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Abstracts from the panel

Between commemoration and dark tourism:
Remembering disasters in post-disaster contexts



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The Long September 19: Remembering Impermanence in Mexico City

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In early 2018, protestors in Mexico City successfully quashed a monument that the government had proposed to commemorate the victims of the earthquake that struck the city the year prior. While some of these organisers were contesting the misallocation of recovery resources, they regularly told me that, in Mexico City, you can't remember earthquakes. The status of memory had been put into uncanny relief by the earthquake's peculiarity: the 2017 earthquake happened on September 19, the same date as the 1985 earthquake that radically reshaped city space and national politics. On each September 19 post-1985, the Mexican state sought to reestablish its legitimacy by: recognising the "heroes of civil protection", promulgating new building codes, and inaugurating monuments and plazas. Most significantly, the Mexican state developed a public earthquake early warning technology, and used it to stage commemorative evacuation drills each anniversary. September 19 became a day in which the Mexican state could express its contrition for the past disaster by its orientation toward future ones. But this future-past involution contributed to the earthquake's harm: when people heard the earthquake alert on September 19, 2017, they thought it was part of the yearly commemoration, and remained in their buildings until the city began to shake. Now, residents are unsure how, or if, they should remember earthquakes. Building on 20 months of ethnographic research, including the anti-monument protests and the three anniversaries of the 2017 earthquake, I will explore the question: how can forgetting disaster be a form of remembering?

Disaster, Vulnerabilities and (Dark) Tourism in the Indian Himalaya

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In June 2013 occurred what has been named the “Himalayan Tsunami” in the Indian Himalaya. Heavy rain triggered a glacial lake outburst flood, landslides and flash floods. An estimated several thousand people were killed mainly around the Hindu temple in Kedarnath, and the tourist infrastructure between four Hindu temples was massively destroyed, along with the source of income it had provided for the local population. The presentation deals with the nexus of tourism, vulnerabilities and disasters and analyses empirically determined vulnerabilities during and after the events of 2013. We describe the historical development of tourism in the region, the primary and secondary effects of the “Himalayan Tsunami” related to it and present the role (dark) tourism has played in process of reconstruction. The analyses show that tourism is a key driver for the emergence of various vulnerabilities in the communities affected by the “Himalayan Tsunami” before, during and after the disaster. This result is embedded in the scientific discourse on tourism and disasters and discussed critically.

Between commemoration and commodification. Ukrainian public discourses on the touristification of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone

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Chernobyl is a polysemous site, or in the words of Philip Stone, a 'heterotopia', i.e. a ritual space that exists outside of time, and a space of contradiction and duality. As such, Chernobyl is variously connected to danger, degeneration, suffering and death, as well as the manifestation of the risk society and the collapse of a superpower. At the same time, Chernobyl is also related to regeneration, resilience and a new beginning.

The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone has gradually been opened up to visitors the last two decades, culminating with the plans of president Zelensky to develop Chernobyl into a positive brand for Ukraine and site of extensive tourism. An important part of the plan is to create a 'green corridor' to Chernobyl, in the sense of eradicating corruption in the Chernobyl tourist industry. Thus, Chernobyl seems to be in the process of being transformed from a national trauma to a laboratory for building a new Ukraine.

Scholars on dark or disaster tourism have recently turned their gaze upon local perceptions and attitudes towards tourism to disaster sites. In line with this, I will in the proposed paper analyse how Ukrainian news articles portray the touristification of Chernobyl.