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Between Change and Stability: Local Development, Tourist Offer and Local Values in Monferrato, Italy

Abstract: This article presents an ethnographic analysis of the perception of tourism in small, rural municipalities in Italian internal areas, by focusing on the UNESCO territory of Monferrato, in North-Western Italy. The paper looks at how communities consider tourism in relationship with the specificities of their land and the need of transforming it in order to create a functional tourist destination. In so doing, the paper answers to key questions concerning touristic development by pointing the relevance of the hierarchy of values of the communities in shaping the actual offer in services and goods, highlighting the conflicting expectations concerning developing a new, thriving economic and maintaining the local social stability.

Keywords: tourism, marginalization, local development, Italy, UNESCO

Introduction

The word “tourism” has influentially entered the debate on local development, both for cities and for small municipalities. “Tourism” is commonly perceived by communities as a viable option to meet their present socioeconomic needs and pave a new way toward a positive future (Skinner and Theodossopoulos 2011). Despite these expectations, current events suggest less obvious outcomes in terms of logistical, environmental, social and cultural difficulties that must be confronted in order to turn the potentialities of tourism into concrete actions.

This article looks at tourism through the eyes of small Italian municipalities (La Nave and Testa 2016) that experience a condition of marginality shared by all the communities in the “internal areas” (Monaco and Tortorella 2015) of the country. It investigates the expectations these local communities have towards tourism by analysing the ethnographic case of Monferrato, UNESCO site in

Piedmont, Italy. In so doing, it sheds light on the everyday dimension of ordinary affects (Stewart 2007) that mark the process of transformation of a village into a tourist destination. Following the description of the fieldwork research and its methodology, an ethnography of the daily attitude of Monferrato communities towards tourism is presented. The cultural data are analysed in order to understand the communities' expectations and hierarchies of values (Herzfeld 2004) that underlie the unfolding of the local tourist offer and its developments. In so doing, it provides a cultural answer to the question about the current difficulties in grassroots developing a convenient, coherent and sustainable touristic offer, in particular in the field of hospitality, in Monferrato and in similar social contexts.

The Research

This article presents the results of a research conducted in the Piedmont region since 2004. The focus of the research has been the on-going patrimonialization of the Monferrato area, recently recognized as a UNESCO heritage site (38th World Heritage Committee 2014). The process has led to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the traditional festive calendar, the local agricultural productions, and a renovated commitment to local economic development (e.g. Fontefrancesco 2014; 2018). To interpret the cultural aspects connected to these economic transformations (Fontefrancesco 2015b; 2016b), the analysis focused on the emic perception of the socio-economic change that the communities are undergoing (Fontefrancesco; 2015a; 2015b).

The Monferrato was chosen as the terrain of exploration and analysed following the model of the arbitrary location proposed by Candea (2007) to rethink the reality faced every day by a local community that is facing socio-economic marginalization. In fact, it is a good example of the border area, close to metropolitan centres, such as Turin and Milan, but culturally and historically distinct and distant from them; a low-profile zone experiencing the same processes that affects other internal areas (De Rossi 2018). It is an area of about fifty municipalities and just over 70,000 inhabitants located between the cities of Alessandria, Asti and Casale Monferrato. During the twentieth century, the area experienced a progressive depopulation and limited industrialization and only marginally benefitted from the Economic Boom and the *golden age* years of the industrial districts (Nesi 2004): while a large part of the young population left the area and moved to the nearby cities seeking a job in the manufacture or the service industry, those who stayed and invested locally profited from agriculture. Monferrato's "restanza", the socio-cultural condition of those who had not abandoned their rural communities (Teti 2011), was based on daily

commuting and the development of the primary sector, which appears the main attraction together with artistic heritage on which tourism can develop. However, in Monferrato, the tourism industry has only partially developed, and only recently (Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria and the European House Ambrosetti 2010, Fondazione Gianfranco Pittatore and the European House Ambrosetti 2011; Fondazione Gianfranco Pittatore, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria and European House Ambrosetti 2013). The proximity to large urban centres and the recent UNESCO World Heritage recognition intensified the local public debate on the new possibilities of the tourism industry, and in particular its theoretically positive impact on local agriculture and manufacture (Direzione Agricoltura – Regione Piemonte, 2016). Thus, the research aimed at exploring the social poetry of tourism (Herzfeld 1997, 139–155), analysing the grassroots debate and the connection between the imagination of a new, possible future fostered by tourism and how locals understood their environment. In so doing, the research drew from the anthropology of rhetoric its main methodological approach (Carrithers 2005; 2009; Emery and Carrithers 2016). Moreover, it was conducted in applied perspective, directly linked with my administrative involvement in the area, in particular from 2014 to 2019. Often, the double role of researcher and elected civil servant is seen as a condition in which the everyday life of administrative operations is not reconciled with the temporalities of anthropological reflection. However, as already discussed in other publications (Fontefrancesco 2015a; 2016a), the two dimensions can be reconciled through a process of participant objectification (Bourdieu 2003) that reads the ethnographic endeavour as a form of committed and engaged anthropology (Palmisano 2014), able to gather from the research elements that offers anthropological insight and informs and drives the administrative planning, in this case concerning tourism development.

Tourism and local expectations

The rise of a new industry is far from being culturally neutral. It shakes a society by impacting on its hierarchy of values (Herzfeld 2004), transforming the very perception of centrality-marginality that a community live. This is also the case for tourism. As Corvo points out (2003, 12), “in an era of globalization, tourism can represent an effective instrument of knowledge and dialogue between different peoples and cultures”, yet this encounter is not free of frictions (Tsing 2005), reactions of the local fabric to the imposition of an exogenous, often global, economic model. In this case, frictions came from a difficult integration of a new social group, the tourists, in the local, social context of a small community (La Nave and Testa 2016). Understanding tourism, in particular

from the perspective of small Italian towns, means reading the socio-cultural dynamics that develop within bounded communities (Stacul 2003) whose borders have represented, for a large part of the population, the extreme, tangible and intangible limit within which most of the individual's emotional and working life took place. Above all, it means to come to terms with a history made of emigration, which made communities culturally unprepared to host new visitors, even if affluent.

Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011) highlighted how tourism is first and foremost a transformative process for a community. It shapes the community based on a dialectic relationship between the local people and the new visitors. The expectations, of both hosts and the guests, are pivotal in this process because they frame the field of social transformation. While the tension may be hidden or smoothed in the context of in a large town, they are palpable in a small village, surfacing in the everyday discussions that involve the locals as the following episode demonstrates.

Ethnography of an attitude

Mario is a sixty-year-old viticulturist, born and bred in his village in Monferrato which left for over twenty years before coming back in the early 1990s to take over the family farm. In the last three decades, he committed to his now well-known vinery, prised by food and wine associations for the quality of its productions. He is a prominent person on the local scene and that was the reason it took me to interview him in 2016 on his farm. During the interview he was clear about his understanding about tourism:

“We cannot remain closed; we must open up ... tourism is our future. We must position ourselves well. We must aim for quality, for rich tourism... This is the only future our villages have.”

Like other local producers, Mario feels the need to transform Monferrato into an area that not only produces good foods and wines, but also, and above all, can be able to be a key tourist destination, such as another area in Piemonte, the Langhe of Barolo, where wine production became the hallmark of a destination able to attract visitors from all around the world. To this end, Mario has organized and participated to many initiatives aimed at quality tourism such as gastronomic festivals, tasting itineraries, and experiments to enhance the native Monferrato vineyards. In the interview, he described his initiatives, the success and the failure, never giving any hint of doubts about the necessity of tourism. This was in the afternoon.

In the evening, just a couple of hours later, I met Mario in the village. He was sitting at the bar, playing cards with his friends and comrades. They were

discussing the conditions of their area, the continuing depopulation, the overall impoverishment, the lack of industrialization, and the possibilities of the future. On that note, Mario insisted that tourism was the only viable alternative for a community that had recently been fully recognized as a World Heritage Site. His opinion seemed to find consensus among his public consisting of four other men: two local agricultural entrepreneurs born in the late 1950s, just like him, and two retired men in their seventies, both with a life of work in the tertiary sector. The contents of the chat from the bar reverberated the theses presented in the conferences and institutional meetings held in previous years in the Alessandria (e.g. Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria and The European House Ambrosetti 2010; Fondazione Gianfranco Pittatore and The European House Ambrosetti 2011; Fondazione Gianfranco Pittatore, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria and European House Ambrosetti 2013). Those words seemed to confirm the poetics of success that impregnates the public debate and describes the Monferrato as a possibly successful tourist destination, attractive for the international public, particularly Europeans.

Despite any good premise, tourist development was and still is a path in its making. The gradual and rapid spread of new restaurants throughout the Monferrato area, as well as the mushrooming of B&Bs and holiday homes (although slower and more uncertain) do not yet meet the requirements of a tourism intensification process. Despite a clear demand for new accommodation and the numerous public and private initiatives aimed at stimulating the opening of small receptive realities, the results are still limited and mostly attributable to forms of the gig economy (Sundararajan 2016).

“Why should we open new hotels? The tourists are coming anyway?” This was the answer I got from the friends once I pointed out the present limited number of accommodations available in the village and in the area. They provided examples of people coming to the local restaurants and wineries, not recognising any substantial opportunity provided by tourists longer staying. The attitude, as well as comments, such as “it’s not nice there are people we [villagers] do not know in town during the night...”, “you never know what can happen”, completed a precise poetics of mistrust towards the visitors, the *foresté* in the local dialect (literally, a foreigner), that intertwined and contradicted in many ways the idea of tourism as a key to the future.

The following day, in front of the same bar, the same guests of the previous evening along with other men of the community were discussing animatedly. A group of tourists from Milan had arrived, probably to eat in one of the local restaurants. They were a large group of people who had been visiting the village for about an hour, asking the locals for information.

Locals were gossiping about the newcomers. However, when some of them entered the bar, those present in the saloon, a dozen men and women over fifty,

among which Mario, fell silent: some pretended to be reading the newspaper or to conduct a decent conversation with the neighbour, some openly began to scrutinize the newcomers, for all the tourists had become the centre of attention.

The visitors asked for some news about the town if there were some places to sleep and which wineries could be visited. The bartender gave some brief information and they ordered a coffee. They were served and left the room while the eerie silence turned into murmurs.

After five minutes, the group of people gathered and began to comment on that visit. To which one said: “but, who knows what they want, to come here? Can’t they just stay at their homes?” The others nodded; including Mario.

Of conflicting expectations and negative reciprocity

The ethnographic narration vividly introduces the reader to the everyday dimension of tourism in Monferrato. Above all, it shows a contradictory attitude toward the industry that raise questions concerning the social role of the industry for the local community. In particular, it asks why has tourism any value in the eyes of a community and what is it for. An analysis of the expectations of the villagers can help in providing an answer.

In a previous publication (Fontefrancesco 2015a), I had the opportunity to discuss how, in the internal areas of Italy and in particular in the area analysed in this article, tourism is conceived as a possibility, a horizon of modernity, of economic development, of new social centrality in the broader fabric of the nation system. This understanding is based on the recognition of the positive impact of tourism in nearby areas, such as Langhe and Roero, where it slowed down depopulation, drove state investments in road and telecommunication infrastructures, and made the name of the territory being known in the world. There tourism was able to counter the process of social, economic and cultural marginalization (La Nave and Testa 2016).

The relationship with tourism shows the expectations of a community about its future and its modernization (Ferguson 2002), highlighting what the progress of the twentieth century did not provide locally in terms of socio-cultural relevance and well-being. Thus, in Monferrato, tourism appears as a perspective and an instrument for strengthening a society that is perceived as frail, undermined by socio-economic transformation occurred since the late nineteenth century (Bravo 2013; Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria 1992; Eco, Beltrame and Forte 1981; Rapetti 1984).

Tourism impacts locally and provides new economic and human resources, thanks to investments and an increasing presence of new people who stay in the community for short or longer periods. Indirectly, it provides the opportunity

for the creation and expansion of local activities, such as wineries, restaurants, and shops, that, in turn, requires the presence on the spot of employees and operators. Public administrators, local entrepreneurs, commuter workers residing in the Monferrato villages, and retired citizens recognized this systemic role and highlighted four major transformative contributions for the communities in terms of improvement of: local reputation, economic opportunities, attendance, and local population. However, the benefits coming from the results were far from been undebated.

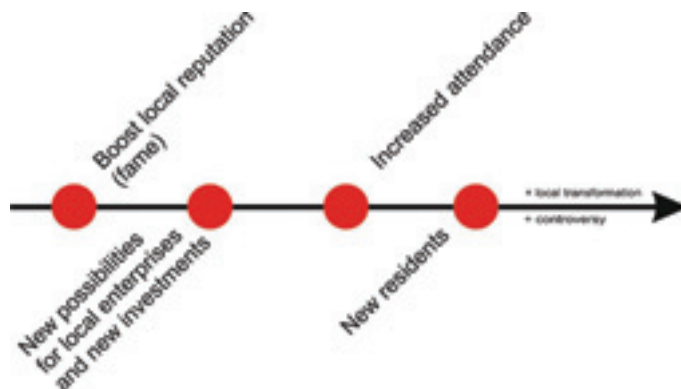


Fig. 1 – Model of the socio-cultural impact of tourism on local communities.

As Fig. 1 visualises, the level of controversy goes hand in hand with the depth of the social structure change triggered by tourism. This is a form of conservatism that suggests an underlying conflict between expectations and attitude to change. In fact, although in some cases the informants, mostly elderly or commuters, underline their disinterest toward tourists, tourism and its effects, most of them showed a positive attitude toward tourism, emphasizing its function in expanding the possibility of trading local products. In this respect, they pointed out their willingness in change their practices in order to better suit with the needs of the tourists.

In recent years, the strategic use of the promotion of local cultural heritage has been discussed by anthropologists, highlighting how, in particular in the field of intangible cultural heritage, tourism becomes the trigger of community re-ethnicization processes. In this way, local rituality transforms and adapts to needs of tourism consumption (Cavanaugh 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Giovannucci, Barham and Pirog 2010; Grimaldi 2012; Theodossopoulos 2011). The process is already ongoing in Monferrato, particularly about food and wine.

Wine has been at the core of local festivals in which the culinary element is spectacularized. Examples are the Wine Festivals with their carnival-like attractions (Fontefrancesco 2014) and special gastronomies (Fontefrancesco 2018),

and gastronomic tours, as was the case of “Di Grignolino in Grignolino”, promoted by Slow Food. Thanks to wine, and food, the area is reinforcing its touristic reputation, as it emerges even by a simple comparison between the first Slow Food Guides, published at the beginning of the 1990s (Slow Food Arcigola 1991) and their most recent editions (e.g. Slow Food 2016).

If my informants were keen to rethink local production, they showed perplexity in investing in hospitality and, indeed, the offer of hospitality remains underdeveloped, with a lack of beds in particular in the smaller municipalities of the area (Fondazione Gianfranco Pittatore, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria and European House Ambrosetti 2013). While it could be interpreted as the consequence of a regional and national regulation that does not facilitate or support small initiatives, such as the creation of new B&Bs (Morandi 2015), the research suggests this delay may be directly linked with the very hierarchy of values of the communities.

Reading it through the lens of Sahlins’ (1972) theory of reciprocity which links the data of expectation of gain with that of social distance, the research suggests local communities associated tourism to a model of negative reciprocity, which tends to maximize immediate gain and maintain broad social distance between hosts and guests. In this perspective, it is not surprising that the community effort is aimed at intensifying the aspect of sale, which allows a fast extraction of value and a limited exposition to the newcomers, while the articulation of a wide offer of hospitality, a field of enterprise that would create a longer contact with the visitors, is largely ignored.

Conclusions

The article intended to explore the attitudes that move rural, local communities to embrace tourism as a mean for local development. Investigating the case of Monferrato area, the analysis highlighted the hierarchy of values in which tourism is incorporated. Such interpretative dimension sheds new light on the pattern of touristic development undertaken by the local communities, the strong emphasis on marketing local, food products and the scarce expansion in terms of hospitality. The research suggests it is functional to the community’s understanding of tourism as a form of exchange based on negative reciprocity and moved by a feeble attitude to social change.

The research, thus, points out to the perspectives of tourism in terms of sustainability. The economic sustainability of this enterprise is given by the combination of a rich offer of products available on the spot, be they food and wine products or landscape and cultural heritage, and from the possibility of accommodation for short and long stays. In this respect, the present articulation of

Monferrato offer meets only partially the demand while answering to a precise need for social stability that comes from the communities. Stability, however, may not be compatible with social sustainability in a context marked by depopulation, impoverishment and ageing. Rather, the famous quote “for things to remain the same, everything must change” (Tomasi di Lampedusa 2010) seems to constitute a step forward in the path to more durable sustainability not just for tourism in the area, but for the very life in the community. Thus, facing the question concerning the right strategy to implement a more complete offer without resulting in further fragility and social distortion for the community, the paper opens new discussions that start from the Monferrato and look forward towards the future.

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*Između promene i stabilnosti: lokalni razvoj, turistička ponuda
i lokalne vrednosti u Monferatu, Italija*

Ovaj rad sagledava turizam kroz vizuru malih italijanskih opština iz unutrašnjosti koje su iskusile tipične uslove marginalnosti i ispituje očekivanja tih zajednica u pogledu turizma. U radu se fenomen turizma istražuje etnografskom metodom fokusirajući se na gradić Monferato koji je UNESCO zaštitio. Namena etnografske refleksije jeste da bude sredstvo u analizi svakodnevne dimenzije uobičajenih osećanja stanovnika koja utiču na označavanje mesta i na otvaranje zajednice prema spoljnjem svetu u cilju pretvaranja grada u turističku destinaciju. Namera rada je da analizom ponudi kulturološki odgovor na kritičko pitanje za teritoriju Monferata: zašto, u oblasti gde je velika pažnja posvećena stvaranju i organizovanju atraktivnih dešavanja, nije jednako tome razvijena ponuda adekvatnog smeštaja? Odgovor se može potražiti u posebnim očekivanjima koja se manifestuju u samoj teritoriji.

Ključne reči: Monferato, turizam, marginalizacija, lokalni razvoj, etnografija

*Entre changement et stabilité:
développement local, offre touristique et valeurs locales
à Monferrato, en Italie*

Cet article analyse le tourisme à travers le prisme des petites communes italiennes provinciales qui ont expérimenté la situation typique de marginalité des régions locales et questionne les attentes de ces communautés concernant le tourisme. Dans l'article l'examen du phénomène du tourisme est fait par la méthode ethnographique et concentré sur la petite ville de Monferrato protégée par l'UNESCO. La réflexion ethnographique est destinée à être un moyen dans l'analyse de la dimension des sentiments quotidiens des habitants qui influencent la fabrique de l'espace et l'ouverture de la communauté envers le monde extérieur dans l'objectif de transformer la ville en une destination touristique. L'intention de l'article est d'offrir une réponse culturelle à une question cruciale pour le territoire de Monferrato: pourquoi, dans un domaine où une grande attention est consacrée à la création et à l'organisation des événements attractifs, l'offre d'un hébergement adéquat n'a pas également été développée? Il est possible de trouver la réponse dans les attentes particulières qui se manifestent sur le territoire même.

Mots clés: Monferrato, tourisme, marginalisation, développement local, ethnographie

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