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Dossier: Heritage explorations across Europe

The (over)touristification of European historic cities

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As a result of the rapid growth of the tourism phenomenon, European historic city centers are subjected to diverse social and urban transformations. Those processes might be indicated as a so-called *touristification* – a kind of gentrification caused by the needs of uncontrollable development of a tourism economy (Cocola-Gant 2018). In the consequence of a constantly increasing number of temporary visitors, any tourist destination inevitably has to reach a stage of satiation that is commonly known as the stage *overtourism* (Keon's, Postma & Papp 2018). Such possible negative impact is particularly dangerous in the case of European historic city centers where finally the usage of the former multifunctional city center shifts to the monofunctional (tourism-oriented) form. Although those processes have already been foreseen decades ago, they still seem to be a discussable issue among academics and powerholders all over the world.

However, well-known terms like *Disneyfication*, *thematization*, and *mass tourism* have been already shaped and popularized in '80 and '90. They have been also recently replaced by a lately emerged wave of new terms like – already mentioned – *overtourism* or *tourismophobia*. Furthermore, the introductory of (over)tourism-related topics to the mainstream media discourse occurred. The number of articles dealing with that issue is still increasing both in daily newspapers and different types of periodic magazines. And finally, together with the ongoing growth of the tourism economy the rising resistance of common citizens become more and more often noticeable on the streets of our cities. Sometimes written on the walls in an act of vandalism, sometimes screamed on the streets during protests. Such movements are much more prevalent in the southern cities of the Old Continent where the impact of tourism phenomenon is much more disturbing and where resistance began to organize itself not only on a city level but also a regional, national and even European level (like SET Network – *Sud Europa di fronte alla turistificazione* – established in mid 2018).

Being aware of those facts, we should ultimately indicate the spreading *mass tourism threat* to world heritage sites – especially to European historic cities, where the impact of the growing tourism economy is currently the most perceptible. Indeed, we can already clearly observe the dangerous outcome of ongoing touristification processes in cities like Venice, Florence, Lucca, Rome, Madrid, Barcelona as well as many other examples across the Old Continent. However, this threat is not directly related to tourists themselves – or any other temporary visitors – but rather to the impact of the more general tourism economy dynamics. The real threat to historic city centers is related to the decisions of every city very inhabitants. How would they manage their own urban heritage? Should such management be equivalent to monetizing it? Who has a right to the city as well as to its past, present and future? Exactly those questions are in the very center of this research interest. Altogether with the tension between urban conservation practice and the getting out of any control demands of the tourism economy on our cities' condition and everyday life of their common citizens. Indeed, we just cannot omit the crucial role of urban heritage understood as a resource that vastly accumulated in our historic city centers is nowadays mainly used to fuel the growth of the tourism economy.

Although we should be already aware of the described dynamics of ongoing touristification processes, it is still very hard to grasp and deeply study them. This is why most of the recent research on tourism phenomenon is based on a case studies methodology which is deeply rooted in descriptive studies of rather a qualitative character (Ashworth & Page 2011). The main challenge of nowadays research on ongoing touristification processes faces the lack of general quantitative data related to this phenomenon. This is why one of the main goals of this project is to elaborate on a new method of such quantitative and comparative evaluation. And recently, such an opportunity to illustrate the impact of tourism phenomenon emerged altogether with the consequences of the eruption of the short-term rental market. Thanks to vastly gathered and easily accessible data (AirDNA 2019) we are able to propose easy to conduct method of comparative evaluation of current state of our cities touristification stage that is based on 3 years period trends (attached figures present result of such study conducted for sample of 109 Italian historic cities contained in Associazione Nazionale Centri Storico-Artistici report from 2017). Such a method could have a crucial but also only a supplementary character for any future case study research on the tourism phenomenon.

However, at this stage, the fundamental challenge of this research is to convincingly correlate such a narrow sample of data with the much wider phenomenon – and more precisely its impact on historic city centers. It is important to underline that the ongoing process of European historic cities (over)touristification is not only one of the most urgent issues of current scientific discourse but also it has become one of the most crucial issues of Europe's future. Although the impact of the rapidly growing tourism economy in its complexity is not easy to be studied, it is fundamental to work out and further improve a proper method to conduct comparative research on that topic that would enable us to work on a more overall understanding of this phenomenon.

References

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The map visualization and linear diagram of Airbnb active listings growth for a group of 109 Italian historic cities. An inner circle for Q3 2016 and an outer circle for Q3 2019.

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The linear diagram with just 17 selected cities that exceed number of 2000 active listings. In both diagrams 3rd quarter of 2016 and 2019 have been marked.

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