

## SOCIAL PHENOMENA IN TRANSFORMATION. TOURISM IN THE LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### DRUŠTVENI FENOMENI U TRANSFORMACIJI. TURIZAM U SVJETLU PANDEMIJE COVID-19

**APSTRAKT** Dugo vremena, a u nekoliko slučajeva i danas, turizam se nažalost ocjenjivao kao suštinski ekonomski fenomen; posebno na nivou javnog mnjenja, teritorijalne uprave i u raznim radnim i profesionalnim oblastima. Zapravo, decenijama, nakon „rađanja“ modernog turizma; u analizi posvećenog fenomenu turizma dominirali su oni ekonomskog tipa. Turističku industriju i vlade zanimalo je koliki su prihodi od valute pripisani turizmu; dimenzije rada i zapošljavanja i ekonomsko bogatstvo generisano na teritorijama.

Tek relativno nedavno, počev od 1970-ih, turizam je našao način da se na njega gleda prvenstveno iz naučne perspektive, a ne samo iz ekonomskog i socijalnog pravca razvoja; posebno u globalizovanom društvu, kakvo je ono u kome trenutno živimo. Ovo je akreditovano za rad društvenih nauka; posebno onima iz sociološkog polja, jer je pokazao kako je razmatranje turizma kao društvenog fenomena (sa važnim ekonomskim implikacijama) bilo strateški korisno i zanimljivo.

Ovaj rad, nakon kratkog podsećanja na to šta znači „društveni fenomen“, empirijskim podacima ukazuje na to kako socijalne pojave prosto ne nestaju, već se transformišu čak i kada se čini da su ih druge relevantne pojave, poput trenutne pandemije koronavirusa, brzo eliminisale. U tu svrhu turizam ćemo posmatrati kao socijalni fenomen.

Ključne riječi: turizam, Covid-19, moderni turizam, socijalni fenomen.

**ABSTRACT** For a long time tourism has unfortunately been evaluated as a substantially economic phenomenon; especially at the level of public opinion, territorial governance, and in various professional fields.

In fact, for decades, after the "birth" of modern tourism, an economic approach prevailed in the analysis dedicated to the tourism phenomenon. The tourism industry and governments were interested in knowing about revenues attributed to tourism, the working and employment dimensions and the economic wealth generated in certain areas.

Only relatively recently, as of 1970s, tourism has made its way from being viewed from a solely scientific perspective, to a subject of economic and social development, especially in a globalized society, such as the one in which we are currently living. This is accredited to the work put in place by the social sciences; in particular to those in the sociological field, for having shown how considering tourism as a social phenomenon (with important economic implications) was strategically useful and interesting.

This work, after briefly recalling what "social phenomenon" means; reverts to empirical evidence, how social phenomena do not simply disappear; if anything, they are transformed, even when other relevant phenomena, such as the current Coronavirus Pandemic, may seem to have quickly eliminated them. To this end, we will use the case of the social phenomenon of tourism.

Keywords: tourism, Covid-19, modern tourism, social phenomenon

## 1. Social phenomena

As it is well known, social phenomena can be defined as events that impact the structure and features of society in various and intense ways. The effects they produce on the features (or traits or aspects) of social life can be determined over the years in a slow or fast, significant, essential or irrelevant way. In any case, these effects are not always easily perceived by social scholars, as this will depend on the extent of the changes that the phenomena from which they derive produce on the community. However, they may be perceived by the approach and the theoretical and conceptual orientations they take; a part of the "toolbox" used to study society. In any case, social phenomena provides an appreciable indication of the social transformations taking place, and also of the extent of these changes.

The set of activities put in place to identify them; and then, subsequently, to study and analyse them, is what will allow social scientists to also develop insights and advances in the future studies of society. The reference to the "science of society" is evident here; the discipline that has social phenomena as its specific object of study; concrete facts or events subject to direct (empirical) or indirect observation, and investigated in their causes and their processes and effects; in their reciprocal relations and with other phenomena, in a methodologically and empirically founded way; in order to provide their descriptions, interpretations, explanations and sometimes predictions (Hachen, 2003).

Various social phenomena have been studied and analysed by different and significant scholars. Some of them that have been examined over time are institutions, social movements, fashions, socialization processes, mass media, deviance, religion, gender differences, consumption, etc. Obviously, the intensity and social weight of these phenomena on society vary over time and cultural space (Harvey, 2002).

Recently, in a more contemporary society, other social phenomena have manifested themselves, and presented as relevant, in the eyes of social scientists. They characterize the era we are living in, providing considerable suggestions and insights into the understanding of the evolutionary direction in which Western society has been channeled (Bauman, 1999). Among these we recall, ranging freely between t different perspectives of analysis of social phenomena (macro, micro, etc.), , social phenomena such as bullying, new media, political system, power, alcoholism, social flattening, addiction to the Internet and social networks, the mythization of technology and innovation, drug use, etc. All listed by way of example; are social phenomena in the sociological sense of expression, that is, attributable to the cultural dimension of the human being and of social groups (Durkheim, 1981).

## 2. The social phenomenon of tourism

“Tourism” is undoubtedly among those social phenomena which have greatly marked modern society, and which accompanies the economic and social development of contemporary society in a considerable way..

The phenomenon, i.e. tourist mobility, is generated as a response to a widespread and shared need at the different levels in which society is divided; and develops on the basis of social conditioning. The behaviours and attitudes of individuals feed and justify the existence of tourism as a social phenomenon, making tourism acquire the de facto meaning that involves society in its organization, its institutions, the planning and management of the rules that govern it.

Since its inception, the social phenomenon under discussion has conditioned, and continues to influence more and more heavily the attitudes of people and social groups, manipulating and confusing the actual social and life conditions of people, aggregating them into a single social role (that is, that of the tourist). It therefore encourages relationships and social relationships between people of different social classes, as well as the creation of networks of inter-individual relationships, in the context of real and virtual, common dimensions and social contexts.

Tourist mobility, travel and stay of people in places other than their residence, is, albeit with different intensity and commitment, the field of study and analysis of all the social sciences, and, for this reason, the phenomenon is examined through theoretical and conceptual approaches that are also very different from each other (Savelli, 1989). As an event that is part of the social practice, now habitual (Bauman, 2000) of human beings, it is easily distinguishable, studied and catalogued, according to the point of view of the observer.

In this paper we will refer to tourism as a social phenomenon of "mass", which as such outlines a binding need, a need, a necessity, an aspiration, for millions of individuals belonging to the most diverse social classes, ethnic groups, races and religions. It is a phenomenon that was born with modernity, and then evolved, transforming itself and adapting to the social changes that have taken place over the years, until it becomes a global phenomenon (Guidicini, Savelli, 1988).

Modern tourism was born with the second industrial revolution. In this historical period, the term "tourism" appears for the first time. The main purpose of the trips in those years is the cultural growth of the individual. Until then, traveling was an elite social phenomenon. Such was the Grand Tour, the trip reserved first for young people belonging to the English aristocratic class, and then, with the second industrial revolution, for the new, young and rich bourgeoisie that grew up with industry. The Grand Tour was not strictly a vacation trip, as its primary objective was the improvement of education, the acquisition of knowledge, completion of cultural and political education,

coming into direct contact with the places and symbols of Western civilization, and with the court circles of European countries towards which there were diplomatic interests (Sessa, 1992).

Subsequently, with the progressive affirmation of the so-called industrial society, forms of travel and "tourists" differ in terms of organizational purposes and methods, which however maintain the character of a demonstrative element of well-being and social supremacy, are progressively affirming, and are likely reserved only for a few social classes.

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the reduction of working hours and the recognition of a period of paid holidays for workers, the conditions were created for tourism to take on the character of a mass phenomenon (Richez, Strass, 1996). Fun, rest, leisure, individual and collective, represent a need, a new way of living and thinking in accordance with the conditions, aspirations and needs of the "new society". Tourism becomes a possibility of response to all this; a need and a right for all social classes, and an activity that society must promote and protect.

Although it is clearly evident that tourism is primarily a social phenomenon, many authors tend to consider tourism first and foremost as an economic phenomenon, and not as what would be more correctly distinguished as a social phenomenon from which other relevant phenomena are generated, including the economic one. This situation is mainly due to the fact that the social science, especially in Italy, where tourism became a mass phenomenon, has dedicated large study spaces to tourism from the perspective of economy (revenue currencies, employment, contribution to local wealth, etc.). For this reason, we can point out the undoubtedly significant benefits of economic nature, recorded in the territories affected over the years by the uninterrupted growth of national and international tourist demand. Tourism affects the currency balance of nations, especially in economies of developing countries, which are mainly based on the activities generated by the tourism sector. Thinking about the Italian case, there are dozens of tourist destinations and small local communities that, only on the basis of the income produced in a couple of months by tourism, are able to manage and live for the rest of the year and make investments necessary for the following tourist season.

Alongside the social and economic aspects, it is also necessary to emphasize the political one (in a broad sense), and in this capacity tourism presents itself as a formidable tool for transformation and evolution of people. The interpersonal exchanges to which it constantly gives rise, the comparison between different cultures, civilizations, peoples and races, are the basis of the most relevant processes of change and of economic and social development of the populations that have been involved, in particular since tourism has become a mass social phenomenon. Tourism has affected, and interfered significantly in the processes of urbanization and globalization of economy, maintenance and recovery of historical and artistic resources, recovery and maintenance of cultural traditions, symbols and values, local communities etc. Tourism has also

heavily influenced the management and exploitation policies of the territory and the environment, with effects and consequences, positive and negative, widely and clearly visible.

Furthermore, it seems appropriate to underline that tourism is a social fact in the Durkheimian sense of the term; a social phenomenon that imposes itself outside the will of individual consciences: what result would a citizen of a holiday resort have if he proposed to abolish the possibility of a tourist stay in one's community for persons from other places? One could come to think that he has stopped thinking, he could also be isolated and marginalized, the written and unwritten rules would turn against him, as well as all categories of subjects who benefit economically from the tourist movement. His request may derive from the need to satisfy his personal needs, and based on the demonstration of objectively negative consequences, for example: the quality of life of the community, to be able to be heard by a public administrator etc. In any case, his request could not be fully satisfied, since tourism is a social fact that imposes itself beyond individual wishes.

Whatever the type or form of tourism that the individual decides to practice; the place he decides to attend; the duration or the period of the year in which he will go on vacation; it is an indispensable social act shared by a group of individuals, from which it is difficult to escape, and will find a course regardless of one's will. On the contrary, those who do not go on vacation will have to somehow account for this. It may be thought of him that he is in financial difficulties, or sick, or that he is a snob. It will unlikely be considered a free choice. Modern tourism is therefore a social fact which is based on the spontaneous behaviour of a large number of individuals driven by the same goal.

### **3. A changing social phenomenon: tourism in the light of the Covid-19 Pandemic**

As is well-known by scholars, and is now evident also to those who have read what has been written so far, the trend and evolution of tourism as a social phenomenon are automatically conditioned not only by collective and individual behaviours, but also by other social phenomena.

What has just been said leads us to reflect on the effects that the Covid-19 Pandemic has had and will have in the future on tourism.

The first thing that can be easily said and that is worth mentioning at the outset, is that no one could ever have thought that such a thing could have happened in a contemporary society: the almost total blocking of international travel, after years of uninterrupted growth in travel which had reached one and a half billion arrivals globally in 2019, and which had made tourism the first employment and induced product sector in the world!

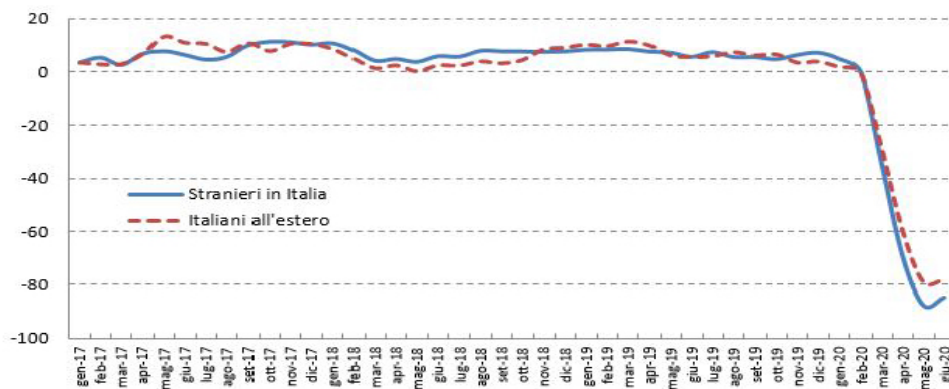
In fact, in 2020, among the various restrictions imposed by governments around the world to counter the spread of the so-called "Coronavirus", there was one that accounted for almost total block to local, national and international

mobility of people, and this, in a few months, led to the "collapse" of the entire tourism sector.

The effects produced by this situation are effectively represented in the reports prepared by the UNWTO which is, as is well known, the United Nations agency responsible for promoting responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. According to these analyses, in June the arrivals of international tourists fell by 93% worldwide compared to the same period in 2019. The data shows the serious impact that Covid-19 has had on the sector. Also according to the UNWTO, the robust decline in demand in January-June 2020 resulted in a loss of 440 million international arrivals and approximately \$ 460 billion in export revenue from international tourism (five times the economic loss which occurred in 2009 due to the global economic and financial crisis).

With reference to Italy, the Study Centre of the Bank of Italy highlighted how, in August 2020, compared to August in the previous year, the expenses of foreign travellers in Italy (4,248 million) were 28.5 % lower than, those of Italian travellers abroad (1,735 million) by 52.2%. So in the months of June, July and August, 2020, the expenditure of foreign travellers in Italy dropped by 48.5 percent compared to the same period of the previous year; those of Italian travellers abroad decreased by 58.4 per cent.

Fig. 1 - Tourist expenditure of international travellers in the period June, July and August 2020: % changes in the corresponding period for the year 2019.



Fonte: Banca d'Italia 2020

(<https://www.bancaditalia.it/statistiche/tematiche/rapporti-estero/turismo-internazionale/>)

Now, in spite of the numbers detected and estimated, which demonstrate the objective damage experienced, and which we are still experiencing, the tourism sector will try to go further and as soon as the world emergency hopefully ends, think about the new tourism situation. To do this, we propose some reflections gained during the past summer period.

In fact, during the summer of 2020, through various research activities carried out in the field, we were able to observe the situations that allowed us to deepen some working hypotheses that we had advanced for the occasion and that were linked to the idea of tourism as a social phenomenon.

In other words, the main working hypothesis was to believe that people would go on vacation as soon as they were given the opportunity to do so, despite the awareness that the chances of contracting the Coronavirus infection would be greatly increased in consequence of the inevitable convivial sharing of places and situations on vacations, and despite the fact that behavioural precautions suggested by the world health organization would tend to be respected.

Well, in fact, albeit in somewhat precarious working conditions, the research work carried out in the field in at least six seaside and inland holiday resorts of southern Italy, has produced results that prove the hypotheses valid.

The merchants interviewed, and to their own amazement, recognized the presence of an accentuated tourist movement in the location of their businesses, which produced an increase in turnover compared to the same period of the previous year.

The tourists interviewed, more precisely the tourists that we can define as natives, that is, originally from the place but residing in other areas of the country and / or abroad, recognized that it was precisely to counter the possibility of contracting the virus that they preferred to spend the holidays with relatives and old friends. This necessarily involved even the youngest children who in the absence of the Coronavirus problem would almost certainly have preferred to spend the holidays with their friends and in more exciting places. Precisely the presence of these "young tourists from the roots" did not go unnoticed in places usually frequented by vacationers later in life.

Finally, the municipal administrators themselves reported the almost total absence of empty second homes during the month of August, which had not happened for years.

#### **4. Final considerations**

Keeping in mind what is highlighted and discussed about social phenomena, particularly on the basis of what has been briefly mentioned with respect to the results of the research work carried out in the field, we can certainly highlight some final considerations:

First of all, as we have seen, a social phenomenon, even a very significant one, such as tourism can be obstructed. This can only happen through the imposition of "coercive" tools: in our case this has happened in those areas of the world where the physical circulation of people has been prohibited to counter the spread of Coronavirus.

We have also seen that, as soon as people were allowed to travel, although in a controlled and moderate way, tourist mobility immediately re-

emerged and people moved to places, even very distant from their residence, to spend their holiday. This means, therefore, that the social phenomenon does not undergo important transformations in a short time, even when there are intervening variables which are carriers of very relevant phenomena such as the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Furthermore, it was possible to highlight how social phenomena undergo transformations, even if it is not easy to assess whether they are temporary or permanent. In our case this is the presence of people / tourists who have "accepted", due to the Corona virus, to spend a holiday in places and social and cultural environments different from those where they prefer to stay. For this reason the phenomenon will undergo a transformation which, in turn, will produce further transformations in the society as a whole.

Finally, we can say that social phenomena are extraordinarily interesting events to observe and study, especially when they are of global interest, as in this case. Their adaptations will be slow, and continue over time with significant effects on the whole society.

In conclusion, tourism, a very complex social phenomenon due to its mutability, makes the work of social scientists particularly onerous, because they have to continually reconsider the theoretical perspective of reference.

### *R e f e r e n c e s*

- Bauman Z. (1999), *Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone*, Laterza: Bari-Roma.
- Bauman Z. (2000), *Modernità liquida*, Laterza: Bari-Roma.
- Corbin (a cura di), *L'invenzione del tempo libero. 1850-1960*, Editori Laterza: Bari, pp. 404 – 442.
- Dall'Ara G. (1995), *Perché le persone vanno in vacanza?*, Franco Angeli: Milano.
- Durkheim E. (1981), *Breviario di sociologia. Le regole del metodo sociologico*, Newton & Compton Editori: Roma.
- Guidicini P., Savelli A. (1988, a cura di), *Il turismo in una società che cambia*, Franco Angeli: Milano
- Hachen D. S. (2003), *La sociologia in azione. Come leggere i fenomeni sociali*, Carocci: Roma.
- Harvey D. (2002), *La crisi della modernità*, trad. it., Il Saggiatore: Milano
- Perri A. (2020), *Il turismo delle radici*, Aracne: Roma.
- Richez J. C., Strass L. (1996), *Un tempo nuovo per gli operai: le ferie pagate (1930-1960)*, in A. Corbin (a cura di), *L'invenzione del tempo libero. 1850-1960*, Editori Laterza: Bari-Roma, pp. 404 – 442.
- Romita T. (1999), *Il turismo che non appare. Verso un modello consapevole di sviluppo turistico della Calabria*, Rubbettino: Soveria Mannelli.
- Romita T., Perri A. (2009), „Da emigrati a turisti. Turismo delle radici e recupero delle identità locali“, in: Romita T., Ercole E., Nocifora E., Palumbo M., Pieroni O.,



25 T. Romita, Social phenomena in transformation. Tourism in the light of the Covid-19 ...

Ruzza C., Savelli A. (a cura di), *Atti del III Convegno Nazionale „Turismo Sostenibile: ieri, oggi, domani“*, p. 212-222, Pronovis: Cosenza.

Savelli A. (1989), *Sociologia del turismo*, Franco Angeli: Milano.

Sessa A. (1992), *Elementi di sociologia e psicologia del turismo*, CLITT: Roma.