

Tourism, Market Liberalization, and Civic Discourse:
Ethnographic Perspectives from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Florence, Italy

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The entire historic city center of Florence, some five square kilometers, is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site based on its “outstanding universal value” (<http://whc.unesco.org>). Home to less than 50,000 residents, the UNESCO zone of Florence hosts over 20,000 visitors a day during the summer months. Precisely accurate numbers of visitors and residents are difficult to ascertain because the UNESCO zone is not actually itself an administrative unit for which the city collects independent data, but based on available information, I estimate that the population density of the city center increases between 30% and 50% depending on the season. This has a number of negative consequences both in terms of disproportionate burdens placed on the city’s infrastructure, and in terms of the declining quality of life for residents. UNESCO itself identifies mass tourism as a threat to the cultural heritage of Florence (<http://whc.unesco.org>) at the same time that the city capitalizes on its status as a World Heritage site to promote itself as a touristic destination (<http://www.turismo.intoscana.it>). The city’s government and local media routinely laments the trends that are precipitated by the continual increase in tourism and its associated services: the depopulation of the city center, the loss of artisan workshops and historic small businesses, the proliferation of convenience stores, kebab shops, and fast food chains. Yet the city government simultaneously promotes the continual development of tourism and related sectors, the growth of which contribute directly to the loss of the city’s cultural heritage. In this paper I draw on over ten years of sustained ethnographic research in Florence to report both qualitative and quantitative data on the nature and process of the city’s ongoing transformation into a place whose character is shaped principally by tourism.

My theoretical orientation includes Bourdieu’s (1998) critique of neoliberalism to account for the city’s reliance on tourism, and on Baudrillard (1994) and Eco’s (1986) theories of simulacra and hyperreality, respectively, to make sense of the ways in which the touristic city is supplanting the lived city. More broadly, I am situated in the urban ethnographic tradition that grew out of the original urban theory of the 20th century, including Wirth (1938), Mumford (1937), and Park (1915), as well as the later Marxist perspective of Castells (1977). While I acknowledge the importance of the material reality of economic factors, I much prefer the more culturally oriented approach of anthropologists like Geertz (1973) and Marcus and Fischer (1999). In this way, I attempt to account for economic and

political factors without losing sight of the meaning and experience based aspects that exert so much influence on human behavior in urban collectivities.

My empirical approach is grounded in ethnographic participant-observation. I have been a full-time resident of the historic center for eleven years, during which time I have maintained a systematic and ongoing inquiry into the urban environment into which I have slowly assimilated. I am trained as a goldsmith in addition to being an anthropologist. I kept a studio in the famed Oltrarno artisan quarter of Florence for four years, a practice that granted me entry to relationships with other working artisans that I could never have established had I been exclusively an academic. My perspective on tourism is further enhanced by the time I spent working in the grey-market service economy as an unlicensed walking tour guide in my early years here. I ended up in Florence as a marriage migrant rather than for anything the city itself might offer an immigrant or expatriate. My work as an artisan and a guide were necessities when I was still a recent arrival struggling to establish myself in the local academic job market teaching for US university study abroad programs in the city (the latest iteration of a long Anglophone fascination with Florence), which are themselves expressions of what is sometimes derided as academic tourism. Being a cultural anthropologist in a foreign city made an ethnographic perspective on my own experience irresistible and, in many ways, automatic. As a result, the topics I address were developed out of my experiences without any *a priori* research agenda. They reflect nothing so much as everyday life in the urban core of one of the world's most archetypal cities as it struggles to maintain its distinctiveness in the face of overwhelming pressure to conform to the needs of its millions of touristic visitors.

Throughout the paper I attempt to illuminate the issues implicit in the city's treatment of tourism by incorporating relevant qualitative data. I draw heavily on my work with artisans not only for their importance to the city's identity and cultural heritage, but also because they are an indicator occupation for the health of the productive economy, as opposed to the service economy. The artisan traditions of Florence are named in the UNESCO designation, but the number of artisan workshops in the city is diminishing annually. The trend towards a service economy is regularly discussed by local media, and everyone I know who lives or works in the center can cite examples of it from their own neighborhood. This paper expands upon my earlier consideration of the role of mass tourism in the city's transformation (Androus 2016), focusing instead on the policies and public statements of the city government in response to contradictory demands to maintain both Florence's cultural heritage and its perpetual economic growth. The question of what kind of tourism is always

important, with mass tourism widely denigrated and a more enlightened, less structured, individual style of tourism continually valorized. But this narrative masks the true issue, which is one of scale: in a discussion of this very topic with one of my primary informants, a fourth-generation leather artisan with the pseudonym Antonio G. (his own choice, in tribute to Gramsci), I asked Antonio what the difference would be between one thousand package tour groups of fifty people each and twenty-five thousand enlightened couples travelling independently. Taking my point, he replied simply “*in either case, they will completely consume the city.*” Antonio was the one who taught me the Italian word *massificazione*, its meaning easily recognizable in the English version massification.

There is perhaps no single symbol that combines the images of massification, homogenization, globalization and the concomitant decline of quality and value, than the fast food franchise McDonald’s. The first appearance of a McDonald’s in Italy in 1986 precipitated the founding of the Slow Food movement, which has since grown into a worldwide force for the promotion of local agricultural varieties and small scale producers. In the summer of 2016 local media began reporting on the application for a permit to open a McDonald’s in Florence’s piazza Duomo, right alongside the Cathedral, in a space currently occupied by a sporting goods store. A social media campaign in opposition immediately sprouted and before any official response to the permit application, the mayor made a public statement expressing his opposition, invoking his ongoing “*battle that for years we have conducted against fast food and mini-markets and for the protection of the city’s traditions and identity*” but lamenting that “*for some years now, mayors have lost their power because of laws addressing liberalization that make it very easy to open new businesses*” (<http://www.controradio.it/>, my translation). Nevertheless, the city was able to block the permit application thanks to a law passed in 2012, but only in effect since January of 2016, intended to return a degree of local control in the face of EU-mandated liberalization (<http://corrierefiorentino.corriere.it/>; <http://firenze.repubblica.it>). Notably, these sources make no mention of the other three McDonald’s locations in the UNESCO zone, one of which is a mere 500 meters from the controversial proposed location at the Cathedral.

In respect to my findings, the vigorous debate over the possible appearance of a McDonald’s in piazza Duomo while another McDonald’s is already well established almost within sight of the Duomo offers a compelling metaphor for the current state of the city’s relationship with both tourism and liberalization policies: while symbolically charged debates unfold, the actual changes have already taken place. McDonald’s is here, the tourists outnumber the residents, the city’s Central Market has gone from a place to buy groceries to a

shopping-mall style collection of restaurants, and historic workshops have closed and been re-opened as historic workshop-themed cafés and bars. I wish I was exaggerating about those last points, but the images that will accompany the presentation of my paper make the fate of these spaces tragically clear: there is no more stark depiction of the shift from a productive economy to a service economy than a workshop with its tools now hanging under glass while tourists sip cocktails and gush about the bar's atmosphere on TripAdvisor. The reinvention of the Central Market also took place since I moved to the neighborhood, and in its own way crystallizes the shifting profile of the city from a place to live to a place to visit: as a resident I need a place to buy groceries more than I need a collection of overpriced eateries reeking of staged authenticity.

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