

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