Selling Culture to Tourists. A Case Study of Interwar Italy

According to many researches of contemporary society, we are living in a time when heritage is of particular importance. Sociologist Bella Dicks, for example, has called the present society as “heritage society”. This interest in the past is manifest in many fields of life, including that of tourism. The past is eagerly being utilized is tourism business thus further strengthening in its turn the trend. Actually, heritage sites and attractions have become one of the basic qualities of visitability. This has led to theming the past, displaying, constructing and producing it in a commercial way. This attitude and perception may be quite recent in their actual form, but they have long historical roots. Historical sites have been of key importance for centuries, but their systematic, commercial utilization in modern tourism experienced an important breakthrough in the interwar period. Contemporaneously, the attitude towards the past seems to have changed from an educational ideal to an approach emphasizing overtly entertainment, emotions and experiences.

The main aim of this paper is to discuss how and why culture and heritage were transformed into branded goods to be sold to tourists as a captivating pastime. The case presented here is Italy, which was one of the most active tourism promoters as it was also one of those countries, which earned most from tourism in the interwar period. In order to understand the transformation we will have to contextualize the topic firstly in the general development of public tourism promotion and only after that we can focus on the question of changing representations of the past as tourism attractions.

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1 Bella Dicks: Culture on Display. The Production of Contemporary Visitability. Maidenhead, Berkshire 2003.
Investing in Advertising

Messages about the excellence of various tourist resorts situated in almost every corner of the world filled the mass media after the First World War: newspapers were loaded with insertions, millions of booklets were printed, posters were glued on walls in the streets and at railway stations, films were shot and radio programmes broadcast. In addition, expensive office-networks were constructed in the great cities to distribute the material produced for the potential tourists. One of the countries, which most eagerly shared in this unprecedented interest in tourism was Italy. The vast scale of tourism promotion – or as it was called at that time: tourism propaganda – is clarified by a couple of examples: in 1933 Italy produced more than 400 million pages of touristic material in various languages (the number of languages varied between five to twelve circa) which was distributed free of charge abroad and in the end of the same decade it had 70 offices or other representations abroad.²

The phenomenon of foreign travel and its public promotion was widely noticed. During the Depression, for example, the U. S. Department of Commerce ordered a study on international tourism promotion. In his report, Herbert Bratter described a novel situation in which a number of countries were investing notable sums in order to attract foreign tourists to their respective countries:

Today “tourism” is a world-wide industry of major importance [- -]. In the United States and elsewhere, foreign nations employ for publicity purposes paid advertising in newspapers and magazines, posters, pamphlets, guidebooks, maps and other printed matter, motion pictures, lectures, the radio, and news bureaus. Many countries maintain special tourist bureaus, some with branches abroad. [- -] At least 50 national governments have actively participated in encouraging the

² This paper is based on an extensive study of Italian interwar tourism promotion and tourism policy. For it were studied, among other sources, circa 300 tourism booklets, numerous annual volumes of periodicals, dozens of posters and some films produced by the Italian State Tourism Board ENIT. Taina Syrjämaa: Visitez l’Italie. Italian State Tourism Propagand Abroad. Administrative Structure and Practical Realization. Annales Universitatis Turkuensis B 217. Turku 1997. 402 p.
visits of foreigners. This study of the tourist industry abroad reveals a high degree of organization and government-sponsored cooperation.\(^3\)

The speed of growth was immense and puzzled contemporary observers. Before the First World War only companies and entrepreneurs such as Cook’s travel agency, hotels and railway companies had invested in advertisements – following the trends set by various sectors of industrial production -, but their efforts had been more or less sporadic. In the immediate aftermath of the war, numerous countries established entirely or partly state-run bodies to promote tourism, which meant an abrupt increase in the quantity of promotional material. This was partly due to the disastrous economic situation after the war: it made states strive for foreign currency in new ways.

Another, important factor was the changing clientele. The so-called “democratization” of traveling which had started during the previous century was proceeding. These new tourists had different kind of social and educational background than their predecessors, different kind of possibilities to travel and partly therefore also different kind of aims and wishes. They could not follow an age-old grand tour route with a private mentor as such, but what they could hope for was a brief visit to a famous locality. To compensate for these ‘flaws’, they followed the detailed instructions of printed guidebooks, which pointed out clearly which sights were the most important ones, how one should look at them and what one should think about the sights.

The new travellers, tourists, conquered the world. They partly shared the values of previous travellers, but only partly. Instead of studying every statue in a museum with the red guide book of Baedeker, they might have wished to sunbathe on a hot beach, listen to jazz music drinking more or less or to ski in the mountains. As a contemporary Italian observer noted:

The tourist of today is no longer the classical archaeologist, neither the collector of visits to galleries and museums; he is instead a dynamic and tireless consumer of

distances, the perfect type of hedonist traveller who wants to amuse himself spending as little as possible.⁴

These new tourists did not and could not act as elite travellers of previous centuries and their selection of travel destination might well be quite another place than Italian cities which had enjoyed from continuous flood of travellers earlier. Especially two features worried the Italian tourist promoters at that time: the diminishing of the average time spent in Italy by the tourists and the ever-increasing number of competing foreign tourist resorts. When transport improved, the ways of travelling also changed. Firstly, in 1910 the average stay in Italy had been estimated to be 30 days, then it had dropped to less than five days in 1931 and in 1939 it was estimated to be less than three days. Secondly, the Mediterranean travel destinations had no longer a sovereign position. Due to new technological solutions, places which had been far out of reach of Europeans previously became now attainable.

So far there had been no need to promote cultural tourism and tourism had been in any case cultural. But what to think about the new tourists, what to do? How to promote Italy? The cradle of Western civilization. Didn’t everyone know about it already? Should they sell... Rome and the Colosseum? Should they sell their culture, their history? The idea seemed to be disagreeable or crazy to many. In fact, in the general assembly of the first nation-wide Italian private tourism association, its president Maggiorino Ferraris, an enthusiastic promoter of tourism, had stated in 1912:

It would be absurd to think that Rome, due to the greatness of its history, would need a special office of [tourism] promotion in order to make itself known in the world. We think that anyone even imagining to distributing a poster depicting the historical and archaeological attractions of our Rome would be killed by ridicule.⁵

Obviously, many agreed with him also after the First World War, but the Italian State Tourism Board, founded in 1919, did start to make soon such posters and booklets which had been condemned to be ridiculous only a few years earlier. The interwar tourism was

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characterized by intensifying international competition, consolidation of large-scale, systematic tourism promotion and representing the complex bunch of history, heritage and culture as an easily consumable product.

The omnipresence of the past

The vast amounts of promotional material produced in the interwar period included a great number of forms and topics. Those millions of pages distributed abroad included generic presentations of entire country, booklets of smaller regions or single cities or they focused on a certain theme such as those on Italian sanctuaries, or Italian archaeological excavations, or Italian art, or Italian music. Some booklets concentrated on following the itineraries of famous visitors such as Goethe, Byron, Shelley and Wagner. A certain number of leaflets were dedicated to single events such as classical theatrical performances in Siracusa or Paestum. Even posters and films depicted historical cities and reproduced again and again their key images.

Two ubiquitous themes, occurring in almost any material, were the beauties of the Italian landscape and history. Attributes given to various localities were strongly attached to their past. Vittorio Bertarelli, one of the “founding fathers” of Italian tourism, described, for example, what kind of photographs should be displayed in the Italian tourism offices abroad:

… large and wonderful photos [of] cities and places of Italy from Turin to Syracuse, from the ruins of Selinunte and from the temples of Girgenti, to the columns and arches full of glory and poetry of the Forum Romanum; from unique Venice, [which is] full of light, to strong and towered Bologna; from Siena and Perugia, severe, noble and proud of the remembrance of their lives as independent communes, to Naples, Taormina, Palermo and Syracuse, charming in their splendour of beauty at sea; from the tomb of Dante to that of Petrarca and Virgilius; from Milan, vibrating with modern life to the towns of silence such as Ferrara and Ravenna.7

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6 Agrigento.
7 Relazione sull’attività svolta nell’anno 1922. ENIT. Roma 1923, 58.
In addition to material connected to cultural tourism, there were also other themes taken into account. Some promotional material was made, for example, for those who wanted to play golf, eat well, enjoy in a spa or wander by foot or by skiing in the mountains. – Activities and organized pastimes were becoming more and more important during the interwar period. However, without attempting to make an exact quantitative estimation, it is safe to say that the great majority of the tourist promotion material concentrated on what we could call today cultural tourism. The concept as such did not exist in the 1920's and 1930's because it was so self evident, the role of cultural tourism was so crucial in all travelling. This, in fact, made the task of promoting it - paradoxically - more difficult for the contemporaries.

As such, Italian history was hardly a new attraction for foreign travellers. Medieval pilgrims had been intrigued by strange-looking ruins and monuments of Antiquity and in the Early Modern time historical sites became the major attraction. Young gentlemen’s Grand Tour was – at least officially – motivated by the wish to learn about the basis of Western culture and to accumulate thus social capital. This tradition partly survived in the nineteenth century although the bourgeoisie who could then start to undertake foreign journeys did not have equal possibility to dedicate time and money for preparing one’s knowledge. It knew less of European history and culture than the former elites, but it was very keen on acquiring the right kind of social and cultural capital. Guidebooks did their best to further strengthen the tendency to appreciate and select historical sites when travelling.

This pursuit had usually been considered to be a most serious task requiring a lot of effort.\textsuperscript{8} Tourists were looking for and gazing at the major attractions as described in guidebooks. The sites, whether entire cities or villages or particular institutions such as museums, did not advertise for their services. Previous travellers’ travelogues, guidebooks and travel agencies set authoritative models to be followed by travellers. The then guide books could recommend to tourists-to-be to read dozens of volumes of both

classical literature and newest academic studies. Tourists were, thus, regarded to need – and to be satisfied by – same publications, which were primarily addressed to scholarly circles. In the interwar period this did not suffice any longer, but tourism became characterized by an increasing commodizing of culture and heritage.

**Past as entertainment**

The two decades witnessed the publication of a few rather scholarly publications – such as the booklets on Pompeii and Herculaneum written by the superintendent of the excavations⁹ - but the great majority of material were much more simpler and romantic in tone. Especially, when the amount of illustrations grew, texts became shorter and “lighter”. There was, for instance, a series of “città d’arte”, tiny booklets dedicated to tiny towns which offered cultural and historical sights. These booklets, containing between 8-12 pages, described briefly the basic sights of town, but more than that they depicted a fascinating, romantic atmosphere.

For example, Viterbo, was presented by emphasizing its “picturesque” location, “picturesque” old quarters and its “solid and severe” edifices in which its medieval past could be sensed. In the same way, the opening phrases of a booklet on Treviso praised the city walls, described “tortuous” streets, “glorious monuments of the age of communes and the numerous rests of the Venetian Renaissance”.¹⁰ When a traveller had earlier been supposed to read some dozens of kilograms of books, the new tourist could prepare for a brief visit by giving a glance to a small booklet. The State Tourism Board prepared in 1929 a tiny, only 16-page brochure even on the eternal city, Rome, for the hurried visitor.

The new way to present history is well crystallized in the following ad published by the Italian State Tourism Board for American public in 1931:

> Meet History and Romance in Italy

⁹ ENIT. Le Vie d’Italia, ottobre 1933.
¹⁰ Viterbo. ENIT & FF.SS. Milano-Roma [1927]; Treviso. ENIT & FF.SS. Milano-Roma [1927].
There is scenery of fairytales. A tepid zephyr fans the palms - azure are the skies, reflected by a sea breathing purity and eternal peace. Amidst this splendid landscape the spirit of antiquity grows alive. Fancy and monuments bring back folk and heroes of centuries long past.\footnote{Harper’s Magazine, February 1931.}

History is here presented as something crucial, a true and inextricable element of the region, yet easily accessible - a tourist could grasp it as easily as he or she could enjoy a beautiful panorama. History was a romantic attraction, although it was not yet themed into an exhibition solely constructed for visitors. Many tourists could, however, connect it to specific places, such as the excavations of Pompeii. The ad did not mention any major sights, not to speak of details of the excavations, but offered history as a generic, enjoyable, emotional state of mind and a romantic experience, available to anyone without prerequisites.

Doubtlessly, former travelers had not all been truly passionate devotees of history and archaeology, but few had openly dared to question the importance of cultural activities. Romantic travellers had eulogized moon-lit ruins and adored their beauty, but many grand tourists are known to have concentrated much more on lively social pastimes than on studying archaeological remnants – whether at moonlight or daylight - but the \textit{ideal}\footnote{Harper’s Magazine, February 1931.} and the official motivation for travelling had been mainly linked with educational purposes.

The modern, twentieth-century tourist also had his or her duties. He was supposed to “do” the important museums and cities. It was impossible to imagine, for example, a successful journey to Rome without seeing the Colosseum or the Vatican museum (or at least, some of the most famous works of art of the collection). The tourist’s task was to see these sights and maybe also to take a proof of this encounter by photographing them. Yet, tourists were not expected to study a lot before the journey or to read more than a guidebook. History was there to be seen, but a brief and fragmentary encounter would be enough. Much less commitment was required than from previous travellers.

The change shocked many contemporaries who saw the new tourist groups as battalions of barbarians. In January 1929, for example, an opponent of tourism Mario Carli, the
editor-in-chief of the newspaper *L’Impero*, entitled the leading article of the newspaper: "Italy as an amusement park". Carli saw the attracting and flattering of tourists as a humiliation for modern (Fascist) Italy. He wrote that he would not be at all sorry if there were fewer tourists: "... we enjoy being more alone at home without hearing barbarian accents...". Carli argued that in any case "Cookites", who travelled in big groups, left very little currency in the country. By his comments, Carli was trying to refute the assertion that tourism was important for the Italian economy. He insisted that only serious travellers who adored Italy truly would have been welcome.\(^\text{12}\)

Carli's spirited article provoked much discussion in the Italian press and it caught attention also abroad. Actually, the then debate resembles to some degree the later discussion on authenticity. In which form cultural heritage of a region can be presented? Should it be in its “scholarly” form - almost with footnotes - or how much can it be altered when it is transformed into a commercial product? The idea of Carli and like-minded commentators was that a correct interpretation and representation of Italy existed and other ways to describe and produce attractions deviating from it were less authentic, morally questionable and false. Carli remained in minority. Offering entertainment and amusement to tourists, that is modern consumers, became the main trend in tourism and tourism promotion. This could not be without affecting the way to represent and display history and culture. They became raw material for much publicized experiences and emotions – something that tourists today are still eager to gather.

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