Special Issue IT.A.CÀ

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory, Tourism, Technology

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YEAR VII - VOL. 18 - NUM. 1 - JANUARY 2024
FedOA – Federico II University Press
ISSN (online) 2723 – 9608 – ISSN (print) 2532 – 750X

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

DIPARTIMENTO
DI SOCIOLOGIA
E DIRITTO DELL'ECONOMIA

This special issue was created with the support of Department
of Sociology and Business Law University of Bologna.

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English text editor: Pietro Maturi.
Copertina a cura di Fabio Improta elaborata con illustrazione del Festival IT.A.CA' 2022,
di Antonella Di Gaetano

EDITORE

FedOA - Federico II University Press
Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche "Roberto Pettorino"
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

Responsabilità editoriale
Fedoa adotta e promuove specifiche linee guida in tema di responsabilità editoriale, e segue le COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.
Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 59 del 20 dicembre 2016.
Direttore responsabile: Carmine Urciuoli
ISSN 2723-9608 (pubblicazione on line) ISSN 2532-750X (pubblicazione cartacea)

Articles

In evaluating the proposed works, the journal follows a peer review procedure. The articles are proposed for evaluation by two anonymous referees, once removed any element that could identify the author.
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Fuori Luogo is included in the ANVUR list of scientific journals for Area 14, Political and Social Sciences (since 2016), in Area 8, Civil Engineering and Architecture (since 2019), Area 11, History, philosophy, pedagogy and psychology (since 2019). It is classified in Class A in 14/C1, Sociology (since 2019), 14/C2, Social Policy and Social Work (since 2019), 14/C3, General and Applied Sociology (since 2017), and 14/D1, Methodology of Social Research (since 2017).

Fuori Luogo is indexed in: DOAJ Directory of Open Access Journals - ACNP Catalogue code n. PT03461557 - Index Copernicus International ID 67296.

The journal is part of CRIS Coordinamento Riviste Italiane di Sociologia.

Fuori Luogo is included in the LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) network of the Public Knowledge Project (PKP PLN)

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Interview with Alessandra Priante

by Luigi Celardo[1]

In this issue for the section "Fuori Luogo Interview" we met Alessandra Priante, Director of the European Regional Commission of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Tourism policy expert and an associate professor at the Luiss Business School, was director of international relations and protocol at the Ministry of Agricultural, Food, Forestry and Tourism Policies. In addition, from 2010-2015, she held numerous positions on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the Government's Cultural Expert for the Gulf region (United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait).

QUESTION: I would ask you to briefly outline your career and what was the path that led you to tourism policy.

My passion for tourism has led me to always face new challenges with courage and optimism. Before my current role as Director for Europe at the UNWTO, the United Nations agency promoting sustainable, responsible, and universally accessible tourism, I was previously responsible for multilateral relations and tourism policies in Italy for the ministries in which tourism was placed (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and subsequently the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies). My studies in Economics and Commerce at Bocconi University and in Business Management at Luiss Guido Carli University have instilled an entrepreneurial approach in my daily work, transmitting it also to my team that I always encourage to improve.

QUESTION: The concept of sustainability applied to tourism is associated with innovative solutions such as less impactful mobility, consumption of local and seasonal food, and plastic-free events, but also with economically sustainable dimensions like choosing premium pricing for more ecological hosting modes and devices. What is the approach of UNWTO in this regard? How does it balance the quest for sustainable innovation in transport with respecting the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities?

For the second consecutive year, UNWTO has pioneered the global initiative "Best Tourism Villages"[2], aimed at enhancing rural villages in every region worldwide. The main goal of this initiative is to recognize villages that exemplify rural tourist destinations with cultural and natural assets, preserving and promoting community-based values, products, and lifestyles, while committing clearly to sustainability in its economic, social, and environmental aspects. Each year, applications from countries are evaluated by an independent advisory committee using a set of indicators covering the following areas: cultural and natural resources; promotion and conservation of cultural resources; economic sustainability; social sustainability; environmental sustainability; tourism development and value chain integration; tourism governance and priorities; infrastructure and connectivity; health, safety, and security. In 2022, a total of 32 villages from 18 countries across the five global regions received this recognition.

QUESTION: The European Commission's communication on December 11 2019, about the "Green Deal" focuses the political debate on a growth model based on concept of clean and alternative energy. According to this orientation, it is essential to increase the value attributed to the protection and restoration of natural ecosystems, in addition to the sustainable use of natural resources and habitats. How is UNWTO supporting this process?

As the sole specialized agency for tourism within the UN, UNWTO is advancing a series of innovative initiatives in synergy with the "Green Deal" goals. For instance, the Glasgow Declaration

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2 Home - Best Tourism Villages (unwto.org)

on Climate Action in Tourism[3] offers a new set of innovative pathways to protect the biosphere and climate, aligning the sector with global commitments and catalyzing collaborative solutions to the many challenges that businesses and tourist destinations face globally. Specifically, the Glasgow Declaration encourages accelerating climate action in tourism, committing to a reduction of emissions by at least 50% over the next decade and achieving the "Net Zero" target as soon as possible, by 2050. The Declaration was officially launched at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021. Currently, the number of signatories exceeds 700 organizations from 87 countries: the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Ministry of Tourism of Panama, Turismo de Portugal, Netherlands Board of Tourism and Convention, Innovation Norway, and others have recently joined as signatories. The European region has the highest number of signatories, with over 400.

QUESTION: Digital environments are part of our reality: "life is social, life is digital, digital is social" (Lupton, 2015). The proliferation of metadata from various platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor, and Twitter, contributes to expanding the participatory space that emotionally and economically involves the new user of digital tourism, especially the more digital generations (Corbisiero, Monaco, Ruspini, 2022). What are the advantages and the critical issues in the use of digital tools in international tourism systems? Is there an "out of place" in the digital world?

This is a very interesting question because, in my opinion, there is no definitive answer. On one hand, online platforms like TripAdvisor are essential for helping small and medium enterprises, which are the backbone of tourism especially in Europe, to become known to consumers. In our work, we strive to enhance destinations or rural villages that have a unique approach to tourism that encompasses all aspects of sustainability - the "Best Tourism Villages" I mentioned earlier. The spirit of the Best Tourism Villages initiative, let me emphasize, is precisely to demonstrate everything these villages are doing well, such as ecological policies, but also to offer support and technical consultancy to ensure that these villages grow equitably (this is the purpose of the so-called "Upgrade Programme"). We hope this approach mitigates the potential disadvantages or consequences of online platforms, which might orient mass tourism toward certain villages while leaving others out, thus fostering growth in terms of inequalities and, therefore, with less cooperation.

QUESTION: The European Commission is currently focusing on a European tourism convention project to reflect transversally on European tourism "of tomorrow." The aim is to start a roadmap for 2050 towards a sustainable, innovative, and resilient European tourism ecosystem ("European Agenda for Tourism 2050"). What do you think will be the future scenario for tourism systems?

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that tourism was the sector most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that more than 50% of jobs or human capital was lost in Europe. We need to create new growth and employment opportunities in tourism, otherwise the scenario could be that of a sector struggling to get back on its feet despite a rapid recovery of international travel this year (according to UNWTO, in 2022 more than 900 million tourists traveled internationally, and this trend is expected to continue). This is one of the main concerns of our European Member States: how can we make tourism a more attractive sector for employment, transforming the crisis into an opportunity to create more interesting jobs, especially for the youth? Tourism, being the most "human" of all sectors, cannot lose its potential in addressing this challenge. The European Commission has announced that 2023 will be the "European Year of Skills," and we want to capitalize on this opportunity! We believe that a more aware and better-trained tourism workforce will lead the transition towards healthier and more responsible

3 The Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism (unwto.org)

ways of traveling. Europe certainly has the potential, together with UNWTO, to implement this vision or scenario that is part of the recently adopted European Agenda for Tourism by the European Union institutions.

QUESTION: The hybridization between tourism and digital technology is pushing towards travel needs and forms of hospitality that are increasingly diversified and planned based on the requests of increasingly unique traveler profiles, so much so that the literature on the subject speaks of "tourism for all" (Monaco, 2019). This includes the inclusion of people with disabilities or LGBT+ in the realization of an increasingly sustainable tourism hospitality system. How does UNWTO consider, recognize, or encourage accessible tourism? What are the future intervention strands of the organization you work for in this field?

According to UNWTO, accessibility for all to facilities, products, and tourism services should be a central part of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy. Accessibility is not just about human rights. It is a business opportunity for destinations and companies that want to welcome all types of visitors and increase their revenue. For this reason, on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, UNWTO, the ONCE Foundation, and the Spanish Association for Standardization launched a guide[4] to the implementation of ISO standard 21902:2021, aimed at public administrations and tourist destinations. This tool is crucial for understanding the specific actions that can be undertaken by a wide range of organizations charged with designing policies, strategies, and marketing plans for accessible tourism.

Introduction

Travel is a terrain of metaphors of global origin, a garden of symbols through which transitions and transformations of all kinds are expressed. A mere shift in space can influence individuals and their identities, shape social groups, and modify the enduring structures of meaning that, according to Lévi-Strauss (1964), are used to organize the social and natural experience of every cultural group. Consider the pilgrimage as a symbolic form of religious unity and missionary sanctity, the Grand Tour as a moment of initiation into the figure of the European bourgeois intellectual (Leed, 1991), up to the current models of augmented reality that shape travel through immersive and totally reconfigured sensory experiences. The spread of Web 2.0 has indeed fueled the possibility of new forms of sharing the travel experience. Today, social media hosting people's narratives are used by various actors involved in the tourism industry. Visitors, in particular, play a key role in the co-creation of the symbolic image of tourist attractions, and the reputation generated by digital platforms is becoming increasingly significant. In this scenario, the concept of travel is no longer understood as a classic demand derived from economic conditions, but as a factor of development in itself. Such transformations have been accelerated by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, overturning the importance of the economic aspect in favor of the psychophysical protection of the traveler (Nandwani *et al.*, 2021). In this scenario, facing the needs for escape of digital travelers, relationships are uprooted from local contexts and recombined over new distances of time and space. Consequently, tourism, as one of the main vectors of globalization, poses questions about the modes of action of the intermediaries of the tourism industry - tour operators, travel agencies, OTAs (Online Travel Agencies) - with respect to the digital transformation triggered by the pandemic. According to the latest data provided by UNWTO (January 2023), the sector recorded better-than-expected results in 2022, thanks to high pent-up demand and the relaxation or abolition of travel restrictions in a large number of countries. More than 900 million tourists traveled internationally in 2022, twice as many as in 2021, although still 37% fewer than in 2019. Moreover, international tourism has recovered

4 ISO 21902:2021(en), Tourism and related services - Accessible tourism for all - Requirements and recommendations

63% of pre-pandemic levels. Although the scenario is positive, the survey by the UNWTO expert group indicates that 72% of respondents expect better performance in 2023. However, most experts (65%) believe that international tourism will not return to 2019 levels until 2024 or later. The post-pandemic recovery, according to an interesting study on the future of tourism after COVID-19 (Trono, Schmude & Duda, 2022), will develop unevenly and will vary significantly among markets. It therefore becomes crucial to identify new approaches and new forms of management to avoid the criticalities connected to overtourism and conflicts between communities and local operators (Milano, 2018). These were already foreseen in 1995 by the Lanzarote Charter and mentioned again in September 2015 by the United Nations in the Agenda 2030, which reaffirmed the principles and guidelines of sustainable tourism, indicating new forms more attentive to its social, regional, environmental, and cultural components. New tourism practices such as "light tourism" focused on creative and experiential experiences involving a limited number of people, or "proximity tourism" that focuses on small rural communities, highlighting the wealth and potential of often marginal and inner regions, are proliferating. This was reflected in the success almost everywhere during the summers of 2020 and 2021, highlighting the wealth and potential of these often marginal and inner regions. In many of these places, local communities are not yet sufficiently qualified or prepared to offer a range of tourist products and services that meet the expectations of modern tourists, especially those interested in experiential and cultural values (Díaz Soria & Llurdés Coit, 2013; Meloni, 2015; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017; Marchetti, Panunzi, & Pazzagli, 2017; Angelini & Giurrandino, 2019; Bertacchini, Nuccio, & Durio, 2019; Mangano, 2020). The cultural heritage of these places is of great importance both for travelers and for the host communities. Understood as a cultural system, for the former it offers cultural growth, while for the latter it has a strategic value in terms of conserving historical memory, as well as having an economic base value capable of attracting considerable financial flows. Understood as a "service" from the tourist point of view, cultural heritage entails a series of activities ranging from simple conservation and protection to the dissemination of knowledge (Nocifora, De Salvo & Calzato, 2011; Prezioso, 2011; Bizzarri & Andorlini, 2016; Prezioso, 2017). These new forms of tourism transition were already being explored in the pre-pandemic era. It highlights the organization and unity of a system of actors who - in the tourism sector - requires the interaction of subjects with diverging interests and objectives, thus necessitating the overcoming of competitive logic, starting from regional resources and competencies (Brogna & Cocco, 2020; Meloni & Pulina, 2020). The same European Commission has reinforced this will by initiating the roadmap for 2050 towards a sustainable European tourism ecosystem that, at least formally, shows particular attention to the sustainability of territorial communities, local realities, and the need for self-determination of those outpost populations of the local biosphere to be protected (Gregorini & Semeraro, 2019).

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