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Venice and the Extractivist Regime of Mass Tourism

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Notes

This short text explores the phenomenon of overtourism and its impacts on cities like Venice, drawing from political geography, critical development studies, urban studies, and the environmental humanities. It examines how the expansion of extractivist dynamics – traditionally focused on natural resources – now extends to social, economic, cultural and ecological domains, providing a unique perspective for understanding key dimensions of the Anthropocene. The social conflicts resulting from the aggressive neoliberal marketization of urban spaces, as exemplified by Venice, expose the extractive logics justifying mass tourism: the commodification of the commons and of cultural heritage embodies a form of symbolic extraction that parallels the material extraction of resources, reshaping the social, economic, and ecological landscapes of cities. This extractivist logic, intensified by neoliberal forces and promoted by several political actors, transforms urban life, aesthetics, and ecology at once.

It is difficult to imagine a city that cohabits with the dramatic social impacts of overtourism more than Venice. A city crystalized in the global tourist imagination since the eighteenth century, its form and contents have been reshaped by massive flows of visitors throughout the twentieth century and in particular in the last 20 years.

A black swan event such as COVID-19 has completely halted the touristic industry operations worldwide for a year, but the tourism in Venice has rebounded due mainly to the enduring appeal of the city as a destination, and the insistence from local and regional politics to be fully dependent on this type of industry.

The rise of short-term rental platforms like Airbnb has intensified the mutation of certain places around the world into tourist destinations, a process sometimes referred to as 'destinization'. Besides Venice, this is a phenomenon affecting many other tourist localities around the world. Cities and popular spots such as Barcelona, Chiang Mai, Mexico City, Bali, and Medellin, just to name a few, now face the challenges of a specific type of tourism-led gentrification of planetary scale, which involves the displacement of local populations, and the erosion of the urban commons as a result of the rapid growth of the short-term rental market.

As some have argued, these dynamics seen collectively and holistically, can be understood as part of a broader shift towards an 'extractivist' form of industry, in which the immediate extraction of value from local resources and communities is prioritized over their long-term sustainability and well-being. This process also involves local and national administrators and governments in an actively complicit role, as they protect and even expand the presence of these economies in the face of growing inequality and social and environmental injustice.

In Venice, this has led to a situation where the number of tourists visiting the city far exceeds the number of permanent residents, creating a phenomenon that some researchers have termed 'hypertourism'. Visitors to the city become users or consumers of the spaces and of the touristic services offered, feeding a cycle in which more and more spaces and services are transformed into touristic businesses to cater to an ever-growing, increasingly monocultural, space-intensive industry. As a result, the city becomes defined as a place with an unchangeable basic tourist vocation, not too dissimilar to a theme park or a resort island.

The accelerated exacerbation of these processes has already had significant consequences for the social fabric of Venice, with many residents feeling increasingly marginalized and alienated in their own city. As Urban Studies scholar Giacomo Maria Salerno notes, the city historically formed is no longer lived: it becomes an object of cultural consumption based on aestheticism aimed at tourists eager for shows and picturesque. Some researchers have referred to this transformation affecting

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Venice as Disneyfication, drawing attention to the ways in which the city's way of life and its commons are being replaced by a sanitized, commodified, caricatural version designed for mass touristic consumption and for the optimisation and management of tourist flows.

The cruise industry has played a particularly significant role in the overtourism phenomenon in Venice as its operations and infrastructure produce extractive relations that sequester and exploit tourists, local communities as well as the natural environments of the Venetian lagoon, on scales that are massive and impossible to manage in a sustainable way. The gigantic physical size of contemporary cruise ships has put enormous strain on Venice's socio-natural ecosystem. The negative impacts of the cruise industry include air and water pollution, the structural erosion of the city's fragile foundations, and the commodification of its cultural heritage. Despite these evident problems, however, local and national governments have often been eager to support the continued growth of the cruise industry in Venice: not seeking to regulate the industry and mitigate its negative impacts, authorities have often prioritized the short-term (concentrated) economic benefits of mass tourism over long-term (distributed) well being of the city. As a result, efforts to develop alternative forms of tourism and to revert the Disneyfication of Venice have so far proven ineffective.

The concept of extractivism, and more specifically neo-extractivism, offers a useful theoretical lens through which to understand these processes. Particularly developed in the context of critiques to developmentalist policies in the Latin American context, extractivism refers to a model of economic development that is based on the large-scale extraction and export of natural resources, often with little regard for the medium and long term social and environmental costs. According to political ecologist Eduardo Gudynas, extractivism can be defined as the appropriation of natural resources in large volumes and/or high intensity, where half or more are exported as raw materials, without industrial processing or with limited processing. Neo-extractivism helps to take this analysis a step further by considering the role of the state in facilitating and promoting extractive processes. In many cases, governments actively support and subsidize extractive industries, often in the name of economic growth and development. This has certainly been the case in Venice, where successive local and national governments have pursued a 'tourism-led growth model' that prioritizes the expansion of the tourism industry above all else, as a goal of its own. Investments and planning have focused on building the mainland while the renovations carried out through the funds of the Special Law of 1973 aimed to rescue Venice have had the effect of revaluing real estate and increasing rents, thus favouring in both cases the abandonment of the island of Venice. This model has led to a situation of extreme economic dependence on tourism, with the city's economy becoming increasingly narrow and specialized, as well as concentrated in the hands of a few.

For some scholars, tourism constitutes an essential part of the urban declination of extractivism, with the dynamics of the tourism industry in cities like Venice bearing many similarities to those of more traditional extractive industries such as mining. Just as mining companies seek to extract maximum value from mineral deposits, often at the expense of local communities and ecosystems, so too does the tourism industry seek to extract maximum monetary value from the cultural and historical heritage of cities like Venice. This process of commodification and appropriation of the common heritage of the city by private interests is a key feature of what can be termed 'urban extractivism', and it goes hand in hand with the development and proliferation of platform capitalism.

As a result, Venice has become highly vulnerable to external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought global tourism to a standstill and exposed the fragility of the city's socio-economic model. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the city's economy, which has led to widespread job losses and business closures.

Thinking of Venice through the neo-extractivist lens, but also, conversely, thinking about the planetarization of extractivism through Venice, makes us realize even more the need for a radical re-imagination of the role of tourism in the urban economy. Opposing the touristification of a city like Venice (but also of other cities affected by mass tourism) means, as Salerno puts it, to affirm that 'the commons that built them and inhabit them have not ceased to be able to produce, and that their capacity to care for the material substratum of their subsistence has the capacity to oppose the forces that push in the direction of their expropriation'. In other words, the forms of resistance to the extractive logic of tourism are already present in the fabric of the city: in the commons that have shaped it over time, and in the ongoing practices of care and conflict through which local communities maintain and reproduce their urban environment and the web of life sustaining it.

Mandatory Reading

Salerno, G.-M. (2022). "Touristification and Displacement. The Long-Standing Production of Venice as a Tourist Attraction". *City*, 26(2-3), 519-41. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2022.2055359

Further Optional Reading

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