

1. Opinions



‘Revenge Travel’: Aeromobilities and the aviation industry after the Pandemic

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In 2022, after two years of being grounded due to the Covid-19 pandemic, passengers quickly took to the skies once more in a phenomenon known as “Revenge Travel”. At the same time, the airline industry, weakened by the crisis, has itself embarked on an insatiable quest for growth that ignores current ecological and social issues.

The rebound of international air travel in the second half of 2022 was nothing short of spectacular. Contrary to the International Air Transport Association’s (IATA) projections at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector had recovered a full year earlier than expected, as border restrictions rapidly dissolved in spring of that year (Cornwell, 2022). In popular parlance, the term ‘revenge travel’ became the shorthand for a world eager to fly again, in a release of pent-up demand and frustration over what the pandemic had denied for over two years.

Given this context, it would seem that the ebbing of the pandemic was less a return to where 2019 had left off, than a jolt—if in the reverse direction—to a new height for aviation. To some extent, one could even argue that the reopening of the world ushered in a ‘new’ chapter for air travel, as the sector grapples now not just with profitability, but also an unprecedented labour crunch, new health procedures and the ever-present spectre of another global crisis.

Owing to its impacts, COVID-19 has thus accelerated existing trends in the industry as well as transformed it, making aeromobilities a more fraught and problematic activity. By charting recent developments in major air markets and aviation’s global governance, I will organise this discussion around three themes: one, the increasing ‘automating away’ of labour at airports; two, the uptick in exclusionary and overbooking practices; and, three, the dilution of climate change mitigation efforts to keep aeromobilities on track. In short, the pandemic has made the aviation industry a hungrier creature than before, even as—or perhaps because—travellers welcome its return.

Revenge 1: Labour Shortage and Automation

Belonging to an industry that has long led technological advances, it comes as no surprise that airports have recently turned to robots and digital technologies to automate their most basic functions. From self-check-in kiosks to automated bag drops to information services, an array of machines—at times armed with prosthetics, sensors and artificial intelligence—now preside over a variety of verification tasks once thought too tedious, and yet intelligent, to be taken over by robots. To be sure, this reliance on robots had been trending even before the pandemic, but the difficulty of hiring workers during aviation’s recent rebound has created the perfect conditions for investing in these machines. In other words, while these technologies were once-feared by workers for their potential to replace humans, they are now deemed indispensable.



Figure 1. Emirates new self-check in kiosks that can be connected to personal mobile devices at Dubai International Airport. (Source: author’s own)



Figure 2. A cleaning robot at Changi Airport Terminal 1 (Source: author's own)

This current state of affairs must also be traced to the mass layoff of aviation workers back in early 2020. Unlike office workers, financial traders, or news reporters, theirs was a vocation that was not amenable to 'working from home'. Adding to these troubles, the prolonged travel slump meant that many of these attrited workers have now moved on from their old jobs, making their return to the industry highly unlikely even as air traffic picks up.

Faced with a dearth of available workers, many international airports have gone full throttle with their automation plans (see Zeng et al., 2020)— that have sometimes existed for a long time. Notably, reactive solutions that have emerged in the last two years include: new biometric check-in kiosks for passengers at Perth airport, self-bag drops and credential authenticating technologies for security screening at Los Angeles International Airport digital lounge access in Dubai International, and self-processed immigration gates at Singapore Changi Airport.

Revenge 2: Seat Exclusions, Overbooking and Business Ethics

A second contention can be found in the way airlines are making aeromobility experiences more splintered and precarious for 'less valued' customers than before. Armed with newly developed digital capabilities, airlines now make exacting and rigid distinctions between the different tiers of (dis)loyal customers. To be sure, such differentiations in aviation are not new. As numerous mobilities scholars have written, the airline industry engages in a highly inequitable form of spatial and social segmentation, where some (elites) are able to speed through the airport quickly, while others are made to wait in line and endure higher degrees of scrutiny and surveillance in the name of security (Adey, 2006).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have arguably taken such differentiations to a new extreme. In particular, with business booming again, some airlines are beginning to split hairs over whether a passenger is entitled to a particular seat, or block of seats, in the same purchased class. Without recourse to international call centres, which have been outsourced and whittled down to a handful of locations—typically India or the Philippines—to save costs, passengers with special requests are now left with no other recourse than self-service on airline websites and at airport kiosks, even as algorithms block access to popular or preferred seats according to each passenger's frequent flier status with the airline and/or ticketed fare class.

Perhaps at the apex of these inequities is the practice of overbooking, where airlines sell more seats than they actually have capacity for. While the prevalence of this practice differs between airlines, TIME magazine reports that 7,143 people were involuntarily denied boarding in the first quarter of 2022— up from 742 over the same period in 2021 and 1,576 in 2020 (Popli, 2022). Meant to help airlines maximize profits, overbooking must be recognised for having disproportionately impacted low-fare and non-elite fliers today, as these passengers are automatically identified by reservation systems and their algorithms as the first to be bumped off whenever the situation requires it.

With many countries still lacking proper legislation on the matter, such practices raise questions that go beyond market segment differentiation to implicate business ethics. When travel demand far outstrips supply, airlines can effectively shirk their responsibility for sale contracts that cannot be fulfilled. Furthermore, cheaper fares transacted earlier (which lock in buyers through non-changeable, non-refundable rules) tend to be the ones to be denied first, so as to honour higher fares that airlines manage to clinch later in the booking window. Such a calculation flies in the face of the goodwill shown to the aviation industry during the pandemic, when public funds¹ were used to support floundering private businesses.

Revenge 3: Climate Change and Slow Mitigation

One could not end this discussion without acknowledging the continuing impact aeromobilities have on climate change. A hot button issue since at least the 1980s, international aviation has increasingly been called to task for its contributions to—but impunity from—greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, international legislation on this matter remains modest and slow-moving. Specifically, despite its limitation as a short-term mitigation measure for long-term atmospheric carbon, the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) overseen by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is now the primary vehicle of climate change mitigation for international aviation. A global market-based measure in its pilot phase, CORSIA works by getting airlines and aircraft operators to offset their carbon dioxide emissions annually, over 2019-2020 levels, by purchasing offset credits.

While the headline number of 115 participating states (at time of writing) seems encouraging, the scheme in fact faces strong opposition from some of the most populous aviation markets in the world such as China and India. During the 41st ICAO assembly (held in 2022), several European delegations thus expressed that CORSIA did not go far enough, and wanted to work with other countries to bring aviation in line with broader environmental goals enshrined in the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) Paris Agreement. From 2024, a new CORSIA baseline would be set at 85 percent of 2019 levels. By 2050, states would seek to attain a collective long-term aspirational goal (LTAG) of net zero emissions for aviation (ICAO, 2022b), through a basket of measures including new aircraft technologies, streamlined flight operations, and an increased turn to sustainable aviation fuels. Glaringly, the prospect of reducing air travel demand itself has not been discussed, even as the industry struggles to meet annual targets, let alone 30-year ones (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Mismatch between The International Air Transport Association's targets in alternative fuel use for aviation and actual use (in percentages). Source: Dan Ruthford, The International Council on Clean Transportation ².

Aspirational goals remain merely as they sound (aspirational), and another shock to the industry could easily derail, or at least delay, current resolutions. As it is, CORSIA has already experienced a semblance of shifting goalposts to fit airlines' recovery schedule after the pandemic. Even the wording of the LTAG contains clauses that 'would not attribute specific obligations to individual States' but allow 'each State [to] voluntarily contribute to achieving the global aspirational goals' (ICAO, 2022b: A-6). Until there is greater visibility on how the industry will act in time to come, one is left wondering whether the COVID-19 pandemic has restrained, or advanced, airlines' thirst for more flying.

A New Era for Aviation?

Recent discourse is replete with discussions of revenge travel from a consumer standpoint. What may be flying under the radar is an analogous set of revanchist and vengeful tendencies possessed by the aviation industry itself. Spanning issues from labour-automation configurations, to the business ethics of selling/denying seats, to the possible use of (pandemic) hardships to defer environmental (non)obligations, the industry is currently exhibiting a discomfiting streak of 'revenge' to make back what it has lost.

To some extent, this reaction is understandable; after all, the air travel trade did suffer an unprecedented loss of connectivity. But, if left unchecked, these current responses could also be worrying for the way they are concentrating power even more in the hands of corporations, with the full support of a travel-hungry population and global governance apparatus. In this context, it behoves ordinary citizens of the Global North who are the greatest beneficiaries of aviation to move past the shock of the last two years, to nurture a kinder aeromobility for future generations.

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Notes

- 1 At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, flag carriers received aid from their respective governments to the tune of US\$54 billion in the USA, €9 billion for Lufthansa, €117 billions for Air France-KLM and US\$13 billion for Singapore Airlines.
- 2 For further information see report by We Are Possible: Missed Target: A brief history of aviation climate targets. — Possible (wearepossible.org), May 2022.

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