The Transnational Implications of the Heritage Industry. The case of the Bangladeshi Street-vendors in the Tourism Landscapes of Rome

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Abstract

This paper puts emphasis on the transnational socio-cultural and economic implications of the heritage industry. It does so by tracing the patterns of mobility and identity-making of the Bangladeshis who work as street-vendors in the tourism landscapes of Rome.

Tourism and diaspora dynamics remain separate fields of inquiry. Yet the two phenomena emerge from—and complementarily affect—uneven geographies of global mobility, thus substantiating neo-liberal patterns of production and consumption. In most European cities, the nexus of diaspora and tourism becomes apparent in heritage landscapes, where tourists consume a selected pastness, and newcomers seek provisional employment. Heritage thus emerges as a cultural phenomenon of which the political and economic ramifications transcend localities, and affect transnational socio-economic landscapes. The case of the Bangladeshi street-vendors in the tourism sites of Rome is exemplar.

In Rome, the abundance of heritage and the conspicuous presence of visitors make tourism a primary employment sector. One that informally absorbs many immigrants and refugees who reside in the city, often illegally. Since the 1900s Rome has been a preferred destination for Bangladeshi immigrants, who constitute the third largest immigrants’ group. Approximately 2500 Bangladeshis sell touristic gadgets in the most iconic landscapes of heritage. The most settled street-vendors send money to their families, whose members often manage to start micro-enterprises. Hence, the Italian heritage industry de facto actively contributes to the developing socio-economic landscapes of Bangladesh. With qualitative fieldwork conducted in Rome and Dhaka, this paper traces the patterns of mobility and identity-negotiation of three street vendors and their families.

This paper further complicates the critical understanding of heritage as an identity-building political phenomenon that serves domestic power dynamics. While this view remains germane, it is likewise momentous to consider the ways in which the power of heritage transcends