

A SOCIOLOGICAL LOOK TO MEDITERRANEAN TOURISM: THE ASSMED ACTIVITY

SOCIOLOŠKO VIĐENJE MEDITERANSKOG TURIZMA: AKTIVNOST ASSMED-A

APSTRAKT Ovaj rad ima za cilj da istakne neka značajna sociološka pitanja u poznavanju turizma, sa posebnom pažnjom na mediteransko područje s obzirom na njegov historijski i trenutni značaj za taj sektor. Identifikovanje glavnih socioloških mreža u ovoj oblasti, kao što je AssMed (Mediteransko udruženje za sociologiju turizma) se razmatra kroz rekonstrukciju ciljeva, principa organizacije i glavnih tema koje su se pojavile na konferencijama koje je promovisalo ovo udruženje. Rad završava isticanjem nekih podataka koji ukazuju na konstantan značaj turizma za mediteranske zemlje, iako u konkurentnijem kontekstu nego što je to bilo u prošlosti. Neka ključna pitanja su takođe naglašena u pogledu aktivnosti AssMed-a, kao i drugih socioloških mreža u turizmu. Sa metodološkog stanovišta, rad se zasniva na bibliografskom proučavanju i istraživanju veb stranica, kao i na autorovom iskustvu u mreži AssMed kao njenog člana, a zatim i kao njenog sekretara.

Ključne riječi: turizam, Mediteran, sociologija, teritorija, AssMed.

ABSTRACT This paper aims to highlight some prominent sociological issues in the knowledge of tourism, with particular attention to the Mediterranean area given its historical importance for this sector. In the effort to identify the main sociological networks in this field, the case of AssMed (Mediterranean Association for the Sociology of Tourism) is considered through a reconstruction of the mission, the organization, and the main topics that emerged in the nine conferences promoted by this association. The paper concludes by highlighting some data that suggest a persistent importance of tourism in the Mediterranean countries, albeit in a more competitive context than in the past. Some critical issues are also stressed in the activity of AssMed as well as in other sociological networks on tourism. The paper is based on a bibliographic and website research, as well as on the author's experience within the AssMed network as a member and then as a secretary.

Key words: Tourism, Mediterranean, Sociology, Territory, AssMed.

The place of sociology in the study of tourism

When we talk about tourism studies, it is usually said that the research area is “dominated” by economics, marketing, and business science; social sciences

often play a minor role, “struggling” to find a place. We can find an interesting example in the Italian case: if we consider the Rimini campus of the University of Bologna, most of the 1st and 2nd cycle degree courses are dedicated to tourism. Nevertheless, we cannot find anything about the sociology of tourism; the last course was de-activated around fifteen years ago. This sounds surprising and even stranger if we think that it is the only campus on the coast of Roma, one of the European regions with the highest tourist density since the 1960s!

Despite this situation, probably due to teaching and academic issues, there seems to be a unanimous agreement on the importance of social and cultural factors for understanding the many forms and changes in tourism over its long history. Attitudes and behaviors are therefore crucial variables to study both tourist demand and tourist supply, and it seems crucial to combine a sociological analysis with the ones conducted by many other disciplines.

This reflection clearly emerges in the work of Hans Knebel (1960) which is considered in the seminal book of Asterio Savelli (2012) as the person who launched the sociology of tourism as a relatively autonomous discipline. This author considers many previous and contemporary forms of tourism. For example, the Grand Tour (defined as “the fossil of modern tourism”). Between the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 19th century, it was a tool for the young nobles of northern Europe to find education and relationship opportunities through travel and to meet their peers in the south of the continent. It continues with the expansion of the holiday habit to larger and larger numbers of the population: the nobility first, then the high class, the middle class, and the working class. Knebel pointed out the sociological implications of this process, with coexistence of exclusive holidays (especially in the spas and mountain resorts, with the rise of a “double moral standard” about the tolerated behaviour from tourist and from local population) and the first attempts to make the holidays more “popular” (with the diffusion of public transport the first “all inclusive” packages). Knebel then considers the rise of mass tourism, from the forms promoted by the propaganda policies of totalitarian regimes in the early 20th century to the boom that characterized the 1950s and 1960s.

An even greater attention to tourism by sociology is witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s, when the uninterrupted development of the “Thirty Glorious” years ends, and it gives way to a crisis which affects tourism almost everywhere, not only in terms of arrivals and overnights but also in terms of motivations and attitudes to tourists. The complexity and fragmentations of postmodernity also had an impact here. Sociological reflection stressed the gradual shift from the importance of “being like the others” to the importance of “being different”, pointing out the increasing variability of tourist taste. This new situation, however, represents not only a crisis but also an opportunity for tourist supply. In a context increasingly globalized since the 1990s, competition has become

much wider, but many regions and destinations can “enjoy” these aspects to find a visibility they did not have before, discovering or rediscovering their own “tourist vocation”.

The networks of tourism sociologists and the birth of AssMed

There are many scientific activities dedicated to tourism: journals, seminars, conferences, associations, research centers, etc. Making an accurate list is impossible but, perhaps, we can ask a question: what is the role of sociologists in this debate? How do sociologists network with each other? How do they network with experts from other disciplines?

The general, the impression is that networking is not so frequent. First, tourism is not a focus of many sociological networks and, when it is considered, it is just one of several research interests. If I consider the University of Bologna, where I work, an example of that is Ce.P.Ci.T. (a study center on urban and regional problems): just a few members deal with tourism because the center is dedicated to many other issues. In the same university, we also have the case of the Advanced Studies Center on Tourism: there are also some sociologists there but it is a really multidisciplinary center, where the majority of scholars are economists, historians, geographers, business scientists (CAST website, 2020).

However, there are also networks of sociologists where tourism is the primary research interest. A couple of examples can be found in Italy: CreST, a research center for tourism studies of the University of Calabria (CreST website, 2020) and Spe.Tur, a working group within the Sociologia per la Persona association. If we move to the international level, the most important case is probably the RC50 - International Tourism network, founded in 1994 within the ISA (International Sociological Association) (RC50 website, 2020).

What happens if we consider the European and the Mediterranean level? We have already seen how these areas, and the latter in particular, have been prominent tourist destinations since the earliest historical forms: not only at the time of the Grand Tour, but already in ancient times with the first visits to temples and monuments as well as in the Middle Ages with the first pilgrimages. This importance certainly continues today: having accurate data is very difficult, but it seems clear that more than 300 million people visit the Mediterranean region every year, a figure represents between 20% and 30% of the international tourist movement in the world. Moreover, if we take into account the ten most visited countries in 2018, four of them are located in the Mediterranean region: France is the first, Spain the second, Italy the fifth, and Turkey the seventh (Unwto, 2019).

Considering these data and all the trends described in the first paragraph, it is legitimate to expect a stronger attitude to a comparative analysis from the sociologists who live and work in these countries. The Mediterranean

Association of Sociology of Tourism (AssMed) was founded in 1987 and its mission was clearly connected to this need: to compare the change of cities and local communities affected by tourism in the Mediterranean regions with the more general changes in social life and the rise of globalization in the economy, culture and tourism market.

Even the composition of the AssMed governing bodies, which is obviously based on the skills and involvement in the association's activities, is also inspired by the idea of adequately representing the Mediterranean regions of this network. The current mandate (2019-2022) is composed by scholars who come from six Mediterranean countries: the president is Natasa Krivokapic (University of Montenegro), the honorary presidents are Asterio Savelli (University of Bologna, Italy) and Marie-Françoise Lanfant (CNRS of Paris, France), the members of the board of directors are Gilda Catalano (University of Calabria, Italy), Philippe Clairay (Musées de Villedieu-les-Poêles, France), Stella Kostopoulou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece), Joseph Inguanez (University of Malta), Ivona Jovanovic (University of Montenegro), Silvia Mugnano (University of Milano Bicocca, Italy), Inmaculada Puertas Cañaverall (University of Granada, Spain). On the other hand, if we look at the past AssMed presidents we can find scholars from seven countries: Marc Boyer (University of Lyon "Lumière", France) was the president from 1987 to 1991 and again from 1991 to 1995 and from 2001 to 2005, Vojislav Jancovic (University of Belgrade, Serbia) was the president in 1991, Afonso de Barros (University of Lisbon, Portugal) from 1995 to 2001, Olga Iakovidou (University of Thessaloniki, Greece) from 2005 to 2008, Margarita Latiesa (University of Granada, Spain) from 2008 to 2011, Asterio Savelli (University of Bologna, Italy) from 2011 to 2014, Tullio Romita (University of Calabria, Italy) from 2014 to 2019.

A look at Mediterranean tourism through the AssMed conferences

Having considered the mission of the AssMed through its history, we will now consider the main topics and conclusions of the nine conferences organized by this association (Savelli, 2009).

The First Conference was held in Bologna in 1987 and focused on the topics "Tourism and cultural communication, for an active role of local communities: new services and new professions" (Guidicini and Savelli, 1988a and 1988b). The leitmotif was the re-emerging of local communities, after decades dominated by mass tourism that tended to relegate them to simple "backgrounds" or "backstage" or just places for recruiting manpower for this sector. Some particularly important tourist segments for the Mediterranean regions were considered: the perspectives opened by Plan Bleu for the seaside holiday, the challenge of hinterland areas with their resources, the first forms

of farm holidays and the rediscovery of rural dimension, the tourism as an opportunity for cultural interactions when Europe was still characterized by many ethnic, economic and political borders.

The Second Conference was held in Cervia in 1991 on the topic “Local intermediate groups and structures, for a reimagination of the tourism system” (Guidicini and Savelli, 1992). In this case, the presentations focused on the new social relations as well as new organizational forms that were emerging in the tourist destinations. The idea of “region” and “territory” was being rediscovered as a key element for tourism after their “de-evaluation” in the decades of mass tourism. These relations and forms were tools to connect local groups and grassroots operators on a side, tourists and large organizations of tourism market on the other side.

The Third Conference was held in Estoril in 1995 on the topic “Tourism and Environment” (Savelli, 1997). For the first time, particular attention was dedicated to environmental aspects of tourism: the negative and positive impacts of this sector, with a reminder that the environment does not include just natural resources (the land, the climate, the flora, the fauna) but also the cultural heritage (values, norms, daily life practices, as well as art, monuments and architecture) that contains the symbols of memory and local collective identity.

The reflections of these first conferences were published as a volume about community strategies in Mediterranean tourism (Guidicini and Savelli, 1999), with a selection of contributions around some key issues: the growing role of local community, the construction of new social relations between local community and tourists as well as among the tourists themselves, the ambivalence of local memory and cultural heritage, the importance of preserving nature and the rural space, the differentiation processes constantly occurring in tourist supply and tourist demand.

The Fourth Conference was held in Ravenna in 2001 on the topic “Local and Global in Tourism: forms of aggregation and communication networks” (Savelli, 2004; Associazione Mediterranea di Sociologia del Turismo, 2004). The trends that were leading a global tourist market were considered, together with the risk of reducing or cancelling local differences due to the diffusion of dominant models. The defence of natural and cultural heritage of each region appears more difficult now; at the same time, this heritage seems more and more important to attract tourists, both “from inside” (the same region) and “from outside” (other regions). Particular attention was dedicated to entrepreneurial aggregations which aimed to use local peculiarity as a tool to act more effectively in the global tourism market.

The Fifth Conference took place in Thessaloniki in 2005, on the topic “Beyond the coastline” (Iakovidou, 2007; Savelli, 2008). The idea of alternative tourism was considered, with attention to the forms that were emerging alongside the

traditional ones (seaside tourism based on the 4s model: sun, sea, sand, sex): farm holidays, environmental tourism, sport tourism, and cultural tourism were the most debated examples. The rise of transversal routes with respect to the coastline was stressed too, with attention to the new opportunities to connect these resources with the ones in the hinterland.

The Sixth Conference was held in Granada in 2008 and was about “Tourism as a factor of development and cohesion in the Mediterranean region” (Latesa Rodríguez, Puertas Cañaverál and Paniza Prados, 2009). The works focused on tourism as a “generator” of cohesion and promoter of sustainable local development. In this perspective, the risks of uncontrolled tourism activities were stressed with attention to their economic, social, and environmental effects. The perception of local image and local cultural heritage was also considered as a more and more important variable that affects tourism trends. As regards some specific tourist forms, much attention was dedicated to sport and leisure activities on holiday time.

The Seventh Conference was held in Sassari and Alghero in 2011 on the topic “Tourist mobility between crisis and change” (Deriu, 2013; Tidore, 2013). The attention to sustainability and unsustainability of tourism continued, with more focus on the effect on urban transformations and the need to govern the change to avoid a negative impact on tourists as well as on the local population. Once again, the role of networks was considered in all the possible combinations: public-public, public-private, private-private. The coastline and the sea also continued to receive great attention for the analysis of tourist demand and tourist supply, with several studies on their subjective representation as well as on the increase of nautical and inter-coastal tourism.

The Eighth Conference was held in Arcavacata di Rende in 2014, on the topic “Tourism and quality of life” (Perri, Catalano and Romita, 2015 and 2016). The reflection of tourism as a generator of local development and well-being for its population continued, not only in terms of profit but also in terms of better services and enhancement of local heritage. The presentations paid particular attention to the growth of food and wine tourism, with several good and bad strategies implemented by local governments in the Mediterranean regions. The need to interact with local actors (province, region, university, tourism entrepreneurs) was stressed too, together with the importance of organizing meetings and education opportunities for younger scholars, such as summer schools to study and plan tourism policies.

The Ninth Conference was held in Kotor in 2019 on the topic “Slow and Fast Tourism”. It showed many elements of continuity with the previous ones but also a higher attention to the trends taking place in the Balkan countries as well as to the innovations in some tourist segments: for example, the literary tourism, the youth travels, the roots tourism and the slow tourism.

Final remarks

Tourism has continued to grow continuously for decades, reaching around 1.5 billion people who travel internationally every year; this situation makes it possible to consider tourism as the biggest industry of the world (Unwto, 2019). There were very few and brief interruptions in this trend in the last thirty years: the one after the terrorist attack to the Twin Towers in 2001, the one during the economic crisis in 2008, the one (still in progress unfortunately) caused by the Covid-19 emergency. We have seen that presences and destinations have multiplied in every part of the world, but the Mediterranean area remains a prominent one. Everything suggests, therefore, that many issues will remain important for the sociology of tourism, and in particular for the AssMed activity. These include the impact of mass tourism on tourists and local communities, with attention to the de-structuring processes induced by large organizations, the contradictions emerged, and the attempts to protect and enhance local culture. The analysis of motivational factors in tourism demand is also destined to remain important; as regards tourist supply, the local aggregations to enjoy the opportunities offered by globalization processes. Another core topic will probably be the attention to the sea: new regional dimensions are emerging in which it becomes a connection both between different regions and with the hinterland areas.

The experience of sociological networks, and the one of AssMed in particular, however, also highlights some critical issues. First, there is an urgent need to share the organization of events with joint international research organizations, particularly because of the international character of AssMed association. Second, this association still seems too “Italian-centric”, with 57 Italian members out of 111 (according to the data from October 2019). The scholars from some Mediterranean regions, on the other hand, are not a part of the network at the moment: North Africa in particular, but also the Middle East. These are the issues to work on because, if AssMed is the longest-running sociological network on tourism, the risk is a “wasted opportunity”, especially for the younger scholars.

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