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Tourism as a heritage producing machine

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this document is to analyze the role that tourism has historically played and still plays today in the emergence and affirmation of the modern concept of heritage. It particularly looks to highlight the operational co-production of heritage and tourism and shows that tourism has never worked better, faster and more efficiently as a heritage-producing machine than in this beginning of the 21st century. We are on the threshold of a new "heritage regime", which presents a gap compared with the one that produced the major European national heritages in the State-Nations of the 19th century. The tourism system (tourism actors, places and businesses as well as tourists themselves) contribute to the production of a new heritage system (heritage places, practices and actors) which functions according to its own needs and expectations, in a world of free traffic, transactions and generalized mobilities.

1. Introduction

The current proliferation of heritage has been observed by many researchers during the last decades of the 20th c. As early as the 1990s, Françoise Choay (1992) analyzed the "triple extension" of heritage; thematic, chronological and spatial. A wider and much more diverse range of artifacts is considered to be heritage by much more diverse set of heritage producers (national, regional or local players as well as cultural, ethnic, linguistic or gender groups). Nothing seems to stop the "heritage machine" from producing more and more, and more and more diverse, heritage artifacts and mentifacts. However, while the "*patrimoniphilia*" of contemporary societies is attributed to several factors, tourism is, paradoxically enough, forgotten. The purpose of this document is to analyze the role that tourism has historically played and still plays today in the emergence and affirmation of the modern concept of heritage.

We must recall that tourism and heritage appear simultaneously in the Western world. The modern notion of "historical monument" appears in the West at the 19th century, at the same time that tourism mobilities gain importance. Research on the history or geography of tourism shows the simultaneous, parallel and sometimes complicit way in which these two phenomena emerge and develop.

Research identifies heritage as one of the main tourism drivers: the existence of a rich heritage is considered, sometimes even over-deterministically, as one of the main factors of tourism development. The inverse relationship (i.e. *tourism as a heritage driver*) has been much less explored. Few analyses address the role that tourism plays not only in the recognition, but also in the social production of heritage.

In my former research, I had identified tourism as "a heritage producing machine" (Gravari-Barbas, 2012). In this document, I will particularly look to highlight the operational co-production of heritage and tourism: heritage development encourages tourism, which in turn contributes to heritage development, which encourages tourism, and so on… I will point out that this (virtuous or vicious) cycle - this text does not intend to judge - has never worked better, faster and more efficiently as in the beginning of the 21st century.

This document is organized into four sections: In the first section, I will deconstruct the consubstantiality of heritage and the locale, as is usually defined by the recent bibliography, in order to recall the role played in heritage production by the "external", often touristic, gaze. In the second section, I will critically question the "anteriority of heritage" in the heritage-tourism chain, to highlight the fact that tourism is not just a heritage "epiphenomenon", but that it can be an essential player in heritage production. The third section will deal with the way by which globalization influences the relationship between heritage and tourism, contributing to the placing of tourism in a particularly central position as a social actor of the heritage production. Lastly, the fourth section will explore in more detail the role of tourism in the contemporary production (symbolic and physical) of increasingly diverse heritages.

2. Heritage and the local: a consubstantiality to de-construct

The relationship between heritage and the local has often been

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discussed in recent years among researchers from various disciplines. The “conceptual kinship” between these two concepts, as the French geographer Guy di Méo defined it in his seminal text of 1994 (Di Méo, 1994), has produced a fruitful body of research on both heritage and tourism studies over the last two decades.

The notions of heritage and heritagization have thus been conceptually constructed, in the Western world, in a dialectical logic with the notions of the local/national and the local/national identity-building. This approach contributed to the development of a dominant working hypothesis that has weighed heavily on the understanding of the notion of heritage. According to this hypothesis, heritage is understood as a social process in which local stakeholders develop the sense of place in a local identity-building approach.

Obviously, one of the main drivers of heritage construction has historically been the European nationalism – the construction of national heritage, accompanying the construction of the national identity and space. More recently, the modern notion of the heritage, as it emerged in Western countries at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, was constructed as a guarantee against the uncertainty of a threatening future. Indeed, historians explain the heritage explosion after the 1960s as part of the identity crisis due to several phenomena such as economic crises in the western economies, deindustrialization, decolonization, desertification of the countryside, reaction to the *tabula rasa* and to the massive construction of the post-war period, and many more… The heritage concept in the 60’s and 70’s was not developed as an offensive action (as in the case of 19thc nationalisms), but as a defensive re-action mainly to globalization, the symptoms of which started to be more fiercely experienced then. It was, therefore, perceived as a means to strengthen the local identity, in a context where the sense of belonging was radically redefined by globalization.

Heritage represents a sum of artifacts that the society (authorities, decision-makers, social actors) endeavors to remove from the common life trajectory of most objects (that, subsequently, makes them transition from the object having a use-value, to “waste” and, ultimately, to extinction) in order to transform them into “semaphores” (Pomian, 1990): artifacts that convey a message (in most cases about a disappearing world, or one already having disappeared). In this sense, heritage in Western societies from the 1970s and onwards, has morphed into “identity hoarding”: a “Noah's Ark” before the “deluge” of globalization.

Several recent social developments, however, invite us to question the contemporary reasons of heritage production. Obviously, heritage is never an “endogenous” construction. On the one hand, heritage social construction aims at differentiating a (social, ethnic, political, cultural etc.) community from others. On the other hand, the outsider's gaze historically contributed to the valuation of “latent” heritage which was not appreciated by locals. Hence, it is often precisely the outsiders' point of view that offers new and original understanding, to objects and sites that seemed insignificant to local actors.

3. Deconstructing the anteriority of heritage

There are numerous research contributions on the heritage – tourism nexus. In most, tourism is understood as a phenomenon induced by the existing heritage assets, which are a posteriori discovered and “consumed” by tourists. Analyses comparing the parallel historical emergence of these two notions remain rare (Lazzarotti, 2003). As tourism is supposed to come after heritage, most research works emphasize its ambiguous and even destructive impact. However, the analysis of the heritagization process in major heritage sites highlights the role that tourism has historically played in the heritage selection and characterization. Mont-Saint-Michel, one of the most quintessential examples of European heritage, and one of the first properties to be inducted on UNESCO's World Heritage List, can be taken as an example to highlight the role tourism played to its constitution as major national heritage.

In his excellent analysis of Mont Saint-Michel, the Architect-in-Chief for Historical Monuments, Pierre-André Lablaude (1961), characterizes the Mont as a pure “monumental product”, created by its own restorers who, far more than restoring the monument, were progressively responding to the sensitivities and expectations of the Mont's visitors – and, sometimes, were even anticipating them. He recalls that when, in 1880, the Architect-in-Chief for Historical Monuments, Victor Petigrand, constructed from scratch, a 90-meter high, brand-new bell tower, he did not base his project on any historical or architectural argument, but rather on the very expectations of the Mont's visitors. Lablaude notes an “obvious complicity” between the architectural visions of the restorer's and the public's - mostly non-local - demand, for “a lyrical resurrection” of the monument. The restoration work was concomitant with the Mont's tourism evolution between 1830 and 1890: during this period, the Mont Saint-Michel evolves from a romantic and elitist tourism place, reserved to a selected audience of artists or intellectuals, to a popular tourism destination, widely visited by new tourists arriving to the Mont in large numbers. The construction in 1879 of a road dam, allowing people to reach the Mont by carriage, put the site within reach of increasingly numerous visitors. Tourists replaced the pilgrims, which used to be the first “visitors” to the Mont. From 1892 to 1902, the Mont Saint-Michel is the best endowed historical monument in France for restoration projects. It is also a more and more popular tourist site with 10,000 visitors in 1860; 30,000 in 1885; and 100,000 in 1910.

Referencing again the analysis of Pomian quoted above (and the use-waste-semaphore cycle), after losing any practical function (it was a major pilgrimage site since the Middle-Ages and became a prison, shortly after the French Revolution) Mont Saint-Michel became “waste”: a place with no attributed use. It could eventually disappear, as did much important architecture after the French revolution. But the tourist gaze (French and international artists attracted by the beauty of the site, the first elite-tourists and then the popular tourism) transformed the Mont into a *semaphore*: an object, the function of which is now exclusively to convey a message (aesthetic, cultural, historical…) and to showcase its former function that has now disappeared.

The restoration of the Mont during the end of the 19th century was done in accordance with its emerging monumental status. The creation of a “monumental product” is pursued, tirelessly, until today. Indeed, the recent restoration projects on the Mont take into consideration the tourist function of the site. For example, for the Saint-Pierre Hotel, fully rebuilt in the 1990s, the architect opted for the creation of colored wood-panel facades, whereas iconographic historical sources showed that they were formerly entirely made of stone. This restoration choice, more on line with the place's imaginary, responded to the “tourist prescription”, or the tourist expectations for a picturesque site and acted-on accordingly.

The Mont Saint-Michel offers a pertinent example of the participation of tourism in the heritage development processes. It also allows to define the role of tourism actors (including tourists) in the heritage development of sites, places or objects that they contribute to reflexively co-produce, according to their own imaginary and expectations. Obviously, suggesting that tourism may be a (co)producer of heritage is still considered as a heretical discourse… Heritage tourism is more easily understood as a heritage epiphenomenon - a practice that “consumes” heritage artifacts produced through (other than tourism) social processes. A shift of the heritage-tourism paradigm seems necessary today, however, in order to better understand the dynamics of contemporary heritage production.

4. Heritage, globalization and tourism

The methods of heritage production are therefore changing in the context of globalization. Globalization contributes to changing the nature, scope and scale of heritage production by propelling these processes to the center of intersecting phenomena characterized by

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