

The tourist space between mythological construction and the production of reality: The case of Rimini – Italy

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Many studies in the last years have underlined the role of the representational theme, thus the role of analysing the complex network of mutual viewpoints and representations between hosts and guests which constitutes the communicational space where the identities of place and of involved actors are performed. Moving from the analysis of the changes occurred in the last quarter of XX century in Rimini, a seaside resort town in central Italy, the proposal aims at discussing the productivity of an approach which focuses on the relationships between "images", worked out for positioning the resort town in the global market, and the production of locality.

A special focus will be posed on how and why those images do play a role of signifiers, capable of being used within the discursive strategies devised by each group, according to its own interests, in the local public arena.

In the field of tourism, due to its fragmentary productive structure, the local authorities have a peculiar role, since they are in charge of irreplaceable tasks such as the pinpointing and implementation of active measures aimed at local development. This role is performed partly through urban politics and the creation of infrastructures, partly through the assumption of a proper business function, as far as they intervene whereas the private capital is not able to develop autonomously effective interventions. This fact has significant consequences, since it implies the publication of the debate which inevitably characterizes the "decision-making process". What in a company is prerogative of restricted circle of managers here takes place in the public sphere, where, in a framework ruled by "image" issues, identity strategies, shared fantasies and power conflicts are continuously performed.

Premise

Although I live in Rimini, a locality that describes itself as the capital of European tourism; perhaps, in compliance with a deontological rule that drives us to locate "elsewhere" our field of research, I have always avoided applying myself to researching local matters. However, in the last few years a series of circumstances, often fortuitous, have seen me occupied in contexts where contiguity to the tourist industry has almost forced my attention to the anthropological themes of tourism and their possible uses, in an analytical key, when researching complex realities such as that of the tourist area around Rimini. This address, more than a complete study, aims at putting order into a series of reflections matured over the last few years and, at the same time, delineating some hypotheses for future research.

The area around Rimini represents one of the more complex cases which has been studied from different perspectives by different disciplines.¹ Anthropology is, without doubt, noticeably absent in

¹ Even though not many works of synthesis are available about the reality of Rimini, there have been many sectorial studies done by local authorities and economic figures, and also analysis done from different disciplinary perspectives published as articles in magazines and anthologies. For reasons of space, on this occasion, I will refer explicitly to

this panorama, even though the pathways of research – as shown by Simonicca (2001) and the abundant literature on this argument – could be manifold on condition that one accepts to measure oneself on the insidious ground of applied anthropology; that is if one is willing to assume the risk involved when considering “the anthropological contribution” as a sum of competences to be activated in social action” (Simonicca 1997:248)

Tourism, is obviously not just a construction of a more or less stereotyped imaginary, being a complex phenomena which moves economic interests, political dimensions and involves experts who use semiotic styles and interpretive settings which are often dissimilar and sometimes opposed. In this setting, anthropology can contribute to the comprehension of the dynamisms which are established in the interconnection of these factors and, primarily the comprehension and “re-construction” of the shared significances of social groups with respect to their own territory. (Simonicca 1997:249; Augè 1997; Callari Galli 2004)

My intent is to analyse some of the phenomena which have been activated with regard to the context of hospitality, starting with the reciprocal gaze which characterizes the relationship between hosts and guests. I intend to explore what “images” of Rimini have been elaborated during its “tourist” history, how and why they have been produced, and also evaluate the production of an analysis relative to the use which is made of these “images” and “representations” in the construction of the “objects” around which discussion develops and interrelates, and the choices made by the local community. (Riccio B. 2001)

1. The production of the tourist space in the interaction between local and global

The touristic space is above all an image: an image created by tourists and tour operators, an image which is necessarily a stereotype built on a limited number of characterizing elements.

Investigating the cultural dynamics and the processes of change that, on different levels, are produced in the dynamic interaction between hosts and guests, represents without doubt the most advantageous work-ground for an anthropologist who intends to measure himself with the tourist phenomena. Such space, being a product of history, is perceived, inhabited and modified in relationship with its many representations, which are often highly conflicting and complex or is simply assumed by the different groups that inhabit or enter into contact with it. (Appadurai 1996; Callari Galli 1996:93-108; Callari Galli 2004) Tourism, on the other hand, is inseparably connected with spatiality and its representations, being at the same time, both a user of, and a powerful means of producing images which have an effect on objects and “resorts” dislocated in every corner of the

world: tourism is primarily movement in “space” in the search for “somewhere else”; tourist locations, which are “built”, chosen and perceived through images and representations.

The “tourist gaze” is a prearranged vision, to the construction of which contribute a wide variety of experts and professionals. In fact, as Urry advocates, it is defined through a process of differentiation from their experience in daily life, which changes with the changing of society, age, personal history, social class and through the constant influence of the mass media. A gaze which, in virtue of the social mechanisms of consumerism, is a result of the institutional system, which presides over the marketing of experience but which, at the same time, also produces reality (Urry 1995; Pariniello 1993).

Building images which organize and cross these structural views seems to be, therefore, a fundamental and characterizing element of the activities of those who take part in the tourist sector. An action which presumes the identification of a system of signs, of activities and social practices identifiable as tourism in terms which contrast with social practices which are not and which are part of the everyday social context one belongs to. (Selwyn 1993)

But reality and images dialogue with, and follow one another (Auge 1999). A series of studies, in the last few years, have underlined the importance of the theme of representation, namely the importance of submitting to investigation the complex gaze and reciprocal representations that take place between hosts and guests in what may be considered as a communicative space, where the processes of the organization of self-perception and those of the formation and identification both of the location and the different actors involved are enacted. (MacGregor 2000; Preston-Wyte 2001)

2. The case of “Rimini”

As I try to highlight in this brief historical *excursus*, I consider that, two relevant elements emerge concerning this theme.

Firstly, the existence of not just one, but of a plurality of representations of Rimini as a resort have been formulated during its history; giving form to public policies, business strategies, and which are anchored to precise areas and elements of the urban landscape. These representations and the elements linked to them, act as signifiers which are available and usable in the discursive strategies that the different groups articulate in their sphere of interest.

Secondly, the role undertaken by the local authorities, in such a fragmentized reality of production as is that surrounding tourism in Rimini. A role which in the last twenty years – but in Rimini

perhaps more than elsewhere such a role has been undertaken in other phases too – has involved the carrying out of indispensable procedures relating to the identification, implementation and carrying out of dynamic strategies for local development. A role which is done not only through town-planning policies and the construction of infrastructures in the province; procedures traditionally done by Local Authorities, but also through taking on a true and proper “businesslike” function which intervenes directly where, due to the fragmentation of the productive system, private capital is unable to implement efficient endeavours.

This fact has important consequences from my specific view of addressing the situation. The undertaking, by the public administration, of the task of defining and implementing active strategies for the economic and industrial development of a productive district based on tourism, such as in Rimini, implies a public debate which necessarily characterizes a “derisive process”. Matters which, in a company, are the prerogative of a small circle of managers and administrators are discussed openly in front of public opinion. Perhaps it is not incidental that in the province of Rimini there are three newspapers which offer 20 to 30 pages of local news; a powerful means of producing and circulating images and stereotypes. (Riccio 1997), a virtual “town square” where on a background obsessed and dominated by the problem of an “image” in the globalized context of an international tourist market (Geertz 1999), connoting strategies, shared imagery and power conflicts are continually present.

2.1. The origins of seaside tourism and the construction of Rimini’s imagery as an elite resort.

Historians who have studied the case of Rimini agree in considering 1843 – year of the opening, with a pontiff authorization and the blessing of the cardinal, of the first bathing establishment, built by two gentlemen from Rimini who based their project on bathing establishments already in function in Pisa and Livorno – the date of birth of seaside tourism in Rimini: even though it is certain that this initiative was not just an imitation of imported models, but also an attempt to institutionalize and commercialize local customs mentioned as early as 1746 in the writings of the Rimini born Giovanni Simone Bianchi, better known as Jano Planco Gardini et al. 1977). A history with its roots in the period between the second half of the XVIII century and the end of the XIX century, in which the framework of modern tourism is established and, saying it with the words of Alan Corbin, the “sea” as a holiday resort is invented. (Corbin 1988; Triani 1988)

In the second half of the XIX century – whilst the “Stablimento Bagni” survives with a certain difficulty, to the point where in 1868, after years of animated discussions the municipality decides to take-on ownership - the railway, the villas and competition arrive. Customs change and seaside holidays no longer need to be justified as therapeutic. The period between the end of the century

and the breaking out of the First World War sees the real start: the turning point in the tourist vocation of the town. The municipality guarantees the implementation of the first real “policy” relative to the tourist sector, which from that moment on constitutes the fundamental identity of the town: the Kursaal hotel is built, the construction of the Grand Hotel Hungary is begun, the first publicity campaigns are designed, festivals and high-society events are organized, as are art exhibitions, horse races, balls, concerts, opera and light opera performances and literary academies. “Rimini the Ostend of Italy” offers itself as a resort for the aristocratic elite and upper-middle classes of Europe, perhaps aiming too high, as the end result will be a clientele prevalently middle class.

2.2. The beginning of seaside mass tourism

The outbreak of the war put a stop to this dream and between the two world wars a part of the tourist system which had grown on the sidelines of this great project took over as the hinges of tourism development: less prestigious enterprises, improvised meeting places offering cheap entertainment to a variegated public ranging from the lower-middle class (which had institutionalized the necessity of holiday periods) to the privileged fringes of the working class, that the fascist regime was gradually introducing into the free-time circuit through a widespread mobilisation based on a political policy of physical exercise. It is also the season of the many children’s seaside health resorts which are established along the entire coast of the Romagna region: a patrimony of buildings the conversion of which is still, in part, an open question.

In the Thirties and Forties the ‘riviera’ sees a period of great success: in Rimini alone arrivals pass from 51 thousand in 1935, to 73 thousand in 1937. Due to the fact that Mussolini spends his holidays in Riccione, the ‘riviera’ opens itself to the culture and needs of the times: the myth of the ‘romagnola’ coast enters the collective imagery as a place where conventional daily life can be left behind – a scenario which is complementary and at the same time coherent with the rhetoric of the regime.

But this is also the phase in which some of the problems which are still on the agenda take form: if on the one hand tourism becomes the number one problem of the town, the focal point of public debate and the catalyser of huge amounts of national revenue – these were the years in which the most significant public works in the area between the coastline and the railway tracks were planned and in part carried out² - on the other hand tourism shared the same rhythms of the daily life, the

² The boat-dock for pleasure craft now under construction in the port of Rimini was planned and elaborated in those years.

values, the rituals³ and the backwardness of a “town” and a “hinterland”⁴ substantially provincial and agricultural.

2.2.1. *The years after the Second World War – the consolidation of the national popular model*

War destroys houses and infrastructures but not ideas and skills learnt in the pre-war period: the war damage to the “town” is catastrophic, but on Rimini as a seaside resort it has an exponential effect. Re-building is immediate: various political factions advocate mega town-planning projects and infrastructural schemes, which would have to wait decades to see the light,⁵ other groups – or perhaps the same, as a result of a sort of intentionally conflicting attitude which characterizes political discussion when obliged to build consensus by keeping together social groups with divergent interests – the process of reconstruction is governed pragmatically, namely in the case of the marina and the authorized “demolition” of the Kursaal, the symbol of elite tourism, which by miracle had not been hit during the bombardments⁶.

Motivated by the fact that building material is essential for re-construction, the Kursaal becomes a deposit from which bricks can be taken to rebuild the marina. Town Hall clerks and railway workers turn into improvised brick-layers during the winter and, together with their families, who in turn improvise as polyglots, run small businesses during the summer. This is how the new phase, which the historian Giorgio Gattei defines as the “national-popular beach” begins. (Gardini et al.1977) The myth is consolidated, the natural resources were at hand, the only problem was that of multiplying the number of guests and the capacity of hosting them: the first problem was solved by a promotional publicity campaign centred around the slogan “A week in Rimini costs the same as three days in Viareggio”, while the second was resolved by a “pragmatic” and “no rules” management of development which lead in the following years to the birth of an immense holiday

³ As proof of this I believe it is not too hazardous to recall the description of this problem made, even though in a poetic key, by Fellini in his film *Amarcord*.

⁴ Aside a “seaside resort” Rimini which in the Thirties was already one of the most successful rendezvous of the growing mass society and of the “free-time culture”, exists another Rimini based mainly on a backward agricultural economy where the near medieval system of share-farming of small units of land is still dominant.

⁵ As an exemplification I cite projects such as provincial autonomy which came about only at the beginning of the Nineties, the boat-dock which has only just been finished, the casino and the planned moving of the railway lines to the outskirts of the town which will be completely abandoned.

⁶ Still today, after more than 50 years, this is an open wound often recalled in political debates as a testimony of the diverging representation of the town and its tourist collocation. The destruction is often not considered as casual but as a precise political mission implemented successfully in the following decades.

metropolis⁷. On the other hand the vicious circle was kept in motion by a new demand coming from holidaymakers who couldn't afford the elite orientated resorts and who wanted low cost, well organized holidays suitable for first timers.

2.3. the Eighties and Nineties: Crisis and changing models

In the decade between 1981 and 1991, something unexpected happened which at first was not even seen as a problem by those directly occupied in the tourist industry. The first signs of the crisis, at the beginning of the Eighties, are noticed by those who monitor tourism from a detached and neutral position: those operating in the industry become aware of the problem in the second half of the Eighties. Between 1981 and 1991 the number of daily presences drops, even though there is an increase in the number of arrivals: an alarming phenomena for those who make use of statistics, and reason in terms of trends, but without catastrophic consequences in terms of the financial balances of the small businesses.

In the course of the following years the image of the Adriatic Riviera gradually deteriorates: the masses of tourists from Northern Europe, controlled by tour operators, are directed towards new and more updated package-holidays offered by other Mediterranean resorts.

On the other hand, the "season" on the Riviera is too short for the requirements of workers in Northern Europe who need to space out their holidays. The prices of the hotels are competitive, but those extra-hotel are excessive and the quality offered does not meet the standards of tourists coming from the rich North of Europe. Lastly, but not in the order of importance, changes in the organization and the kind of way in which people spend their free-time, the effects of profound social changes which become a characteristic of the advanced industrial societies: holiday periods grow in number and the time dedicated to each of these periods shortens, leaving the Riviera in a marginal position where weekend tourism of the type "everything in one night" becomes prevalent. All this is seen by the experts as a premonitory signal of an irreversible decline.

Towards the end of the Eighties the appearance of mucilage, an alarm signal capable of pressing even the most reluctant to recognize the state of crisis.

These and other factors, which the intense discussions of those years evidenced, compel the development of new strategies along paths that, looking back, were not difficult to recognize, but which saw in those years the different participants involved in the debate take sides and create

⁷ In the town of Rimini alone the 258 hotels and boarding houses present in 1946 become 563 in 1951 and 1,466 in 1961. The number of daily presences which were 1,208,448 in 1951 become 5,658,261 in 1961, the number of people employed directly in the tourist industry passes from 1,499 in 1951 to 2,039 in 1961.

controversy which over the long run has hindered a global vision of the problem and the implementation of effective solutions.⁸

First of all a new language enters the field and introduces new keys for reading the tourist phenomena: marketing. A “technology” which implies the progressive introduction of new ways of perceiving and interpreting the international tourist context – as Weick says, “New ways of activating the environment referred to, and of producing answers pertinent to that environment” – and of organizing the tourist offer. (Weick, 1988).

One begins to speak of “tourisms” and of “de-seasoning”, trying to overcome great resistance and opposition, and the need to face the irreversible crisis of traditional seaside holidays, characterized by “standardisation” and “uniformity”, is acknowledged: from this acceptance derive choices, the effects of which will be felt only in the Nineties, and that bring about an overall redefinition of the image and the “reality” of the tourist district of Rimini. Once again it will be the inevitable entry of public institutions which will bring about the condition for a turning point. The strategy proposed implies a series of actions that will develop on diverse fronts.

The passage towards the idea of “tourisms” and the adoption of articulated marketing strategies brings to evidence new “niche” markets and the creation of new products.

For what concerns holiday tourism, the beginning of the building of the boat-dock represents the most evident investment, but along with this other investments are being carried out for re-qualifying the tourist offer linked to “seaside” resources and for diversifying the opportunities for visiting the town: film and theatre festivals, events with a huge impact on the media, restoration of monuments, re-proposal of folkloristic traditions and the activation of itineraries parallel to seaside tourism which valorise the hinterland and so forth.

Also, in the following years, the congress/trade fair sector takes off, starting an authentic revolution in the overall structure of the productive system. This process gets underway with the development of the trade exhibition structures in the second half of the Eighties, the building of a congress centre at the beginning of the Nineties, the constitution of the “Convention Bureau” in 1994, the relocation and the enlargement of the trade exhibition structures in 2001.

⁸ Supporters of the irreversibility of the seaside tourism crisis, nostalgic supporters of the national-popular model wanting to propose it again, people championing a return to elite tourism confronted their ideas for years in the local public arena whilst in the background the town, faced with the new social emergencies, was ever more in difficulty. In this context, people on the outside begin to perceive an image of a “divertimentificio” – a day long entertainment fairground – a town frequented by “the people of the night” (Bonomi 2000) and the diffused perception by inhabitants of the irreversible urban degradation. It is in this context that models of “the foreigner” considered as an antagonist are constructed and replace that of the “ideal foreigner – the tourist”. Riccio analysed the situation in the summer of 1996 and 1997 and the research is still in course. (Riccio 1997)

The development of business tourism which implements de-seasoning, leads to a series of chain-events which bring about construction upgrading, upgrading of professional skills, due to the fact that work is available all year round and better management which is no longer just local but sought for on the national market.

But what is important for our discussion is that in the Nineties a radical change takes place in Rimini. From a type of tourism which was identifiable primarily with the “sea” and the “beach”, there is a transition to a Rimini in which “receptive capacity” as such and “hospitality” form the basic elements for a future identity; here, diverse “products” and “events” are envisaged in a faceted image. It is an “identity” which tendentially does not take into consideration the geographical position of Rimini and moves attention to the town as such: Rimini as a “tourist town” ‘tout court’. I believe that the consequences of this identity metamorphosis represent an interesting area of research, as these consequences can already be perceived in public opinion, in the choices of the public administrators and in those of the private sector.

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