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MANIPULATING SCARCITY IN A UNESCO HERITAGE SITE: THE CASE OF LANGHE-ROERO AND MONFERRATO

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Abstract

The Langhe-Roero and Monferrato are an internationally renowned location where, under the UNESCO World Heritage label, tourists can live a fully, «authentic» experience in gastronomy, local culture, visual delight and accommodation. Drawing on the theory of «Enrichissement» conceived by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2019) the contribution explores how, nevertheless, «authenticity» experienced today is carefully constructed through the revision of the past and the manipulation of the notion of «scarcity» towards «exclusivity» and «exclusion».

Keywords

Authenticity, Enrichment, Langhe, Productive landscape, Extraction

Introduction

We contribute to this session with a discussion on how notions of authenticity, tradition, and heritage have triggered the radical remodelling, in socio-spatial and economic terms, of both the identity and collective memories of Langhe-Roero and Monferrato in Northern Italy. These - formerly - peripheral regions are now well recognized for their vineyards and proudly-made local products. It is out of the scope of the paper to engage with the notions of landscape heritage and patrimonialization broadly explored in academic literature. The contribution aims to make explicit the socio-spatial implications of the emphasis on localism and authenticity, propelled by the UNESCO World Heritage Site label awarded in 2014 to the productive regional landscapes, under the lens of «enrichment» conveyed by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2019)¹. The economy of enrichment has operated in the landscape of Langhe, Roero, and Monferrato, an overturning of the sense of the notion of «scarcity» involving a broader semantic sphere. Also, the concepts of authenticity, identity, and memory - belonging to the semantic sphere of tradition - have undergone an instrumental process of re-signification and enrichment to extract new symbolic and economic value from the past [Zukin 2009; Burckhardt 2019].

¹ The quotes from Boltanski and Esquerre (2019) are translated by the authors from the Italian translation of the original edition, in French.

Scene 1: Approaching Langhe-Roero and Monferrato

A tourist bus stops in a large parking area next to many others in the hilly landscape of the southern Piedmont Region. Disciplined German tourists disembark and walk towards the narrow, cobbled streets lined with traditional restaurants and shops selling local delicacies amidst XVII century portraits of the Marquise Juliette Colbert Falletti and introductory panels that illustrate the story of the Castello di Barolo. Lunch menus emphasize the local gastronomic tradition, promoting the image of rustic hospitality with contemporary quality service, with an eye to high-end design and valorizing any glimpses of the opulent manicured landscape of surrounding vineyards.

This anecdotal yet authentic scene, which is multiplied every day throughout the year in Barolo, and with slight variations in the surrounding municipalities of La Morra, Monforte, Grinzane Cavour, Serralunga d'Alba, Neive, and Barbaresco, provides a striking contrast with the far-from-idyll descriptions that, over the 1960s, writers like Beppe Fenoglio (1954) and Nuto Revelli (1977) conveyed through their novels set in the Langhe. Their horizons were those of depopulated villages and peasants' hardship in a stingy land, where people who could not reinvent themselves elsewhere knew just prostration from local misery and universal injustices.

Scene 2: An enriched metamorphosis

Today the territory, in its spatial, social, and economic components, appears very different from its old characterization. Spatial and economic transformations are real, and, at the same time, changes cannot be denied in the narrative that enwraps wine production, gastronomy, and the characteristics of a rather limited portion of the territory. Over the last 40 years, Langhe-Roero and Monferrato have turned into intensely productive wine-growing lands, which made them internationally renowned tourist destinations awarded in 2014 with the UNESCO World Heritage Site label. The small city of Alba - popularly referred to as the «capital of the Langhe» - was named the Capital of Corporate Culture, home to the 6th UNWTO Global Conference on Wine Tourism in 2022, the International Alba White Truffle Fair, and the selected UNESCO Creative City for Gastronomy in 2017. Parallel to that, since the 1950s, the town of 31,000 inhabitants has consolidated a solid industrial basis with the Ferrero, Miroglio, and Mondo brands², laying the foundations for economic affluence, which complements agricultural profitability.

² Ferrero Group, Miroglio Group and Mondo S.p.A. are international leading brands respectively in confectionery, textile and flooring industry.

Scene 3: Excavating (from) the past

A multifaceted notion of protection from exploitation and promotion of the «local territory» as an economic, social, and spatial construct [Grandi 2018] has emphasized local production of excellence and «eco-localism» [Curtis 2003; Parnwell 2006]. Tourism has played a significant role in the recent metamorphosis that involved the Langhe. Notably, the notions of «authenticity», «identity» and «memory» have gradually triggered the continuous, radical (socio-spatial and economic) development and re-modeling of the region. If those dimensions were somehow implicit, references to the «practical aesthetics» of the rural promoted by the Slow Food movement [Miele and Murdoch 2002] and territorial marketing were crucial in laying the foundations of what the area has become today. The emphasis placed on wine production, gastronomy, and tourism is now the dominant player in the local economy - triggering new ways of narrating and experiencing a geographically circumscribed territory.

These attitudes have consolidated the sort of experience of the rustic vernacular that seeks rare or unique «authenticity» and exacerbates the scarcity of places with designated characteristics: land that conforms to the protocols for Barolo winemaking, as well as – in a different dimension – the possibility to dine in a coveted super-small traditional bistro. We question whether such a race for experiencing the very place where exclusive products are made available makes, in the end, every experience possible only if carefully designed and planned in advance. Therefore, each authentic experience becomes a constructed extraction of value from an artificially designated scarcity [Hobsbawn and Ranger 2014]. It is no longer scarcity associated with limited hopes and possibilities that the region experienced in the 1950s. The concept of scarcity is subject to a semantic overturning in pursuit of traits that made desirable or authentic what was previously cursed, reshaping the community's definition of self within its collective memory [Rotenstein 2016 in Payne 2019].

The enhancement of the territory's past and authenticity has gradually consolidated another strand of extractive and material connection to the environment, that of economic capital and material «enrichment» which is about difference-making and «distinctiveness» in discourses of value to justify prices appreciation. Such mechanisms resonate with Pierre Bourdieu argument on participation to the production of symbolic goods as economic driver and – today – explicit financial interest in land produce [Bourdieu 1987; Boltanski and Esquerre 2019]. From this perspective, excellence in gastronomy and tourism is a primary source of enrichment through the marketing of luxury goods that represent a territory (ephemeral such as food and wine, immobile such as landscapes, or intangible such as «experiences»): today, Langhe, Roero, and Monferrato are a multifaceted, «enriched» space where spatial, economic, and cultural transformations of places - and their corresponding values - converge.

Scene 4: Scarcity, a semantic overturn

Vineyards are the most paradigmatic example in this perspective, with their being directly dependent on soil and human work: the rigid boundaries of territorial denominations have transformed small land parcels used as vineyards for local families in prestigious economic enclaves regulated by wine production guidelines. Nevertheless, even the excavation of soil to hunt for truffles reflects the extraction of value typical of the enrichment economy where scarcity is transformed into exclusivity. Once the product is extracted from the soil – being one of the few edible land products which cannot be grown as crops - its symbolic and economic value expands in the name of its unique luxury, set on elegant velvet cloths and topped with clear glass domes as jewels to be admired and venerated. «Enrichment», as in Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2019), relates to the circulation of a heterogeneous set of economic, spatial, and social objects, actors, and environments, which propels an exploitative economy extracting symbolic and economic value from conditions of uniqueness and patrimonialization of a purposefully revised (or reinvented) legacy. The documentary «The Truffle Hunters» (2020) by directors Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw³ condenses the semantic overturning of the concept of «scarcity» and «exclusivity,» notably from a spatial perspective, by alternating fragments of the ancestral life of truffle hunters to the glamour of the gourmet world that is delighted by truffles. Soil is the natural threshold that reshuffles meanings. The earth is the natural element that marks the border of a nostalgic reversal of meaning. Truffle hunters are old and rough, mostly uneducated men. They live in close contact with the soil in a harsh landscape, live in modest houses, wear rumpled clothes, have daily habits linked to the poverty of the past, and embody an emotional capital of values rather than financial one: their search for truffles, increasingly rare due to high competition and changed climatic conditions, is linked to a subsistence economy and takes place in adverse circumstances. Yet, once the product is extracted from the ground, its symbolic and economic value rises under the banner of its distinctiveness as a luxury asset and obviously surplus commodity. The spatialization of scarcity also changes: the modesty and dim light of rural environments are replaced by the rarefied brightness, design, and luxury that characterize the exclusive scenarios of the gastronomic boutiques of the city center, of the stands of the International Alba White Truffle Fair, and a three Michelin-starred restaurant.

Scene 5: Patrimonialization

The current process of enrichment reverses the condition of «scarcity» associated with the past local livelihoods - the cultivation of vines, post-war poverty, farming, and daily life in the fields. Historically experienced as a stigma, it is now a means of exclusivity that makes Langhe's territorial products unique and accessible to a restricted group of

³ <https://www.sonyclassics.com/film/thetrufflehunters>

users. Parallel to that, the motivations that have led to UNESCO's patronage of Langhe, Roero, and Monferrato as World Heritage underline the place's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and uniqueness, defined as an «exceptional living testimony to the historical tradition [and] to a social and rural context and an economical fabric based on the culture of wine.»⁴ UNESCO is singling out authenticity, intended as what has been done in the past, with regard to spaces, practices, and ways of living. Yet the very fact that what was restricted to local use before is now of «universal value» makes accessible patterns of valorization shared by other places. Notably, «patrimonialization transforms places» in a way where «settlements transform to modify their aspect, to encompass a coordinated mix of «ancestral» past and contemporary outlook» [Boltanski and Esquerre 2019, 415].

The transition from «heritage» to «capital» [Boltanski and Esquerre 2019, 102] is reflected, at different scales and interests, in the limitation to the use of the architectural heritage of historical and landscape importance, as evidenced by the numerous cases of re-signification of the many castles that dot the region. The Guarene d'Alba Castle, built in the 18th century, was transformed into a luxury resort in 2016. A conservative restoration under the guidance of the Superintendence for Architectural, Archaeological, and Landscape Heritage has tried to combine «absolute respect for museum value with high-level hospitality.»⁵ However, even if the presentation emphasizes its character as a common good, the operation has effectively bounded an enclave that is not accessible to the public. Other properties have become prestigious locations with a similar process of decommissioning of public facilities whose images are then lent back to contribute to the image of the place: this is the case of Grinzane Cavour castle, which capitalizes on the symbolic value of the past of Count Camillo Benso di Cavour and today hosts the annual International Alba White Truffle Auction and a Michelin-starred restaurant.⁶

Scene 6: An exclusive productive landscape to experience and consume

The tension between the sublimation of «traditions» in a contemporary framework and the old way of doing things (visually and economically, quantitatively and qualitatively) reflects the relationships that interconnect physical objects, landscapes and collective identity associated with the symbolic and material value system a territory represents. The cultivated landscapes of production thus incorporate an aesthetic commodification, whether they are seen as amenities to be enjoyed or more directly as the means that guarantees products for consumption.

⁴ The UNESCO label defines six core zones and two buffer zones which comprehend a territory of 10.789 hectares, belonging to 29 municipalities. See https://www.paesaggivitivinicoliunesco.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Piano_di_Gestione.pdf.

⁵ <https://www.castellodiguarene.com>

⁶ <https://www.castellogrinzane.com>

Public bodies⁷ in charge of the World Heritage Site management plan have broadly inclusive goals, accommodating knowledge, accessibility, cultural communication, and community building. Yet the bundle of collective and personal interests in the name of the defense of past relevance generates a condition of othering places that lay outside the designated perimeters (defined by protocols for winemaking, UNESCO management plans, tour guides, etc.) and appropriations of rural memories, which are by many neglected with relief. [Boltanski and Esquerre 2019, 420] note that similar frameworks promote a direct patronage engagement in public life «in the name of the collective» by those who may get a direct socio-economic benefit.

In this framework, a multifaceted notion of «culture» triggers new sophistication in uses and spaces. Some new wineries, from artifacts linked to traditional production, have become design objects that seek to create a break with tradition through a self-proclaimed «nonconformist» approach. On one of the most prestigious slopes of the Barolo hill, the L'Astemia Pentita winery was built in 2015 [Ferraro 2015], self-labelled as the «first example of a Pop winery.»⁸ The building contrasts with the strict observance of the local aesthetic and construction tradition. Two massive, fake wine crates make up the main volumes of the cellar, which associates the production function with that of an exhibition hub of art and design objects coming mainly from the Gufram company, taken over by the owner in 2012 and engulfed in the group Radical Design⁹ with the broader cultural scope of setting a design museum in the area.

Some local, historical families promote cultural patronage operations by exploiting their influence in the territory to promote an allegedly alternative (and reinforcing) mission to the production. The Ceretto family, historic wine producers, and patrons of a three Michelin-starred restaurant Piazza Duomo in Alba have consolidated their collaboration with internationally renowned contemporary artists. In 1999, they cooperated with the world-renowned artists David Tremlett and Sol LeWitt in transforming a formerly

⁷ The Association promoting the Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont in Langhe-Roero and Monferrato (established in January 2011 by the founding members of the Piedmont Region, the Province of Alessandria, the Province of Asti and the Province of Cuneo) aims at coordinating all governance activities, from the promotion of the candidacy to the integrated planning of the projects concerning the site. It has also published a «Management Plan» for the area, pursuing four objectives (the creation of a «harmonious landscape», a «social landscape», an «economic landscape», and an «efficient landscape»). These objectives follow four main axes (knowledge, protection and conservation, cultural and economic enhancement, promotion and communication). See https://www.paesaggivitivinicoliunesco.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Piano_di_Gestione.pdf

⁸ The building was designed by the local architect Gianni Arnaudo (one of the partners of the internationally renowned radical design collective Studio 65, operating between the 1970s and 1990s). See http://www.gianniarnaudo.com/a42_l-astemia-pentita.html

⁹ See <https://italianradicaldesign.com>

abandoned chapel near La Morra into the Barolo Chapel - one of the most iconic and photographed touristic spots in the region¹⁰.

Not far in Guarene, the local noble family Sandretto Re Rebaudengo has consolidated (and expanded) its presence in the domain of contemporary art. After converting the historical family mansion into an exhibition site, they have promoted the realization of the Parco D'Arte Sandretto re Rebaudengo in San Licerio hill, featuring the works of international artists¹¹.

Scene 7: Less is more or the spatial rationing of resources

The scarcity of resources typical of the rural tradition often pairs with «economic devices capable of establishing the price» and - above all - of making it justifiable «through arguments capable of highlighting its value» [Boltanski and Esquerre 2019, 291]. In this sense, the patrimonialisation of authenticity in the cultivation of vineyards acts as a technique of territorial development: typical territorial indications and terroir delimitations are spatial instruments that define not only geographical areas and the authenticity of products but - above all - real economic values.

Although this consideration is valid for the whole UNESCO region, the case of the vineyards surrounding the tiny Barolo village is particularly paradigmatic in defining the boundary of the so-called «Langa del Barolo.» On the one hand, in itself, it constitutes one of the six UNESCO Core Zones on which the territorial management plan insists. On the other hand, the cultivation of the Nebbiolo vine from which Barolo wine is obtained is strictly regulated by the wine production regulations, which circumscribe the production area of the DOC and DOCG denominations to 29 hectares - playing a decisive role in the determination and distribution of economic values. The production disciplinary of Barolo wine also regulates the maximum quantity of production: the wines called «Barolo» and «Barolo Riserva» are characterized by a grape/ha yield of 68% and a maximum production of 54.4hl/year¹².

In this framework, a product whose scarcity and spatial footprint are rigidly regulated is necessarily configured as a luxury good that has important repercussions of value also on the territory. The price of a hectare planted with Nebbiolo vines in the area delimited by the specification, if in 2013 it was 1.3 million euros, in 2019 it reached 2.5 million, and peaks of 4 million are recorded for the vineyards that name the finest crus.

¹⁰ Over the course of the years, the Ceretto Family has consolidated collaborations with some of the most influential contemporary artists in the international scene (among them Kiki Smith, Anselm Kiefer, Francesco Clemente and Marina Abramovich) by commissioning site-specific works and performances. See <https://www.ceretto.com/it/arte> and <https://www.ceretto.com/it/holding-the-milk>.

¹¹ <https://www.parcoarte.fsrr.org>

¹² The data in the essay are not exhaustive. To have a more accurate overview, see http://catalogoviti.politicheagricole.it/scheda_denom.php?t=dsc&q=1011.

Scene 8: Exclusivity and exclusion

The new rural economy based on constructed scarcity and manipulated enrichment accompanies socio-spatial restructuring that introduces ignored inequalities. Two worlds living apart in the same space emerge: those who directly operate in the tourist sector (including tourists themselves) and inhabitants who live their daily life in the territory with marginal contact with the effects of commodification. Mega-resorts, rural luxury escapes, and second-home markets highlight an amenity migration that impacts on working-class locals. Such dynamics have been seen in other contexts, and usually where available housing stock is limited: «as a result, the high demand for rental property allows for landlords to offer lower-quality units than would be possible in a more competitive market, making rural renters twice as likely to live in substandard housing than rural homeowners» [Payne 2019, 734].

Whether named «rural gentrification» or «migration of affluent urbanites and suburbanites to the country» [Sandman 2022; Phillips 1993], the uneven circulation of capital within an area and the specialization of labour, which includes alternative patterns of economic migration, supports the desire of the new population to «buy into» a version of the rural idyllic lifestyle that the new residents perceive to exist [Sandman 2022]. The rustic scarcity of hilly Langhe landscapes has turned into a universal ambition, also by means of the UNESCO World Heritage Site circuit, which made well-intentioned gastronomic travellers respectful of the local proximity networks the tool of new exclusions. The land has value not only for its capacity to produce unique vineyard crus but rather for the potential appreciation of what is attached to it [Payne 2019, 731].

Scene 9: The trick of distinctions

Different from a linear gentrification process – which triggers the substitution of pre-existing traditions with new socioeconomic values – the current construction of authenticity is based on a selection process endorsed by local inhabitants.

As such, the process is not exclusive of Langhe. Agricultural landscapes in which niches of «special» produce have consolidated a symbolic value of exchange rather than their direct value as food operate for the constant (re)production of a stereotyped, pacified, and rustic imagery, which confirms and reinforces the dominant vision of those who have the cultural, media and economic power to shape its representation – concealing the existence of coercive processes that reiterate others' exclusion [Stokowski et al. 2021; Rodriguez Castro and Pini 2022; Eriksson 2022].

In fact, the material and immaterial cultures of the place are filtered with an aim to designate authenticity that only partially assesses the operational dimension of the very productive landscape to be preserved in its features and products. In this perspective, idyllic vineyards act again as a scene for segregation. The notion of «scarcity» featuring the life of local inhabitants in the 1950s regains today its original meaning for those belonging to the new, fragile layers of society. More or less inadvertently, some inhabitants are devalued despite their crucial role – for example as cheap labor in the vineyards at

a specific moment, flexible seasonal workers in hospitality, and the like – in maintaining and reproducing the features of these islands of economic wealth [Brown-Saracino 2007]. Chronicles narrate periodically of irregular immigrants who are forced to operate wearing working shifts in the countryside: although the harsh condemnation by public administrations and humanitarian associations, this phenomenon still seems firmly rooted in the territory. Vineyards and picturesque farmhouses, from being pleasant locations of touristic visual delight, become thus spaces of exploitation and segregation for fragile population¹³ [Vassallo and Martin 2022].

The region configures itself not (only) as an aesthetic landscape but as an operational landscape. What notions of heritage and memory are consolidating in the Langhe territories in recent years? In this multifaceted context, «patrimonialisation» swings between the protection (and creation) of cultural value and the extraction of economic value from products, places, and people - expanding the meaning of «exclusive» not only to an attribute of a luxury product but to an act of spatial, economic and social exclusion.

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