the worst tragedy of Post-war Italy. It intends to convey to the visitor a strong emotion and a real awareness that the value of life and the lessons of the past are essential foundations for building our future" (http:// www.prolocolongarone.it, last accessed on 18 December 2015).

If the aftermath of the Vajont disaster is a hard and controversial history, nowadays tourism could be both a sector of its economy and a cultural way of transmitting the narration of part of the Longarone inhabitants' memory. At the same time, for tourists "Vajont" became the place of a public lesson on national history, an educational place where you must go in order to 'not forget the mistakes', and to experience a terrible truth and a compassionate feeling for the victims, that is their relationship with 'the limits of human trust in science' and with their national sense of belonging to a communal history (Fig. 1).

3.2 Comeglians: From a Disaster to an Innovative Policy for Tourist Industry

In 1976, the Friuli region (North-East of Italy) was affected by an earthquake. The epicentre was Gemona, there 993 people died and 80,000 lost their homes. The Gemona earthquake is very famous in Italian history because it was rather massive and it affected a very poor and deprived area. The process of reconstruction started quite soon. In some remote mountain areas near Gemona the re-construction phase was embedded into a more complex process of local development. Friuli was one of the regions that during the nineteenth century lost the highest number of people due to the migration phenomena and the process of urbanisation towards the industrial areas. The Friuli disaster has become famous due to the active and proactive behaviour of the victims. Immediately after the earthquake the local community

Fig. 1 A tour to Vajont Dam, Erto e Casso, Pordenone, Italy. *Source*: Davide Gangale

organised themselves: tent camp committees and a Committee of the committees were organised to coordinate the first housing aid. The government and voluntary aids came onto the scene later. According to Strassoldo and Cattarinussi (1978), the proactive collective and organised action fainted away in the recovery phase. There was a massive exodus of the local population from the affected areas (especially in the mountains) to the seaside areas. Within this scenario, innovation especially in the recovery phase came from the external agents. Among all, attention should be given to the case of an innovative project of recovery strongly connected with the tourist industry.

The mountain areas were the most deprived areas and, therefore, the process of reconstruction was seen also as a good opportunity to re-launch those areas. In 1978 a project, based on an academic work under the supervision of the University of Zurich, was proposed to convert an area into a tourist destination. Since 1982, the north area of Gemona—the towns of Maranzanis, Povolaro e Tualis—has become an interesting laboratory of innovation for tourism. Thanks to several EU Funds (Lander II) three towns have been rebuilt and turned into new forms of tourism facilities. Instead of building hotels, old houses have been renovated to host the tourists. The project was mainly based to promote a kind of tourism that included a strong involvement of the community. This new model of tourism facilities was named *Albergo diffuso*. Albergo diffuso of Comeglians is composed of several houses that have been turned into tourist accommodations. Actually it has a maximum capacity of 105 tourists distributed in 14 houses (which very soon will

Fig. 2 A view of Albergo Diffuso Comeglians, Udine, Italy. *Source*: Lucia Miotti

be more than 22 houses). Annually Comeglians has around 5500 arrivals including tourists and day visitors and its turnover is around 10,000 euros for bednights. Comeglians has been included in several trekking circuits and therefore the village does not only provide accommodations but it is also becoming a valid knot of day excursions. Data show that Comeglians is a tourist project that has tried to offer multifunctional services aiming to attract tourists and day hikers (2010, source: Albergo diffuso Comeglians).

Since then, *Albergo diffuso* has become a well-recognised innovative model of hospitality and has spread worldwide. It is presented as a model of sustainable development, which aims at the exploitation of local resources both tangible (cultural heritage, agriculture and handicrafts, small businesses) and intangible (traditions, knowledge, social ties). This model is an attractive form of sustainable tourism for both present and future generations because it promotes heritage and is oriented to the recovery of a locality's cultural identity and to the revival of traditional aspects (Fig. 2).

4   Conclusion

These original ways in which tourism and disaster *interact* can reveal how different tactics and strategies (De Certeau 2010) can play with different kinds of vulnerabilities and actors in disaster contexts and at different levels, in the re-configuration of a "new normality" for residents and tourists. Looking at a post-disaster phase as an

attempt to reduce a place vulnerability in order to avoid a hypothetical future hazardous event, we can conclude that disaster tourism may also provide some tools for building or carrying out a sense of *hereness* that could offer cultural, social and economic means to face the disaster and the aftermath. Our attempt wants to go beyond a reductionist concept of dark tourism and how to manage a tourist destination hit by a disaster by focusing on some dimensions (place, temporal dimension, event and tourism), which, if analysed and correlated, let us understand in better ways how disaster tourism can be explained and how residents and tourists can "deal" with it. The need to study disasters in tourist areas is not only relevant because the tourist industry is expanding and tourist developments are frequently located in areas at risk, but because tourists, seasonal workers and temporary population might be more vulnerable when a disaster occurs. The intersection between tourism and disaster is not limited to disaster risk reduction or dark tourism and has to be more explored: as we have shown, tourism can be seen and might be analysed in different ways as a propulsive means in every phase of the disaster cycle.

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