

## Off-the-beaten-track Tours, Urban Walks: different labels, the same touristification?

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**Premises: studying gentrification and touristification in Southern Europe** - In recent decades, gentrification has become a buzzword. Several scholars have highlighted the limitations of approaches constrained by Anglo-american lens, promoting a more cosmopolitan, global perspective (Lees et al. 2015).

In 2000's, while Smith and Derksen (2002) talked about a "gentrification going global", Clark (2005) warned about the differences of places experiencing gentrification in a different manner. More recently, Maloutas (2012) wondered if the use of the Anglo-Saxon term facilitates or, on the contrary, precludes a deep understanding of diverse processes implying urban restructuring of different urban contexts.

In particular, Petsimeris (2005, p. 242) argues that "Southern European cities are highly heterogeneous and complex, and the processes of gentrification are for this reason very different in terms of its temporality and spatiality".

**The research** - San Berillo is a neighborhood of the historical centre of Catania, a city located in the eastern coast of Sicily. For decades the degraded working-class district was one of the largest red-light districts in Europe.

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After a 1958 national law making prostitution illegal, a series of demolitions and reconstructions, followed by the local community's forced displacement, completely upset deeply-rooted relations among urban fabric, socio-economic structures and population. In 2000's, different phenomena concur in partially modifying the trajectory of decline: a tourist tour organized by a local association, accused of fueling touristification; a bottom-up culture-led social regeneration program, organizing "urban walks" targeted to locals; the emergence of a new retailscape in the outer boundaries; an urban renewal program in the brownfield section of the district, left empty after post-war demolitions.

The research aims at critically scrutinizing differences and similarities in terms of ideological assumptions, objectives, practices of the above-mentioned processes in order to evaluate the conflicting uses of urban spaces, fragmented into micro-spaces where everyone claims for his own "right to the city".

The research is theoretically grounded in the debate about the term's transversal /transnational effectiveness and the planetary perspective in order to understand if it can be applied also for cities of the Global North sharing a lot in common with a Global South (Ascençao, 2015).

It is also grounded in the debate about the forces reconfiguring urban development as well as tourism due to the neoliberal shift, by scrutinizing the patterns through which the district is re-imagined as a "marginal" place to visit or explore; and if these post-modern urban practices can be interpreted as signs of tourism gentrification, which has a different meaning in peripheral economies insofar as tourism is often act as a driver of growth (Cocola Grant, 2018).

The work is based on a series of fieldworks carried out from 2012 to 2019, during which unstructured interviews were conducted with several actors, ranging from sex workers to

tourists and cultural operators, in order to gather primary data on respondents' view about the neighborhood changing landscapes.

## References

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