



Stage fright and romanticism in *Il Giro del Mondo*

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the local cultural consequences of the tourist quest for authenticity through an ethnographic study of an ancient Christianized pagan spring ritual in Northern Italy. Rather than embracing its Christian features, tourists and local inhabitants alike define its meaning in romanticist terms. This informs “stage fright” at both ends, i.e., concerns that it may degenerate into a staged folklore show. Defining the event as celebrating their community and its ancient ties to the land, local inhabitants even dismiss tourist attendance altogether. Contradicting theories of culture loss, cultural tourism here moreover strengthens rather than weakens local culture and identity, albeit not by accommodating the tourist quest for authenticity, as theories of cultural sustenance suggest, but in opposition to it.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s cultural tourism and academic interest in it have boomed in tandem (see for an overview: Richards, 2018; Council of Europe, 2011). This cultural tourism entails “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination,” which ranges from “arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries” all the way to “the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions” (UNWTO, 2018: 95). Referring to a particular motivation rather than a particular ‘type’ of tourist, cultural tourism entails any tourist activity that aims for first-hand personal experience of cultural features of a host society. It does as such apply not only to culture buffs, but also to those who spend most of their time enjoying life on the beach and/or exploring local nightlife, while also undertaking daytrips to local markets, churches, or heritage sites.

This thirst for first-hand personal cultural experience, and the travel to more or less distant places that comes with it, distinguishes cultural tourism from mere reading about the phenomena or attractions at stake, or watching movies or documentaries about them. This is precisely why so many studies of cultural tourism address issues pertaining to authenticity, including the latter’s ‘staging’ to quench tourists’ thirst for such first-hand personal experience (Boorstin, 1962; MacCannell, 1973): authenticity constitutes the holy grail as well as the principal driver of cultural tourism. In this paper we study the consequences of this tourist quest for authenticity for local culture and identity. These consequences are a contested issue in the academic literature, which features theories about local alienation and culture loss due to cultural tourism (e.g., Greenwood, 2004 [1977]; Macleod, 2002; Rots, 2019) next to theories about how cultural tourism can actually sustain and re-invigorate local culture (e.g., Chhabra et al., 2003; Cohen, 1988; Medina, 2003).

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We study these issues by means of an ethnographic case study of a Christian rogation known as *Il Giro del Mondo* [“The Tour of the World”], which takes place every year on the Saturday before Ascension Day on the Asiago Plateau in Veneto, Northeastern Italy. The event boasts a marked aura of authenticity, which can be traced to its local community character, its deep historical roots in ancient pagan spring rituals, and its setting in a pristine natural landscape. This aura of authenticity has in recent years made *Il Giro del Mondo* popular among tourists from beyond the Asiago Plateau, which makes it an ideal case for our purposes. Our analysis highlights the role of what we call “stage fright,” found at the ends of visiting tourists and the local population alike: a fear that due to increased tourist interest the Great Rogation might ultimately lose its authentic character and degenerate into an event that is merely “staged” for the sake of tourists.

After the theoretical elaboration of our research problem in the next section, we introduce the reader to the specificities of the event and discuss the data collection during multiple periods of ethnographic fieldwork since 2013. We then present our findings about tourists' and locals' understandings of the event and their responses to its increased tourist appeal in recent years. Finally, we summarize our research findings and discuss their theoretical implications to then conclude with some tentative suggestions about their generalizability that can double as hypotheses in future comparative research.

Staged authenticity and its discontents

Staged authenticity in cultural tourism

Tourism is not one single thing and there are surely different types of tourists, too, not all of them being equally concerned about cultural encounters, let alone the latter's authenticity. At one extreme we find “recreational tourists” (Cohen, 1988, p. 377) catered by a mass tourism organized around “sea, sand, sun, sex, and spirits” (Löfgren, 1999, p. 208). At the other extreme we find “experiential tourists” (Cohen, 1988, p. 377) driven by marked desires to authentically experience ways of life that differ more or less profoundly from what they are used to at home. Echoing the closely related “tourist” and “traveler” labels, the social-scientific study of tourism remains informed by this binary, as can be seen from its marked focus on cultural tourism and its relative neglect of “sea-sand-sun-sex-spirits tourism,” as Cohen (1984: 378) already observed decades ago. Until the present day, the latter type of tourism tends to be studied at best as a nuisance to local communities (Andriotis, 2010; Aslan & Kozak, 2012).

Indeed, recreational mass tourism figures as an implicit negative reference point in studies of cultural tourism, the latter defined by a marked interest in what anthropologists have traditionally called “the native point of view” (see Cohen, 1988, p. 375–377). Precisely these desires for authenticity make cultural tourism vulnerable to staged and performed enactment of cultural heritage. Indeed, many studies have meanwhile documented how tourist experiences of authenticity tend to entail negotiated outcomes of staged performances. Summer farmers in Bregenzerwald (Austria) who double as agro-tourist hosts, for instance, make deliberate efforts to construct “pseudo-backstages,” i.e., frontstages presented as backstages. They do so by subtly offering visitors glimpses of everyday family and work life on their farms and by inviting them into the dairies or cellars where they produce their Bregenzerwaldian mountain cheese, a local specialty central to regional cultural heritage. By pointing out empathically that these spaces are officially off-limits to visitors due to hygiene regulations – “I don't let everybody in here;” “This is actually illegal” – they boost tourist experiences of authenticity by underscoring the rarity of the occasion (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013, p. 185). Likewise, a tourist organization called Los Angeles Gang Tours authenticates its tours of gang-infested South Central, Los Angeles, by highlighting the dangers involved. It does so by having tourists who take their tours sign a release form to declare that they take full personal responsibility for any harm or damage inflicted. The act of performative staging of “real” ghetto life this entails is ironically revealed by the organization's agreement with locally active gangs to not disturb its bus tours in any way (Zerva, 2015, p. 522, 524).

The notion that tourist experiences of authenticity tend to be negotiated outcomes of staged performances is central to constructivist approaches to authenticity that dominate empirical studies of cultural tourism (Martin, 2010; Wang, 1999). Such approaches do as such steer away from modern, essentialist notions of authenticity as an intrinsic quality to instead recognize its variegated – often conflicting and incompatible – understanding by different groups. Constructivism defines the question of whether some of these understandings are actually “true” while others are “false” as basically a non-issue and does as such take culture and meaning more seriously than modern accounts of authenticity do, obsessed with issues of truth and falsity as the latter are (Houtman, 2021; Martin, 2010).

Expelling the ghost of staged authenticity

The potential stagedness of representations of local culture entails the Achilles' heel of cultural tourism, which is incessantly haunted by the ghost of “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973). Tourists only appreciate their experiences as truly authentic if the latter are felt to stem from direct contact with the “really real,” i.e., “genuine” local culture. The impression that they actually do is strengthened by circumstances like independent travel rather than in organized tours and a paucity of other tourists around, with the obvious implication that tourist agencies tend to pretend “to offer the ‘non-tourist’ tourist experience which is the non-packaged, individual or more often discretely-packaged experience” (Prentice, 2001, p. 11; see also Bowen & Clarke, 2009; Coleman & Crang, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Urry, 2011; Week, 2012). Deviations from such conditions increase the likelihood that representations of local culture are interpreted as staged performances, i.e., as entailing not so much an acquaintance with a “real” backstage, but rather with a frontstage mimicking a “real-world” backstage. If this happens, performances of authenticity fail: they lose their appeal and stand in the way of the experiences of authenticity sought after so passionately.

The ghost of staged authenticity has become even harder to dispel from tourist consciousness now that “MacCannell’s formula of *staged authenticity* has trickled down from the level of science and intelligentsia into popular thought” (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013, p. 188; emphasis in original). Tourists try and exorcize suspicions that what presents itself as authentic may nonetheless be fake, artificial and staged (Olsen, 2008) by avoiding pre-packaged holiday trips with excursions, site visits and city tours, because the latter lead even visits to local craftspeople or family homes to raise suspicions of staged performance. What becomes suspect almost by definition are payments to gain privileged access to experience something allegedly difficult, perhaps impossible, to experience without purchasing a ticket.

The flipside of such desires of escaping staged authenticity is a marked tourist interest in cultural events that have all the appearance of being non-staged, like local events and festivities with historical roots that precede the rise of (mass) tourism and that are hardly or not at all marketed by a local tourist industry. Long-standing local religious festivals that entail celebrations of local community and its connection to the sacred in the classical sense of Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]) are prime examples of this, which is why many of these have evolved into major tourist attractions in and of themselves. Religious heritage tourism does as such involve not just the religious or spiritual who engage on spiritual journeys that effectively wipe out the line between “pilgrims” and “tourists,” as is well documented in the literature (Badone, 2014; Badone & Roseman, 2004; Belhassen et al., 2008; Farias et al., 2019; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2018; Oviedo et al., 2014; Polzer, 2014; Troeva, 2016; Van Nuinen & van der Beek, 2016). Religious heritage tourism does also have much to offer to authenticity-seeking cultural tourism that is not religiously or spiritually motivated. This is exemplified by tendencies of highlighting the religious significance of places or events to increase their tourist appeal (Rots, 2019, p. 173). Notable examples are the *Semana Santa*, Sevilla’s penitential Holy Week (Andalusia, Spain) and the *Oberammergau Passionsspiele* in Bavaria, Germany. Both are markedly local religious festivals with Medieval roots and could as such not be further removed from staged events organized as a quick fix for tourists, which ironically explains their tourist appeal and development into major tourist attractions in and of themselves.

Local communities and staged authenticity: culture loss or culture sustenance?

Much less agreement exists on how the tourist quest for authenticity affects local communities and their cultural heritage. A first influential theory holds that cultural tourism easily degenerates local culture into a staged counterfeit, which causes it to lose its meaning and authenticity in the eyes of local communities. A second theory, however, rather brings out that cultural tourism provides excellent opportunities to sustain local culture and identity, precisely because it invites the latter’s commoditized staging to accommodate authenticity-seeking tourists. Cultural tourism can as such not be understood just like that as either an alienating burden to host communities or a welcome vessel to keep local culture and identity alive.

While there are good reasons to be skeptical about the notion that a culture can “get lost” or “disappear” altogether, certain elements of local community life can surely fade away under the influence of cultural tourism, while others continue to exist in spite of it. An ethnographic study of the Canary Island village of Vuelta has for instance demonstrated how particular aspects of local culture, especially those related to its traditional identity as a fishing community, have started to disappear due to “the transforming power of (...) tourism” (Macleod, 2002, p. 65). Similarly, the inclusion of the sacred grove Sēfa Utaki (Okinawa, Japan) in UNESCO’s World Heritage List has sparked a massive increase in tourism and “a strong sense among local residents and spiritual practitioners that ‘their’ site has been taken away from them, and that the rapid increase in tourist numbers has made it more difficult to connect with the deities believed to reside in the forest” (Rots, 2019, p. 174).

In an influential account Greenwood has even maintained that many examples from all over the world demonstrate that “local culture (...) is altered and often destroyed by the treatment of it as a tourist attraction” so that “the commoditization of local culture in the tourism industry is (...) fundamentally destructive,” making local culture “meaningless to the people who once believed in it” (Greenwood, 2004 [1977], p. 159). He provides ethnographic evidence about the *Alarde*, an annual procession in Hondarribia (a Basque town at the Spanish border with France) that commemorates the town’s victory over the French after a siege of more than two months in the first half of the seventeenth century. The procession boasts representatives from the town’s various wards and (occupational) groups, all in traditional dress, including men armed with shotguns, young women, woodchoppers, and groups of children playing Basque flutes and drums. The mayor and town council lead the procession on horseback, dressed in military uniform. The event traditionally boasts a marked local character, performed for and by members of the local community and symbolizing and reaffirming local identity and solidarity. Having existed for centuries and having attracted increasing numbers of tourists, the event all of a sudden lost much of its former appeal in the eyes of the local populace when the city council proposed to henceforth perform it twice on the same day to accommodate tourists. This caused major dismay among the people of Hondarribia, who from that moment on lost their enthusiasm about the event: “In the space of two years what was a vital and exciting ritual had become an obligation to be avoided” (Greenwood, 2004 [1977], p. 163).

Postmodern studies likewise bring forward that cultural tourism tends to alienate local communities from their own culture and identity by evoking feelings of being treated like museum pieces in need of conservation rather than as genuine and multi-faceted human beings, free to decide on their own lives and identities (e.g., Taylor, 2001). Yet, such studies fail to acknowledge that authenticity is ultimately in the eye of the beholder, so that local populations may also respond differently. This includes responses that understand staged performances of local culture as vital to the latter’s preservation, or even facilitating “claims of historical continuity and authenticity” to be mobilized as a “powerful ideological weapon of counter-hegemonic movements” (Martin, 2010, p. 539). Unlike what the theory of culture loss holds, then, there are no good reasons to understand cultural tourism as alienating and burdensome to local communities by definition.

Indeed, a second theory about the local consequences of cultural tourism holds that the latter may in fact provide excellent opportunities to sustain local culture rather than eroding it. Conceiving of authenticity as negotiable rather than a “primitive given” Cohen (1988) has critiqued Greenwood’s (2004 [1977]) culture loss account for over-generalizing. He points out that its commoditized staging does not necessarily destroy culture, but may actually save it from disappearance in the fog of history due to tourist demand for its staged performance.

This is exemplified by Succotz, a small village close to Belize’s most popular archaeological site, the ancient Mayan city of Xunantunich, popular among North-American and European tourists with interest in the ancient Maya (Medina, 2003). This popularity has made the Succotzeños aware that knowledge about Mayan culture, cosmology, and language qualifies them as knowledgeable guides at the excavation site and that artistic skills like stone carving and ceramics enable them to produce and sell replicas of ancient Mayan handicrafts. What we see here is precisely how commoditization of ancient Mayan culture, otherwise at the brink of extinction, does in fact help preserve it. Similarly, the Scottish Highland Games organized annually in North Carolina, United States, demonstrate how heavily commoditized and staged performances of cultural heritage can sustain rather than erode culture and identity (Chhabra et al., 2003). For few Scots understand these games as alienating them from their cultural heritage. Rather to the contrary: “Scots stage Highland games today to display and promote their traditions and to deepen their commitment to their community” with the “avowed objective of preserving and promoting Scottish heritage” (idem, 709). Commoditized stagings of cultural heritage do hence not necessarily produce alienation and may in fact be fostered as ultimately empowering.

While the theories of culture loss and culture sustenance may at first sight appear incompatible, the complexity of social reality does not necessarily fit either category of the resulting binary grid. Indeed, our ethnographic case study of *Il Giro del Mondo* demonstrates a dynamics that incorporates vital elements of both theories, to the effect that it neither contradicts nor confirms either of them. For what we find is a marked dismissal of staging local culture, as assumed by the theory of culture loss. Yet, this strengthens rather than weakens local culture and identity, albeit not to accommodate the tourist quest for authenticity as the theory of culture sustenance brings out, but precisely in opposition to it.

Before we discuss our research findings and draw our conclusions, we introduce the specificities of Asiago’s *Il Giro del Mondo* and discuss the data collection by the first author.

Contextualization and data collection

Tourism on the Asiago Plateau

The Asiago Plateau is located in the Veneto Region in Northeastern Italy, the upland in the southeastern part of the Alps (the so-called “Pre-Alps”), about 1000 m above sea level. Colloquially known as *L’Altopiano dei Sette Comuni* [“The Plateau of the Seven Municipalities”], it consists of seven municipalities: Asiago, Lusiana-Conco, Enego, Roana, Rotzo, Gallio and Foza. Even though the Plateau is a popular mountain destination, it attracts mostly tourists from the region itself (i.e., Veneto), unlike touristic places in Northeastern Italy like the Dolomites in the Southern Limestone Alps. Also in contrast to regional tourist destinations like the cities of Verona, Venezia, and Padova, it does not attract many foreign tourists: in none of the past 10 years their number accounted for more than 5% of the annual total of 400,000 overnight stays on the Plateau (see Regional Statistical System: http://statistica.regione.veneto.it/jsp/linea.jsp?tipo=Presenze&territorio=11_Asiago).

For what follows it is important to point out that the local tourist industry focuses on promoting the Plateau as a leisure destination for seasonal holidays or local events, mountain routes, local products (e.g., the event *Made in Malga*, which takes place every year, is dedicated to regional culinary products like traditional mountain cheese) and ski tourism in the winter season (particularly cross-country skiing due to the abundance of woods). The local tourist industry does deliberately not actively promote or advertise *Il Giro del Mondo*, the event that we discuss in this paper, as one of the Plateau’s interesting tourist attractions. Yet, attendance has unmistakably increased and diversified in recent years, precisely due to this status as a non-advertised and strictly local event. The event’s new attendants tend to originate from the surrounding lowlands and to have been alerted to *Il Giro del Mondo* through word of mouth.

Il Giro del Mondo

Il Giro del Mondo is historically rooted in rural Roman spring rituals called *Lustrationes* which entailed circumambulations that traced circles around houses, fields and people, symbolically embracing, defending and purifying all that lies within to secure fertility and ward off evil forces (Fenton, 1997; Lattanzi, 2008). These ancient pagan rituals were then Christianized from the fourth century AD onwards, most probably under Pope Liberius (352–366), to ultimately spread all across Europe in the wake of the establishment of a Christian Roman Empire by Charlemagne (Bortoli and Kezich, 2001; Gios, 2001; Kezich, 2017). Some of these rogations have survived and feature pre-Christian pagan elements until the present day. The circumambulation that we study in this paper is one of these.

Asiago’s Great Rogation takes place every year on the Saturday before Ascension Day on the Asiago Plateau. Its circular route of about 20 miles follows the hollow at the center of the Plateau, which coincides with the perimeter of the territory of the municipality of Asiago (see Fig. 1). To help readers visualize relevant details of the walking tour we have included some photographic materials, post-processed where needed to protect participants’ privacy by hiding their faces.



Fig. 1. The Rogation's circular route with stops ("Soste") (map processing by Roberto Costa Ebech).

The circumambulation is walked in a clockwise direction, which comes down to following the sun for an average of 13 h, from sunrise to sunset. Increasing numbers of people attend the event, estimated by a local newspaper at 3000–5000 for the 2019 edition (<https://www.ilgiornaledivicenza.it/territori/bassano/altopiano/in-cinquemila-alla-grande-rogazione-1.7371926>).

Participants assemble at around 6 AM in front of the Duomo di Asiago, the town's main church. From there the procession sets off as what locals refer to as a lingering "human snake," headed by a group of local inhabitants with the Great Rogation's historical banner, a red flag with a white cross (see Fig. 2).

The procession first heads to the old Lazzaretto, a small church established in the seventeenth century after the last outbreak of the plague (1631–1638) in the area had faded away (see Bonato, 2009). Indeed, many of those who had survived the plague came to define the Rogation as offering a vote of thanks. At the Lazzaretto Asiago's parish priest celebrates an open-air mass (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Local inhabitants leading the procession with historical banner (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech).



Fig. 3. Open-air mass at the Lazzaretto (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech).

Immediately upon the end of the mass, still at the Lazzaretto, a first pagan-derived ritual takes place. Girls donate hand-painted boiled eggs to boys who collect them in traditional felt hats. The ritual symbolizes fertility and the donations of the eggs signify declarations of love to the boys who receive the girls' gifts (see Fig. 4).

The procession then proceeds with the parish priest at the end of the queue along the hamlets of Kaberlaba, Canove and finally Camporovere, where it is welcomed by local church bells around 12 AM. Here a longer break takes place, during which the local inhabitants offer the participants food and drinks. After the break the procession continues and passes through a series of semi-circular, more than seven feet high arches, built by inhabitants of the various villages. These "Arches of Pines" are made of braided pine tree branches adorned with wild flowers to symbolize the celebration of and submission to nature (see Fig. 5).

Just before the end of the tour, in the village of Gallio, another pagan-derived ritual takes place. At this point the boys return the eggs they have received from the girls at the Lazzaretto, together with larch garlands that they have braided and decorated with wild flowers picked alongside the path (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 4. Local young man with eggs in felt hat (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech).



Fig. 5. An arch of pines (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech).

Asiago's parish priest then advances and leads on a horse the final stretch of the procession from Gallio to Asiago, where it had started early in the morning (see Fig. 7).

After about 13 h of walking the procession ends at sunset right where it started, at the Duomo di Asiago, where a final mass is celebrated, introduced by litanies in Cimbrian, a local Germanic language originating in Southern Bavaria.

In his sermons Asiago's parish priest carefully connects the Rogation's Catholic character, its significance to the Asiago community, and its pre-Christian meaning of warding off evil forces. He does so by linking the resurrection of the land (the beginning of spring) to Jesus Christ's ascension to heaven and by highlighting the intimate relation of the community to the land, referring to the Rogation as "the wedding ring," "the mass on the world," "the old dance of the people," "the Easter event of our people" and "the jubilee of our land." A brief fragment of his sermon on the eve of the Great Rogation of 2016 provides a good example: "The Great Rogation belongs to me as I belong to it. And together we belong to the Lord, because He is the good shepherd. [...] It is a liturgy that guards our memory in which earth and sky are united: a heaven on earth and [...] a land of heaven."



Fig. 6. Larch garland (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech).



Fig. 7. Asiago's parish priest leads the procession on a White Horse (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech).

Data

The fieldwork on which this article draws was conducted by the first author, who as a native Italian speaker attended Asiago's Great Rogation between 2013 and 2017. Besides participant observation he conducted a total of 65 informal interviews across the years, all with open, non-directive questions and held during the actual circumambulation, 30 of them with local participants and 35 with external visitors. These interviews aimed to register participants' motives to attend and their spontaneous instant reactions to the event. In 2016 and 2017 he moreover held 20 semi-structured interviews in the weeks after the event with local participants that he had met along the route. These additional interviews aimed to deepen insight into their definitions of the event, not least their perceptions of its increased popularity and its local status as an event inherited from past generations. In order to preserve the anonymity of our respondents we use pseudonyms in what follows and reveal only their age, profession and residence (with the exception of easily recognizable local inhabitants).

Our respondents have variegated backgrounds, but do not entail a representative sample. Yet, it is important to point out that we have found no indications that their understandings of the event vary according to age, gender, or education. This also applies to religion, which is especially important given *Il Giro del Mondo's* formal status as a Christian event with marked involvement of the local Catholic church. While some of our respondents identified as practicing Catholics, others as non-practicing Catholics, and yet others as not religious at all, this makes no difference for their understandings of the event and motives for attending. More than that: irrespective of their religious identity, none of the interviewees (neither local participants nor visitors from beyond the Plateau) attaches much importance to the event's Christian character, nor they do self-define as "pilgrims."

Additional participant observation entailed attendance to the masses celebrated at the Duomo di Asiago on the week that precedes the Rogation and at the closure of the event, yielding verbatim transcriptions of the sermons. Next to this the first author collected information sheets about *Il Giro del Mondo* distributed by the parish of Asiago and communication about it by the Asiago city hall through its official website, Facebook page, as well as information sheets. All of these data were subjected to thematic content analysis to gain detailed insight into how the local authorities communicated the event to the public.

Results

"Something about a lost world:" external visitors about the great rogation

External participants are mostly groups of young friends, university students, and entire families, mainly from the surrounding lowlands of Northeastern Italy. Some of them own holiday homes on the Asiago Plateau, others rent apartments or hotel rooms, and yet others arrive in the early morning for a one-day trip. Three interconnected features of the Rogation define its appeal for these visitors, i.e., the ways in which the event enables connections to nature, to other human beings, and to a pre-modern past.

The first recurrent narrative pertains to how the Great Rogation enables experiences of nature by inviting participants to follow its rhythm. They start walking when the sun rises, follow its trajectory during the day and return at the starting point as the sun sets. The element of hiking all day through a pristine natural environment is central to participants' accounts of the event's appeal, irrespective of gender, age, or education, as Giovanna (24, student, Padua) exemplifies: "I love it and I love these places.

It is something so authentic and pure. Looking inside oneself in these wonderful woods and fields, under this beautiful sky.” “Why am I here?,” Paola (38, holistic operator, Vicenza) asks herself, to give the same answer as Giovanna: “To connect to nature, to feel myself part of this [indicating the surrounding nature].” Camilla (53, project manager, Padua) similarly observes: “We return to the beginning. We return to nature – at least, for one day.” Indeed, when describing the appeal of the Rogation and their personal motivation to partake, many of the external visitors use phrases like “following the rhythm of nature” and “being forced to slow down,” i.e., to step back for just one day from the frenetic pace of everyday life.

The second major appeal of the Rogation in the eyes of the external visitors, closely related to the experience of nature, concerns the sense of community and sociality it evokes. This is expressed in observations about the pleasures of “walking together,” “sharing the experience with others” and “enjoying the company of friends or family.” Francesco (42, teacher, Vicenza) who came with his wife and six-year-old daughter: “For us the Great Rogation is (...) about walking together, staying together with the people one loves, in my case my wife and my daughter. We are not really religious people, but we feel the great importance of common values like sharing something simple together.” Or, again, in the words of Vincenzo (27, unemployed, Bassano del Grappa) who came to Asiago with a group of friends: “Honestly... I came here with my friends because the real meaning of this day to me is that people celebrate together something they believe in. The true essence of this pilgrimage is the connection between people who walk together in peace in this wonderful nature.” Especially the younger people appear fascinated by putting pure and simple sociality in practice by walking together. At one of the stops Laura and Giovanna (17, schoolmates) affirm that “it is about being part of a community and about sharing. These are the values we have to rediscover. All the symbols along the route, the Arches of Pines...” (Laura), with her friend Giovanna adding in agreement that “it is something that we, young people, truly rediscover. This walking snake of people in nature.”

For the visitors from outside the Plateau the event in effect entails more than an ordinary experience of nature during a solitary trip. As the commonly voiced fascination with “the walking snake” underscores, the social aspect of Asiago’s Rogation, i.e., sharing a day-long walk with others, is a vital and intrinsic part of the experience. This echoes [Badone’s \(2014\)](#) ethnographic exploration of *Tro Breiz*, a medieval long-distance walking tour in Brittany, Northwestern France. She similarly concludes that “participants’ desires for connection to a community that transcends the self and is intimately linked to a particular regional heritage and identity” ([Badone, 2014, p. 452](#)) account for the recent revival of this ancient route.

The third and final recurrent issue in external visitors’ understandings of the Great Rogation is the appeal of the ancient rituals along the route, like the donation of the eggs after the mass at Lazzaretto. Those concerned understand such pre-Christian rituals as profoundly authentic remnants of a lost tradition, evoking feelings of nostalgia for a past that no longer exists. “The Arches of Pines, these ancient rituals with the eggs, this use of larch garlands. All these things are simply amazing,” Lorella (45, housewife, Padua) muses, her husband adding that “there is something about a lost world, the one of our grandparents, made of something magical, I think” (Mario, 50, bank clerk, Padua). Such attributions of authenticity breathe romantic imaginations of a pure and simple lifestyle, associated with traditional mountain communities, basically untouched by modernity’s rationalized orders: “Look at this... It is magical: the love rituals with the eggs, the larch garlands with wild flowers to decorate one’s hair. This is so beautiful. We miss all this in our lives nowadays” (Cristina, 39, teacher, Vicenza).

The appeals of being one with nature; experiencing pure and simple sociality; and connecting to a primitive past that has succumbed to the modern world express a basically romanticist worldview that implies discontents about modernity’s rationalized orders. Such romanticism is of course nothing new. It has from the late eighteenth century onwards informed critiques of rationalized modernity, not least through the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, its principal historical spokesperson ([Taylor, 1989](#)) and as such “the inventor of authenticity” ([Lindholm, 2008, p. 8](#)). This value of authenticity has fueled desires of experiencing worlds different from one’s own ever since (e.g., [Campbell, 1987](#); [Jasen, 1991](#)). Our data bring out that romantic obsessions with authenticity have not vanished since the so-called “counter culture” of the 1960s and 1970s either, which was similarly alienated from modernity’s rationalized orders ([Musgrove, 1974](#); [Roszak, 1969](#); [Zijderveld, 1970](#)).

On the part of the external visitors such romanticism defines Asiago’s Great Rogation as the counterpart of “pseudo-events” ([Boorstin, 1962](#)) that commercially stage authenticity for the sake of tourists. Its ancient, pre-Christian roots are seen as proof of its “real” authenticity, much like the connections with nature, a pre-modern past and one’s human fellows that it facilitates. Their romanticism informs a marked “stage fright,” i.e., a fear that as a consequence of increased tourist interest the Great Rogation might degenerate into precisely such a staged event. Carlo’s concern that it may ultimately fall victim to mass tourism exemplifies this: “I came here before it is too late, because there are already too many people now, compared to just a few years ago” (Carlo, 64, pensioner). He justifies his own presence by invoking his participation in many of the previous editions as well as his identity as a mountain lover (“Forgive me the term, you know what I mean, but I hope this is not going to be destroyed by mass tourism”). Similar testimonies are expressed in many other interviews, like the one with Angelo (41, musician): “This is one, and maybe the last, authentic ancient event where people celebrate their ancient bond with the land together.” Giorgio (54, office worker) makes a related point: “We are the last ones to see this. The end is near when tourists start making pictures of everything, as they do in Venice.” The irony, of course, is that it is precisely external visitors like Angelo and Giorgio who have themselves contributed much to the popularization of the Asiago Rogation, through word of mouth and sharing their pictures and experiences with others.

“The people and their soil:” cultural consequences of cultural tourism

Most of the local inhabitants speak affectionately about the Great Rogation as “our main community event,” referring to it simply as “The Tour” or “The Day” and placing major emphasis on its celebration of the ties between their community and the land. “We dubbed it *Il Giro del Mondo* precisely because it is our world, our day, our land...,” as one of the interviewed local attendees

expressed this common understanding. One of the men leading the procession confided, “If I have to summarize what *Il Giro del Mondo* means for all of us I would simply say that it is our DNA.” Asked for clarification he explained: “Our DNA means our tradition, our identity, our past and our presence as a community.” On the Facebook page “Altopiano di Asiago e dei 7 Comuni” the image of local inhabitants leading the procession with the Rogation’s traditional banner nicely captures these interconnections in one single image (compare Fig. 2). As Pietro points out, the *Asiaghese* do indeed foreground the significance of the Rogation in sustaining and celebrating the ties between the community and its land: “This is our great festivity. A day we dedicate to our fields, our woods, our land, our community... to us.”

Despite the white cross on its iconic banner, then, the Great Rogation’s significance can in the eyes of the *Asiaghese* not be reduced to its religious meaning. As a local male put it, “I am a Christian and I don’t want to be blasphemous or something, but this day is more important to us than Christmas.” Asiago locals do indeed understand neither the church nor the municipality as having a legitimate say about the Rogation, considering only themselves as its “owners” and as “guardians of a tradition at risk.” “It is not the municipality’s land, it is our land, the land of everybody who has been living here for centuries,” one local inhabitant points out, while another one observes, “We all have the same surnames here... [mentions the most common ones]. This is because we are a small, closely-knit community, with ancient roots that precede the birth of the country itself. We inhabited *Slege* [the name of Asiago in Cimbrian language] centuries before Italy was born.” This is seen as unique to the Rogation: “Compared to the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage, which has always been a procession, an open pilgrimage, *Il Giro del Mondo* has always been closed, only for our community. Like the circle people make around their land... [It is] something that belongs to the *Asiaghese*, not to the tourists, and not even to the church. Its true origin dates back long before Christianity and this testifies that the Rogation is a covenant between the people and their land.”

The municipality and the church alike acknowledge this claim to popular cultural ownership of the Rogation in their public communication. Both discourage upfront tourist presence, as the telling title of the article “The Great Rogation is not for sale” on the website of the Asiago municipality exemplifies (https://www.asiago.it/it/news/art_la_grande_rogazione_di_asiago_non_si_vende/, published May 26, 2014). The article represents the Rogation as a “call” upon the people of Asiago to “feel like a community,” while emphasizing the difference between “guests” and “locals:” “Guests are welcome, because hospitality is a duty, as long as their presence is discrete and respectful. Asiago’s Great Rogation is not folklore and should not be sold to tourists as an attraction. What it represents has been carefully guarded for centuries and must be safeguarded.” In the 2016 Sunday information sheet the parish priest similarly proclaims: “We ask all friends and guests from outside Asiago to take part in the Rogation not as a simple picnic or as a folkloristic show.” Indeed, the popularization of the event in recent years has led the local church to increasingly foreground distinctions between “believers” and “tourists,” in much the same way the city hall has increasingly come to set “tourists” apart from “locals.”

Much like the tourist visitors, Asiago locals thus underscore the centrality of fellowship and nature, but they do so in a decidedly different way. They assert a pre-given, indissoluble blood bond between themselves, the soil, and their forebears on the Plateau, a bond exclusive to native inhabitants and inaccessible to outsiders (see also Rots, 2019, p. 173). Unlike external visitors they do thus not celebrate universal sociality and connections to nature, but celebrate *their* community and connections to *their* nature, in effect defining the “external” natural environment of the Asiago Plateau as inextricably connected to their own “inner” nature as heirs of those who have inhabited the Plateau for centuries. Equally romanticist as external visitors’ understandings of the Great Rogation, this local variety is nonetheless markedly different. It does indeed echo Nazi Germany’s notorious romanticist *Blut und Boden* [Blood and soil] ideology, which posits a similar intrinsic, unbreakable bond between the people and the soil. Romanticism’s bad reputation in the West, not least in intellectual and political circles, owes much to this ideology, even though it played no role whatsoever in for instance eighteenth-century British romanticism (Campbell, 1987) or the romantic left-libertarian counter culture of the 1960s (Campbell, 2007; Musgrove, 1974).

Yet, like the romanticism of the visiting tourists this local rendition also invokes stage fright, in this case more specifically a dismissal of tourist attendance as a threat to the authenticity of the event. In the words of one of the interviewed *Asiaghese*: “This is not a reality show. Tourists come to see us as a TV show, but we are not conspicuously dressed actors. This is a real, intimate event of our community. And it must be preserved like this.” Unlike the church that is more hospitable and glad to welcome visitors as “pilgrims,” then, the local *Asiaghese* themselves more typically see those concerned as “strangers” or “tourists” – uninvited spectators who threaten the authenticity of the Rogation by reducing locals to performers of a naturalistic-folkloric “reality show.” Indeed, in the fieldwork period (2013–2017) local participants have increasingly come to set themselves apart from the waxing stream of non-*Asiaghese* interested in “their” Rogation. They do so by ostentatiously displaying proof of their belonging to the Asiago Plateau through family history, kinship, or local language. One way of doing so is by proceeding together in groups in traditional local dress, i.e., alpine-style felt hats for men and traditional alpine clothes for women; another is by wearing a red scarf to symbolize local belonging and identity (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Local male choir wearing red scarves (photo by Roberto Costa Ebech). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Those wearing the red scarf explain that they do so “because this day is something that belongs to us,” pointing out that “this [red scarf] signifies a boundary between us and the tourists.” Indeed, when approaching these locals, the first author was sometimes asked instantly where he came from, in response to which he would then explain truthfully that he was from the surrounding lowlands, but had spent a lot of time in Asiago since his early childhood. This explanation then often evoked reactions like, “You can come here every year, but you will always remain a foreigner,” “Yes, but you are not one of us; this is for the people who have lived here for generations,” or, dismissing foreigners’ holiday home ownership in Asiago, “This is where the footprints of our ancestors can be found... That is what it means for us to take part in the Rogation; it is not enough to have a second house here.”

Summary and discussion

Our case study of *Il Giro del Mondo* demonstrates that its appeal to external visitors is informed by a romanticist worldview that foregrounds connections to nature, pure and simple sociality, and an ancient and primitive past that has succumbed to the rationalized modern world. This romanticism leads them to express concerns about increases in tourist interest eating away at, and ultimately impeding, the sheer authenticity they are after. Elaborating on MacCannell’s (1973) classical notion of “staged authenticity” we have dubbed these concerns “stage fright,” i.e., fears that an authentic cultural event might degenerate into a staged “pseudo-event” merely performed for the pleasure of tourists. Local community members likewise define the meaning of the event in romanticist terms, which similarly gives rise to stage fright. Yet, theirs is a romanticism that posits an indissoluble blood tie between themselves, their ancestors, and the Asiago soil and that as such claims cultural ownership of the Rogation. This informs a variety of “stage fright” that is defined by fears that their community will ultimately end up performing the event as a folklore show, which will erode its significance as a celebration of their community and its ancient ties to the Asiago soil.

Whereas external visitors and local community members alike are thus bothered by the growing presence of tourists, romanticism and stage fright give rise to an a-symmetrical relationship between the two groups. For on the one hand massive participation by local community members is a *conditio sine qua non* for the authenticity of the event in the eyes of the external visitors. To put it in classical Rousseauian terms, the locals are their “noble savages,” without whom the whole affair would collapse into a staged tourist “pseudo-event.” On the other hand, however, these local community members define themselves as the “owners” and “guardians” of the event and do as such have no interest in welcoming tourist attendance from beyond the Plateau. To the contrary: they dismiss such tourist influx as “polluting” the authenticity of *Il Giro del Mondo* as the major annual celebration of their community, its ancient ancestry, and its ties to the Asiago soil.

This complex dynamics contradicts the theory of culture loss due to cultural tourism (e.g., Greenwood, 2004 [1977]), because here tourism reinforces rather than dilutes local culture and identity. This does nonetheless not confirm the theory of cultural sustenance (e.g., Cohen, 1988) either, because here this reinforcement does not result from commoditization, but from an understanding of tourism as a threat to the integrity and authenticity of local culture and identity. The dynamics that we find does in effect incorporate key elements of both of the theories without contradicting or confirming either of them. Inconsistent with the theory of culture loss advances of tourism here reinforce rather than weaken local culture and identity, but consistent with it this is due to fears of culture loss. Consistent with the theory of cultural sustenance tourism here sustains local culture rather than eroding it, but inconsistent with it this does not happen by catering to tourist demands for authenticity but rather in opposition to the latter.

Conclusion

Our findings obviously cannot be generalized to all instances of local communities facing cultural tourist interest. Indeed, comparison with other relevant studies suggests that their generalizability is limited to local communities that (1) have no marked economic need for tourist revenues yet boast cultural objects of tourist interest that (2) are part and parcel of local community life and (3) feature virtually no a priori separations between local performers and local spectators.

Firstly and most obviously “the importance of tourism as an economic force” plays a decisive role in a local community’s “effort (...) to tolerate (...) the visitors” as Macleod (2002, p. 60) puts it in his discussion of tourism in Vueltas, Canary Islands. Though historically poor and isolated, Asiago nowadays no longer qualifies as a poor and backward town in need of additional resources from tourism. This is very different in Mamoiada, an Italian village in the mountainous interior of Sardinia that boasts the annual Festival of St. Antonio, which is in many ways similar to Asiago’s *Il Giro del Mondo*: it is the most significant annual community event, it is organized by and for local people, and it also attracts increasing numbers of outside visitors, mostly from the surrounding areas (Lorio & Wall, 2012, p. 1444–1445). Yet, while Asiago locals respond dismissively to increases in tourist interest in their annual festival, their Mamoiada counterparts are much more welcoming, basically because they see it as a unique opportunity to boost their local economy as well as “the well-being of a community that was stagnant or even in decline” (idem, 1447). Absence of a clear need for tourist revenues thus entails a first condition that defines the generalizability of our findings.

Secondly, there is Cohen’s (1988, p. 382) insightful observation that “commoditization often hits a culture not when it is flourishing, but when it is actually already in decline” so that “the emergence of a tourist market frequently facilitates the preservation of a cultural tradition which would otherwise perish.” This observation seamlessly fits the case of Succotz, Belize, which features the reinvigoration-through-commoditization of a by and large disappeared Mayan culture: precisely because this was not

“their own” culture and identity, the villagers had no qualms about its commoditization. The welcoming attitudes vis-à-vis commoditization of Scottish heritage in North Carolina's Highland Games can similarly be understood from the absence of a local community that actively celebrates, re-affirms, and sustains Scottishness.

The other way around, the increase of tourism at Sēfa Utaki (Okinawa, Japan) invokes hurt feelings of “cultural ownership” among the local population, i.e., a sense that “their” sacred site has been desecrated and stolen from them (Rots, 2019, p. 174). The dismissive reactions in our Asiago case are similarly due to (threats of) commoditization of an event that is defined as part and parcel of a thriving local community. The restraint on the part of Asiago's city council and church vis-à-vis tourist attendance does indeed differ strikingly from the way in which the Hondarribia city council infuriated the local population by proposing a massive commoditization of the *Alarde*. Consistent with Cohen's observation, then, tourist interest in a cultural object that is part and parcel of a thriving local community entails a second condition that defines the generalizability of our findings.

Thirdly and finally, a specific feature of local cultural celebrations and festivals also appears to play a role in determining local responses to cultural tourism. For many such events are based on a priori separations between local performers and local spectators. Examples are Hondarribia's *Alarde* (Greenwood, 2004 [1977]), Mamoiada's Festival of St. Antonio (Iorio & Wall, 2012), North Carolina's Scottish Highland Games (Chhabra et al., 2003), Sevilla's *Semana Santa* (Spain), and the *Oberammergau Passionsspiele* (Bavaria, Germany). While the scripts of these events feature a priori distinctions between active local performers and passive local onlookers, such is not the case in Asiago's *Il Giro del Mondo*, where all participants are performers and members of the audience simultaneously. This may make *Il Giro del Mondo* even more of a celebration of local community, but it also makes the *Asiaghesi* more prone to stage fright and dismissals of tourist attendance. For admitting spectators to an event that initially had no audience at all is obviously a bigger step than widening an audience that has been there from the outset (compare Cohen, 1988, p. 382). The virtual absence of scripted elements of staging and performance in local cultural events and festivals thus entails a third condition that defines the generalizability of our findings.

Needless to say, these limits to the generalizability of our findings double as hypotheses about local community responses to cultural tourism that need to be pursued in future research, ideally by means of a comparative case study design.

Statement of contribution

1. What is the contribution to knowledge, theory, policy or practice offered by the paper?

It is virtually uncontested that longings for authenticity are key drivers of cultural tourism and that this invites “staged authenticity”, but less agreement exists about the consequences this has for host communities. Whereas some argue that cultural tourism leads local culture to lose its authenticity from a local point of view, others hold that accommodating authenticity-seeking tourists does precisely facilitate cultural sustenance. As to the former theory, our ethnographic case study does indeed show marked dismissals of staging local culture, but it also shows that this strengthens rather than weakens local culture and identity. This outcome does as such not result from accommodating authenticity-seeking tourists, as the theory of culture sustenance holds, but precisely from marked opposition to it. A comparison with a handful of previously published case studies by others leads us to identify three conditions that appear to determine local community responses to cultural tourism.

2. How does the paper offer a social science perspective/approach?

Substantively speaking, the article highlights the role of romantic longings for authenticity as drivers of tourism, not least in contemporary cultural heritage tourism. It does as such tie in with social-scientific studies about the ways in which similar longings for authenticity have meanwhile transformed other social realms, ranging from politics (e.g., leftist and rightist identity politics) and religion (e.g., the shift from ‘religion’ to ‘spirituality’) to consumption (e.g., today's obsession with product authenticity) and science (e.g., the role of ‘post-truth’ in public understandings of science). What all these studies have in common is that they justify skepticism about received sociological understandings of modernization as an increased salience of reason, rationality, science and technology. Methodologically speaking, the article relies on ethnographic data, which is pretty much standard fare in social-scientific fields like cultural anthropology, cultural sociology and many others.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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