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Tourism, Imaginaries and Identities: reversing the point of view

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Bernard Debarbieux

Analysis of the interactions between tourists and local inhabitants is a topic long debated in academic publications. Indeed, it is one of the most commonly recurring areas of interest to researchers in the social sciences who work on tourism, particularly sociologists, anthropologists and human geographers who work in former 'third world' countries (Cohen, 1988; Nash, 1996; Cazes, 1989). However, most of these publications concern a single general question: to what extent do the images tourists make of the places and people they encounter, and the behaviour they adopt accordingly, have an impact on the people themselves and their own cultural practices and representations?

The answers put forward for this question are varied. Many works on tourism published in the 1970s and 80s saw this phenomenon as a source of cultural crisis, causing disruption to social rules, and as the origin of various misunderstandings linked to the folklorisation and commodification of cultural traditions, as well as of stereotypes brought into play in the social relations between tourists and local populations (see, inter alia Krippendorf, 1977; Rajotte and Crocombe, 1980; Turner and Ash, 1975). Secondly, a new generation of authors has preferred to privilege a different, more positive and less Manichean, point of view. They emphasise, for example, the contribution that tourism has made to the promotion of traditional crafts and to the emergence of new forms of cultural expression, as well as the capacity that local populations develop to enter a modern, global economy after their encounter with tourists and tour operators (Norhonda, 1979; Harkin, 1995; Krystal, 2000; Picard, 1996, 2001).

In this article, I wish to adopt yet another point of view and to ask the following question: to what extent are individuals and groups living in tourist areas invited to promote tourism to work on or renew their collective identities? In this formulation, the question suggests that the social and cultural transformations, rather than deriving solely from external forces (i.e. tourist professionals and tourists) may also be consciously anticipated and researched in a proactive manner by the inhabitants themselves as well as, in certain cases, by their own partnership networks. It also suggests that local motivations for the development of tourism may link social relations and collective identities to the economic goals, which are most often highlighted. A few publications from the past two decades have suggested a number of research avenues related to such an idea (Rodriguez, 1998; Erb, 2000; Lanfant et al, 1995) but have not delved deeply therein. In this article, I would like to develop this idea in a systematic way by testing the following hypothesis: when they feel the imperative to achieve some measure of collective identity or to work on their internal cohesion, local communities can come to initiate or direct a process of touristic development, thus aiming to combine on the one hand its expected economic benefits, and on the other, the political status and advantages expected to flow from increased visibility, as well as cultural dynamism or symbolic prestige.

Identities, reflexivity and the geographical imaginary

To clarify the bases of this hypothesis, I take a number of initial detours, drawing on contemporary social theories which offer stimulating analyses of contemporary cultural dynamics:

(1) It is generally acknowledged in social sciences and political philosophy that issues of identity have acquired huge importance in contemporary societies. Certain authors see here the influence of globalization and population flows, as well as flows of information, capital and goods. Emerging identities are, therefore, construed sometimes as recompositions drawing on specific spatial configurations, e.g. diasporas, and new resources such as information networks (Appadurai, 1999), sometimes in the vein of resistance or the invention of alternative projects (Castells, 2001). A rich literature on 'new social movements' has demonstrated how much these new forms of identity tend to valorise collective mobilization (see Snow (2001)'s title, for example). Some movements place high importance on recognizing the social and cultural uniqueness asserted by their protagonists (Taylor, 1989). All these analyses emphasise

collective identities as the shared feeling or will of several individuals to belong to the same group and to present themselves as such in the public arena.

Such a take on the notion of identity should be distinguished from what are often referred to as 'social identities'. These refer to categories or groupings considered as social entities by our societies and the individuals who make up our societies. The notion of a collective identity privileges an endogenous and subjective point of view specific to the populations in question. These two forms of identity are not independent of one another (Snow, 2001; Jenkins, 2000; Kaufmann, 2004). In fact, due to the intensification of social interactions and the circulation of information, contemporary individuals are rarely ignorant of the ways in which they are defined and categorised. This is particularly true of touristic contexts. The people who live in a place frequently visited by tourists become rapidly aware of how they are perceived, not only by the visitors, but also by the media. Therefore, the process of constructing and transforming collective identities often takes into account social identities, indeed sometimes in order to switch their negative connotation to a positive one, as has happened with gay and gender identities. Contemporary collective identities are made up of a complex mix of direct or mediated social interactions and take into account the ever-increasing degree of self-reflexivity of their actors. As Anthony Giddens (1990) has ably shown, this reflexivity is also concerned with knowledge produced by the social sciences. Thanks to the broadcast of this knowledge, local actors show an increased familiarity with the images others have of them and become more ready to borrow elements of these images to use in their own work of identity construction.

(2) More specifically, the construction and transformation of social and collective identities often attaches importance to the spatiality of groups to be delimited, particularly ideas of place, of the local, territory, region and nation. Tourists and the tourist industry they represent (with their guide books, documentaries, etc.) carry the idea that the communities they visit are closely linked to their places. So tourism itself, as a search for or experience of otherness, justifies itself by this idea of the shared specificity of groups and places. Academic literature has contributed to the development and popularization of this representation. Building on the work of geographers such as Derek Gregory (1994) and Franco Farinelli (2009) for example, and authors in a critical anthropological mould, like Akhil Gupta and

James Ferguson (1992), Arjun Appadurai (1998) as well as Jean-Louis Amselle (2010), we know that the social sciences do not merely describe, but also influence the image of local and traditional communities, deeply anchored in their place, and with which they are expected to have developed a profound symbiotic relation. To describe this process, the anthropologists speak of 'metonymic freezing' (Appadurai, 1988) and 'magic triangle' (Abélès and Cullerai, 2001), linking in determinist fashion culture, territory and identity. Gregory also considers this pattern as central to geographers' production of knowledge, in what he terms the 'geographic imagination' (1994).

(3) Finally, our societies have always been more aware of another characteristic of Western thought and academic production in particular; the identification of places, people and communities tends to be linked to knowledge categories derived from nature (continents, mountainous regions, etc.) from humanity (nations, civilisations, even races, etc.). The image and the knowledge of their uniqueness is often subsumed by the image and knowledge of these categories. The tourism imaginary, far from being a fantasy, adopts this way of thinking for several reasons: tourism has developed in modern societies by borrowing broad conceptions of the world and its inhabitants from scholarly and philosophical knowledge; most travel writings and guides are written by authors who labour under this ideological baggage, or indeed are actually 'experts' themselves; and tourism today actively participates in the circulation and promotion in the media of these imaginaries of nature and humanity.

If we admit that contemporary individuals have acquired this type of knowledge, often the source of different stereotypes, we must also acknowledge that these same people, when they live in touristic regions, can and must think of themselves in terms of the categories and forms of anchoring to place and location which the tourism imaginary provides. This idea explains why we question the manner in which social groups are brought to promote tourism by mastering the cultural codes which it carries in order to offer tourist products yes, but also, and this is what interests me here, in order to mould their own self-definition and sense of territoriality. This way of proceeding should feed into a more general reflection in the social sciences about the tension that exists, especially in a context of globalization, between the forces of deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation (Raffestin, 1979). As Gupta and Ferguson say, outlining their agenda for a postmodern

anthropology: "instead of clinging to the notion of deterritorialisation, of the pulverizing of the space of advanced modernity, we need to theorise the question of finding out how space is reterritorialised in the contemporary world" (Gupta, 1992, p. 20; our retranslation of the French translation). My aim in this article is to show how groups mobilise the tourism imaginary and some elements of academic knowledge to underpin or redefine their common territoriality, above and beyond their collective identities.

This article succinctly develops three case studies. The first, Chamonix in France, has been one of my research testing grounds for more than 20 years; the second, Little Italy in New York, was the scene of many academic ventures before I myself carried out several interviews and observations in the Autumn of 2010. The analysis of the third, the gay quarter in Manchester in the UK, is based mainly on existing publications and one personal visit to the location. In these three contexts, tourist development can be understood as the expression of an explicit wish on the part of local actors concerned to build on a process of collective identity construction and the manipulation also evident in tourism and academic imaginaries.

How to be a '"mountaineer" in Chamonix?

Chamonix, in the French Alps, is one of the oldest and largest – if not the largest - mountain tourist place in the world. Taking into account its importance – more than 5 million nights are spent there by tourists every year – and age – more than two centuries – it would be absurd to analyse Chamonix today as a mountain community whose traditional identity was disturbed by contemporary tourism. The people of Chamonix (the *Chamoniards*) have long lived with the fact and presence of tourists and of tourism imaginaries.

The first travellers we can trace visited the area in the middle of the 18th century. Most of them, English, Swiss and French, came to experience the mountainous landscape and the spectacle of the glaciers. The intelligentsia played a decisive role in the fashioning of the modern imaginary of mountains, in particular those who visited Chamonix and the area around Mont Blanc (Joutard, 1986). From the middle of the 18th century, we see the progressive transformation of the idea of the mountain, still vague at that time, into a category of intellectual specialist knowledge: a class of physical entities and a useful notion to describe the surface of the earth, to the explanation

of their formation and to the understanding of interactions between natural phenomena (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010). Some of these scientists, notably Horace Benedict de Saussure who was instrumental in the first scaling of Mt Blanc, played a major role in the birth of tourism in Chamonix and in the coupling of scholarly and tourism imaginaries.

The majority of the scientists and tourists of the 18th and 19th century developed the habit of referring to people they met during their trips to the Alps and stays in Chamonix as 'mountaineers' (*montagnards*). The invention of this category was the logical consequence of the then dominant conception of mountains – a type of natural region – and of the more or less determinist vision of the relations between its elements. This way of thinking of mountains led to the production and circulation of very simplified images of the local populations, sometimes described as 'noble savages' after Haller's poems and Rousseau's novels, sometimes as backward people, simple-witted or fond of fighting (Debarbieux, 2008). Thanks to the popularity of the Alps and Chamonix from this era on, we have a considerable quantity of narratives and essays which enable us to follow the construction of this ethnotype and its local variations, particularly in Chamonix.

The Chamoniards were for some time troubled by the way the travellers referred to them. For the first few decades, they were unused to being called 'mountaineers', as they were accustomed to referring to each other by using the names of areas or regions like Savoie or Faucigny. However, due to the close relations they developed with their visitors, particularly hoteliers and guides, they became accustomed to this mode of address and grew to realise the advantage they might draw from it. They understood that the beauty of their valley existed in the eye of the beholder, in the regard the travellers had of the people and of the surrounding peaks. Most Chamoniard families had at least one member in the 'Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix', and often someone working in the hotels which flourished in the valley throughout the 19th century.

At this point in the description, Chamonix appears to be an early and remarkable example of touristic development. However, from the point of view of the cultural impact of tourism, and the effects of the interactions with tourists in terms of self definition and collective identity, the formulations used doesn't greatly differ from what many studies have identified as the cultural adjustment of local societies (see introduction). Of course, this frame of analysis no longer works for the period beginning at

the close of the 19th century. This is where the proposition presented in this article shows its applicability.

The culture of mountain-climbing changed radically in the middle of the 19th century. Following on several generations of climbers, many of whom were intellectuals and aristocrats curious to learn about landscapes and nature, a new generation appeared amongst the English visitors at first, and then amongst those of the alpine countries. They organised themselves into national and regional mountain clubs, some of which attracted a large membership. These climbers had a completely different conception of their leisure activity. They were often more fit and daring than their predecessors, and keen to test themselves against more difficult ascents. They therefore became more demanding of the guides of the *Compagnie*, occasionally trying to get by without their services when they judged them to be insufficient. As well as this, their expectations were poorly satisfied by the rules which still prevailed in the *Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix*. These rules, handed down from the pastoral agrarian economy of before, were designed to guarantee an equal share of revenue for all its members – but they obstructed the climbers from choosing their guides. As well as that, in order to join the *Compagnie*, a guide had to have been born in Chamonix, whereas technical and sporting competence counted for little. In these conditions, several alpine clubs began in the 1880s to call for an alternative regulation of the profession, as well as free access to the mountain peaks for themselves. Believing themselves to be more able than the guides to whom they had been assigned, and generally more interested in the mountain and its upkeep, members of the alpine clubs started to style themselves as "mountaineers", taking for themselves names that had long been used to refer to the local population.

Indeed, over the same decades, there was a growing obsolescence of local traditions and institutions. The growing interest of national administrations in mountain resources (forests, landscapes, water, etc.) saw the French state, like many other European states, regulate the use of the forests and mountain pastures, thus making the continuation of the traditional associated economy more problematic. Also, the French state authorised (against the advice of the town council) the construction of a railway line to Montenvers, the main attraction of the valley at that time and the main source of revenue for the guides and the porters. Sensitive to the arguments of the alpine clubs, the state also unilaterally reformed la *Compagnie des Guides*, demanding that the guides

obtain a certificate of qualification to carry out their role. In this way, in a few decades, some of the most established traditions and beliefs of the local population were destabilised, particularly those which affected their way of seeing themselves as Chamoniards.

This context contributed to the loss of political leadership on the part of the farmers and guides. The hoteliers, although in a minority[1], took greater power in the local council in the 1910s, thanks to the privileged relations they had with wealthy tourists and the administration, and remained dominant until the 1950s. The consequences of their economic and political leadership were two-fold.

Firstly, tourist numbers exploded: official census records show 24 000 tourists and 20 hotels or hostels in 1920; in 1938, a local paper put forward figures of 500 000 tourists and 70 hotels (Debarbieux, 2001). Investments in tourist facilities, often financed by capital from outside the valley, also multiplied, especially in the creation of mechanical ski-lifts.

It also became clear that the institutions which guided tourist development at local level became worried about reinforcing links, particularly symbolic ones, between the inhabitants and their mountain environment. Among the numerous initiatives taken at the time, the most noteworthy concerned the metamorphosis of the *Compagnie des Guides* itself. Formerly a corporation of farmers in search of extra income, the *Compagnie* gradually became a breeding ground for high level mountaineers, some of whom marked the history of mountaineering in the 19th and early 20th century. In the 1920s, the *Compagnie* opened its doors to non-natives of Chamonix on the condition that they were confirmed sportsmen. Certain members of the *Compagnie* also became famous by inventing and popularising new forms of artistic expression thenceforth to be associated with the tourism imaginary of the summits: Roger Frison-Roche, the first non-native member of the *Compagnie*, invented the mountaineering novel which saw worldwide success. Several members of the Tairraz family took up black and white photography of the peaks, thus creating a new genre. Shortly before, the Tourist Office, on the advice of a newspaper for tourists, created an annual event in 1895, '*la Fête des Guides'*, which over time became the main local event and the living proof of the emblematic role played by the guides in the local imagination.

Staging mountain guides in Chamonix. Picture of a group of guides belonging to the Compagnie (Musée Dauphinois). Below, monument built for celebrating the centenary (1876) of the first ascent the Mont Blanc by H.B. de Saussure et J. Balmat (picture made by Bernard Debarbieux)

Other innovations occurred over the same decades which demonstrated the will of many local actors to advertise a close relation between the Chamoniard community and the mountain tops. In 1921, the town obtained the right to change its name to

"Chamonix Mont-Blanc" even though ownership of the peak is shared by a neighbouring municipality. Also, an increasing number of Chamoniards, taking up a fashion invented by mountain-loving city-dwellers, decided to adopt symbols of the peaks for their family tombs in the two municipal cemeteries: stones in the form of steles, engraved plaques telling of mountain accidents or with mountaineering emblems, rock crystals, miniature ice-picks, edelweiss, etc. Apart from that, several small businesses specialised in mountain-related publishing or the production of mountain equipment.

Gravestones in the main graveyard of Chamonix. Right, Edward Whymper's gravestone, the most famous English climber of the mid-19th century. He was the first to choose a vertical raw stone as a funeral monument. Left, the collective monument of the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix. Pictures made by Bernard Debarbieux

These initiatives began in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. Their consequences are impressive: above and beyond the commercial success of Chamonix to which they contributed, they forged an undeniable sense of community based on the image and practices of the mountain peaks. As this article highlights key moments during which a local population rethought its vision of tourist development and its vision of itself, there is no need to review every stage of the history of tourism in Chamonix. It will suffice here to analyse some of the more recent developments of this history. At the end of the 20th century, faced with an ever-growing number of tourists to the valley, as well as newcomers settling there, notably the English from the 1980s, local elites tried to figure out ways of slowing down the rate of growth and to guarantee a certain degree of social cohesion among the inhabitants. To achieve the latter, and with the aid of a communications agency, they considered the meaning of a "Chamoniard identity" and tried to pinpoint associated "values". We should not be surprised to learn that the inhabitants, whatever their nationality or personal background, seemed to come together in a common celebration of the mountain summits and of Mont Blanc in particular, as well as mountaineering. Tourist communication

policies were therefore refocused onto such images. In Spring 2011, the town of Chamonix embarked on a campaign to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site. However, instead of vaunting Mont Blanc as natural heritage, the municipality seeks recognition for mountaineering as intangible heritage. After the organisation of the Winter Olympics in 1928, and also several major sporting events in the following decades, this is a second attempt to earn a global label linking the image of Chamonix with that of the mountain.

This first case study enables the partial verification of the hypothesis of this article. It clearly paints the picture of a local community which adopted a proactive attitude aiming to transform a social identity of the 'mountaineer' into a collective identity. Both identities link here to the notion of mountain as reworked by the imaginary of scholars, artists and tourists since the 18th century. However, the adoption of this reference by the inhabitants and institutions of Chamonix converted it into a source of collective pride and as a symbol of shared identification. This case study has also demonstrated how a unique community managed to think of itself and present itself as the most remarkable illustration, in essence and in excellence, of the high mountains category. This leads many people on site to say that Chamonix is "the world capital of mountaineering". The study also shows that the privileged association between the image of the Chamoniards with the image of the peaks has also been a source of tension between this group and the mountaineering clubs. Having said that, this case study does not go so far as to fully prove the hypothesis put forward. Tourism was already a significant economic activity in Chamonix and a source of social and cultural recomposition when the work on Chamoniard identities started. If this identity work can be seen as proactive, it should be noted that it occurred in the wake of a reactive phase which reached its climax at the end of the 19th century.

How to be Italian in Little Italy?

My second case study focuses on a very different type of setting, Little Italy in New York, and a different type of category, that of nation and 'ethnic' community. This quarter is as popular in academic literature as it is with the tourists who visit New York. Given these conditions, I will limit the presentation of the context in favour of developing the projects conducted in this quarter over the last four decades.

Littly Italy has been home for days, decades or for a lifetime to many Italian immigrants who arrived into New York via Ellis Island, the immigrant station, from the 1870s to the 1920s. The neighbourhood is well known amongst the other 'ethnic' areas in the city, all products of a double process: that of the social networks and strong links born of the feeling of belonging to the same national and linguistic community, and that of the rejection suffered by many immigrants trying to settle in a city rife with xenophobia. The Italian-speaking settlement in south Manhattan began in the 1870s. Canal Street and its environs were initially inhabited essentially by Irish immigrants. When the Irish began to spread out over the city and the rest of the country, Italian-Americans gradually came into the neighbourhood and the plots to the north of the street. This concentration reached its height in the 1920s (Gabaccia 2007). Some visitors in that decade were fascinated by the atmosphere of the place which was not at that stage really a tourist destination. One of these, Paul Morand, famous author of travel accounts, proclaimed himself impressed by the congestion of the streets and the fascist propaganda which was trying to maintain nationalist fervour: *"Young Italy, albeit still devoted to her madonnas and saints, but proud of her Latin origins, defended in the United States by her daily newspapers, doing her duty in elections, disciplined and made rich, visited regularly by her consuls, her salesmen and by the fascist propagandists who maintain its "Italianness"* (Morand 1930, p. 101).

The reference to Italianness was then just beginning to become a way of defining the singularity of the place and the common character of its inhabitants. Change began with the 1929 laws that gradually caused a reduction in immigration from Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. The reduction in the number of Italian-Americans recorded in Little Italy may also be explained by the fact that the younger generations moved out to different areas in search of employment and to better regarded neighbourhoods. By the start of the 21st century, the number of people describing themselves as Italian-American or who spoke Italian at home was near to zero in each of the three census zones generally associated with Little Italy[2]. The Italian-American neighbourhood could have shifted, as indeed it partly did, towards the Bronx and Queens, or it could have disappeared as other immigrant quarters did in New York, such as most of the Irish community's ones. If Little Italy, as a clearly identified entity, has not become diluted into Manhattan, it is because of the explicit concern to maintain a living core of Italianness in the heart of

the quarter. This concern goes back to the start of the 1970s, to the moment when the ethnic revival movement followed hot on the heels of the civil rights movement. A few associations were set up to keep Italian-American culture alive and to serve the interests of the population living there. Some, like the Little Italy Restaurant Association (LIRA) with the help of New York City technical services, particularly the Planning Commission, undertook modest but meaningful initiatives leading to the development of parks, café terraces, ornamentation of façades and the organisation of the festival of San Gennaro, which remains the main community event of the neighbourhood. These efforts are concentrated on one section of the street, a few hundred metres from Mulberry Street, erected in the living heart of Little Italy.

The finding of these Italian-American associations rests on two elements. There was a marked decline in the Italian-born population in the 1960s. It also corresponds to pressures which were perceived as threats. The increase in the population of Chinese origin (estimated at 100 000 people) and its spread towards the north, led to tensions between the two communities and a real stigmatisation of the more recent immigrants (Napoli, 2004).

However, these conclusions, which can be found in the archives of these associations, are not employed in the arguments put forward to support the project around Mulberry Street. This is probably because neither stigmatising the Chinese community nor criticising the city − a useful ally − were deemed helpful to their cause. Even if the project would lead to structuring a commercial proposition, the LIRA publicly defended the idea that Little Italy was a quarter inhabited by Italian-Americans and that was how it should stay. On occasion, the project showed a rare degree of reflexivity in the limited sense Giddens sometimes uses: the renovation project if presented as "a bulwark of Gemeinschaft against mass society Gesellschaft" (LIRA cited by Napoli, 2004, p 258). The use of this pair of concepts (conceived by the German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, to differentiate pre-modern and modern societies) seems rather inappropriate compared to the meaning given to them by Tönnies. However, by using it, the association succeeds in emphasising the idea of a localised community.

The New York City Planning Commission which supported the project, adopted less radical but also more heterogeneous terms. In the mid 1970s, its president, Victor Marrerro, himself Italian-American, wrote: "For many New Yorkers, Little Italy is a *home-away-from-home*. To thousands of visitors from miles around, it is a place to sample special flavors… It is a magnetic regional asset and one of the City's most vital neighbourhoods. Shaped by generations of New Yorkers, it is a critical part of our urban heritage"[3]. Significantly, but also ambiguously, Victor Marrerro brings several elements to the table to justify the renovation of Little Italy: its heritage, touristic, residential and community character. But as this last element was only sporadically present, essentially limited to a few commercial services, and empty of heritage protection elements as such, it seems that the urban project would have fewer targets than it claimed. The project, by its very nature, did not point specifically to a neighbourhood of Italian immigrants, but a meeting place for the Italian-Americans of New York, a "home-away-from-home", and a place where tourists and New Yorkers could come and breathe in the essence of Italianness.

Italianness in Little Italy streets. Right: Mulberry Street in 2010, picture made by Bernard Debarbieux

It is this mingling of references which is of interest for this article. To protect against the risk of Italian immigration completely disappearing from the New York public space, the rehabilitation project of a section of Mulberry Street was counting on the appetite of tourists for ethnic quarters and local colour, lively and unthreatening, and the capacity of Italian-Americans to meet up there from time to time to cultivate an Italianified identity. The project thus proposes that the flame of community identity can be kept alight partly by setting up a tourist development project. The *Gemeinschaft* (community) invoked to describe Little Italy is a fiction, or a myth that many would like to see persist, particularly because the project managers thought it to be the condition for attracting tourists. We can see in this the expression of the "metonymic freezing" model which was also being used in academic, tourist and urban practices of the time.

Did this attempt to proactively link the wish to keep a collective identity alive and the desire to develop tourist appeal achieve its goals? We do not have enough information to determine whether the

admittedly high number of tourist and recreational visits also involve a feeling of community. The analyses available to us today are cognisant of this lack of reliable information, but appear not to believe in the communitarian hypothesis. A sociologist concludes his analysis of the urban development of the 1970s, twenty years later, with an admonitory statement: the LIRA "helped convert Little Italy into a sort of ethnic strip mall, catering to white Europeans of all backgrounds who wish to sample Italian ethnic foods and play games of chance at ethnic festivals. In the 'new' Little Italy that has emerged over the past 30 years, 'Italianness' is something that can be sampled along the streets of an old ethnic neighborhood (…). The history of Little Italy thus mirrors the changes in Italian identity itself" (Napoli, 2004, p 258).

More recent developments which occurred after Napoli's article direct me to a more nuanced view of the effect such a project may have on identity and community. In 2009, both Chinatown and Little Italy[4] were added to the National Register of Historic Places. This decision validates the work over several years of the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, which has been battling since the 1950s for south-east Manhattan to keep property prices at affordable levels and provide a good quality of life. Federal legislation means that being on the register does not actually guarantee much that is tangible in this domain, even in terms of the preservation of buildings. However, the people behind the project believe in the symbolic benefit of such heritage receiving official recognition and in the capacity of people to appreciate this when various renovation projects are under discussion.

In any case, there is no specific commercial component in the heritage project, and so therefore no hint of commercialisation of ethnic identities. Nonetheless, the interviews we carried out show that supporters of the project are well aware of the fact that the recognition of the heritage value of the area will also be of advantage in making it attract tourism.

The arguments put forward in the request for heritage status reveal the anxiety to maintain a cultural memory. In order to respect the criteria of the federal administration, the request was backed up by two arguments, both of which are extremely paradoxical: one refers to two immigrant communities living together since the end of the 19th century and their importance in terms of numbers and their contribution to New York: "Chinese-American and Italian-American ethnic heritage and social history, particularly in association with the history of immigration in America"[5]. However, designating as 'heritage' a history whose traces or narratives we cannot see risks a certain toothlessness. The second argument targeted built heritage: "mid-nineteenth through early twentieth century buildings remain intact in the district, contributing to the neighborhood's historic context, feeling, and readily identifiable sense of place"[6]. The paradox lies in the fact that the vast majority of extant buildings date to before Italian (and also Chinese) immigration. Apart from some façades, these buildings cannot symbolise much more than the memory of (in the case of Little Italy), and current (in the case of Chinatown) residential occupation.

This double paradox does not take away from the quality of the buildings or the value of the approach adopted. It simply reveals, as do other elements of the file already mentioned, that the concern for identity is here highlighted, whilst the expected benefits are not clearly outlined. As well as this, the emphasis on of identity claims takes a hyperlocal form, at the scale of about thirty blocks, supporting Gupta and Ferguson's observation: "The irony of these times (…) is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate (through migrations), ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p10).

Finally, if the supporters of this project proved their effectiveness by winning their cause, the reason they succeeded was that they researched the benefits to tourism and expected impact on identity. On 12 October 2010, to celebrate the anniversary of the inclusion of the neighbourhood on the Federal Register, a day of events was organised at the area seen as the 'border' between Little Italy and Chinatown. It attracted a few hundred people, including tourists, and some 'Saturday Italians'[7], as well as some locals and representatives from the associations. The events mobilised mutually acceptable symbols, mostly parades, Chinese and Italian music and songs, and also the national anthem of the United States. The highpoint of the day was a little parade recreating the voyage of Marco Polo to China and the first meeting between two worlds, which suggested that they should meet again in solidarity at neighbourhood level. Later in the same year, there was an "East Meets West Christmas Parade".

Throughout the 20th century, Little Italy went through very different phases. From a neighbourhood of settling and transit of many

generations of immigrants, it became a commercial and a heritage product, but in both cases, people were eager to see it as an entity which preserved a public visibility in the name of the memory of the Italian-American identity.

Marco Polo Day parade (October 2010). The banner displays the travel made by Marco Polo from Venise et China (centre and belows), and giant puppets of Marco Polo (left) and Kubilai Khan (right).
Pictures made by Bernard Debarbieux

Such a symbolisation of ethnicity, accompanied here by a quest for business added value, has been identified in many places in the United States (Gans 1979). The case of Little Italy shows in particular how economic strategies leading to the marketability of cultural traces, when a neighbourhood is seen as "a product to be offered to the consumer, a product manufactured and packaged according to marketing procedures" (Lanfant and al. 1995, p. 8), can also seek to develop cultural processes considered useful or necessary in maintaining identity.

How to be gay in Manchester?

My third case study focuses on Manchester, in the United Kingdom, or, to be precise, on the "Gay Village" of this former industrial capital city. This example is well documented in academic literature and presented by many authors as one of the most interesting illustrations in Europe from the point of view of the affirmation of sexual identities, promoting tourism and urban policies connected to this specificity. In 2008, I was in a position to witness the events discussed in this section.

Before becoming a tourist haunt because of its particular atmosphere, the Canal Street neighbourhood was known as the main meeting place, home to the towns' bars and night clubs. It has its own history of police suppression and administrative red tape stretching from the time of Queen Victoria to that of Margaret Thatcher, and also of community resistance. The make-up of this gay and lesbian neighbourhood, manifest in the urban landscape, and the organisation of cultural events, are the products of a strategic alliance

between the elected representatives and gay community groups and associations. The town council, advised by marketing consultants, learned about the tourist impact of gay villages in the United States. In the 1990s it started to promote Manchester as an attractive destination for the gay and lesbian market. To do this, it supported the development of businesses which targeted this clientele and encouraged other businesses to become "gay friendly". As the locals and the British press have it, the project was about "paint[ing] the town pink"[8], or at least in part, relying on the activism or the goodwill of business people and associations from the Canal Street neighbourhood.

If one is to believe the existing analyses, these associations would seem to have deliberately set out to transform the area into a place of sexual tolerance and collective pride, but also into a specialised commercial zone. Many of them were familiar with initiatives in the United States, where "gay ghettos " (Levine, 1979) multiplied in the 1970s, facilitating the coming together, the making visible and the mutual protection of people with similar sexual orientations: "When they became conscious enough and strong enough to 'come out' collectively, they earmarked places where they could be safe together and could invent new lives. The territorial boundaries of their selected places became the basis for the building of autonomous institutions, and the creation of cultural autonomy" (Castells, 1997, p 272). This process went even further when activists like Harvey Milk in San Francisco promoted the development of economic networks and activities designed to strengthen the public presence of this community, to increase its economic weight and to diversify its methods of interacting with municipal authorities. The success of these initiatives saw San Francisco become a model of gay pressure group mobilisation and public policy responses, but also a tourist destination for that population (Howe, 2001). The early initiatives in San Francisco and also in New York inspired many similar projects in other towns to the extent that, altogether, they played a decisive role in the modernisation of the image of the homosexual community and its public and media visibility around the world. The social category of 'gayness' with its stereotypes, often rejected or reinforced by some gay people themselves, attained global notoriety, and became a source of fascination for many researchers in the social sciences.

Drawing on the influence of the American experience, the Canal Street neighbourhood in

Manchester has gone through a similar transformation, but with input from the City at an earlier stage. Above and beyond the concentration of businesses vaunting their gay and lesbian character, this policy has focused on various cultural events, in particular Manchester Pride, an annual series of events running over 11 days at the end of August. A parade is organised in the streets of the town in the style of gay pride parades, long familiar in North American and European towns: a joyful demonstration of an assumed eccentricity and, although diminishing in importance over time, an important political affirmation in the public sphere. The final days of Manchester Pride are more original and informative than can be explored in this article. They consist of a long weekend of events – called simply the Big Weekend – during which stages are set up for music groups and stands are erected in the streets of the quarter. Over these three days, part of the area is surrounded by tall barriers, accessible only by two entries with ticket booths. The visitor hands over £25 to participate in the festival. Most of the money collected goes to gay and transgender organisations as well as the anti-AIDS campaign. The Manchester event became very popular in the 2000s, attracting gay and lesbian tourists from all over Europe, as well as a significant number of heterosexual tourists, attracted by its festive reputation.

Manchester (UK), Big Weekend in the Gay District. Below, one of the very few entrances of the fenced neighbourhood. Picture made by Marianne Blidon

Although it is quite specific, this event, like the quarter as a whole and the municipal policies which have contributed to creating it all, shows itself to be illustrative of the marriage of the economic, cultural and political issues examined in this article. Together, these issues contribute to the

individualisation of an area where homosexuality is centre-stage in the public space for the whole year.

The Big Weekend in particular evokes the image of urban ghettos by creating a semi-fortified area every year. Such a spatial arrangement is part of the strategy of this community: to live and portray a collective identity in bustling public places, where people feel safe. It also forms part of a tourist development strategy: facilitating the identification of an area of leisure and urban performance, as well as an area where tourist revenue may be optimised. Created to this end, the barriers and ticket booths of the Big Weekend constitute a spatial demarcation where differences in sexual preference count for less than the possibility and the wish of participants to shell out in order to take part in the festivities playing on this image. Some researchers have seen in this local tourist policy a sign of the capacity of contemporary capitalism to transform social marginality into economic potential: "the capitalist desire for opening new markets for leisure consumption with new forms of branding, alongside the desire for the territorialisation of space by campaigning gay and lesbian groups, has led to the formation of a 'gay space' marketed as a cosmopolitan spectacle, in which the central issue becomes a matter of access and knowledge: who can use, consume and be consumed in gay space?" (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, p 39). However, at the same time, the long gay and lesbian weekend in Manchester remains a political forum in its own right, and part of the public demonstration of gay pride and a source of revenue for groups who agitate for the cause.

To conclude, we see from this example how economic, political and identity preoccupations may combine, and how this combination benefits from the social imaginary of 'gayness' and the imaginary of the tourist place. The spatial configurations employed to this end favour the expression of identity and economic performance in equal measure.

Conclusion

Tourism is assuredly a powerful engine in the transformation of collective identities in host societies. Many researchers have proven this when they focus their attention on the supposedly negative effects tourism has on ways of defining self and community in local societies. Others have shown it too when they underline how continual contact with tourists leads the inhabitants to think differently about their traditions and cultures, and

to think of themselves in a new light, thus gaining new perspectives about how to integrate themselves into the economy of modern societies. This article aimed to explore a third type of situation, one which demonstrates the capacity of certain people to use touristic development as a tool for reworking or reinforcing collective identities.

The three case studies presented briefly here show that such situations may be found in Chamonix, Little Italy in New York, and in the Gay Village in Manchester. In each case, there are powerful expectations of economic development, but these are not the only motivating factor for the people involved. In each case, expectations for the preservation (Little Italy), the refashioning (Chamonix) or the promotion (Manchester) of collective identities are strong. The projects analysed in this article demonstrate that some protagonists adopt proactive strategies designed to combine the unavoidable tourist images with collective identities which they wish to maintain. In each of the three cases, local protagonists involved in such a process of identity construction have relied on the knowledge of all the participatory categories ("montagnards", "Italians" or "Italian-Americans", "gay people") which are at work in the social identities operating in our modern societies. From time to time, I also showed that the scholarly imaginary itself may participate in this process, by virtue of the growing capacity of people to recognise the academic terms and to put them to use for their own projects. After a look at these examples, it seems that tourism would benefit from a more in-depth study from the perspective of identity and otherness that the various protagonists - tourists, travel agents, inhabitants, etc. – draw upon, perhaps even as a laboratory in which contemporary individuals learn to become actors in this cultural recompositions.

NOTES

1 The 1891 Census shows 21 people working in hotels, 22 in businesses and banks, in other words, very few Chamoniards compared to the 552 farmers, half of whom were also found in the list of members of the Compagnie des Guides.

2 Federal census 2010. At the same date, 46% of the inhabitants of New York City claimed to speak a language other than English.

3 Extracts from administrative documents cited by P.F. Napoli, 2004

4 Extracts from administrative documents cited by P.F. Napoli, 2004

5 Actually, some 38 plots and around 500 other parts.

6 Extract from the application form for the National Register of Historic Places.

7 New York's Little Italy, Littler by the Year, New York Times, 21 February 2011.

8 This is the title of an article by David Smith and Colin Richardson published in the British daily paper The Independent on 17 December 1995.

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