Chapter 13
The Role of the Tourism and Cultural Policies since the End of Convertibility: The Case of Buenos Aires City

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ABSTRACT

In this work, we aim to study the role culture plays as an economic resource, especially for tourism promotion. Such conception is the result of changes in urban planning, international tourism tendencies and economy, politics and culture in general. Culture can generate income through tourism, crafts and other cultural activities.” Such urban transformations in Buenos Aires city have increased since the end of convertibility and become the essential resource for development. In order to carry out this study, we have worked with secondary statistical information elaborated by local administration institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture (Buenos Aires City Government) and CEDEM (Studies Center for Metropolitan Economic Development, Secretary of Economic Development, Buenos Aires City Government). This methodology helps us analyse the increase not only of artistic activities but of the consumption of cultural services through tourism, especially with the construction and promotion of tango as a trademark for Buenos Aires city.

INTRODUCTION

In this work, we aim to study the role culture plays as an economic resource, especially for tourism promotion. Such conception is the result of changes in urban planning, international tourism tendencies and economy, politics and culture in general. George Yúdice (2002) points out that nowadays there is a strong belief that culture is the best developing factor a society may have since new transformations arise based on the use of local urban culture as a strategy for city economic development and as a social
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condition improving factor. “Culture can generate income through tourism, crafts and other cultural activities.”¹ Such urban transformations in Buenos Aires city have increased since the end of convertibility² and become the essential resource for development (Yudice 2002).

In order to carry out this study, we have worked with secondary statistical information elaborated by local administration institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture (Buenos Aires City Government) and CEDEM (Studies Center for Metropolitan Economic Development, Secretary of Economic Development, Buenos Aires City Government). This methodology helps us analyse the increase not only of artistic activities but of the consumption of cultural services through tourism, especially with the construction and promotion of tango as a trademark for Buenos Aires city. Thus it is aimed to position the city –now offering its cultural products- in the regional and international market.

In the past years, Buenos Aires has changed its image and tried to reposition itself internationally. Spaces previously used in the industrial production sector have been beautified as a result of neo-liberal policies implemented in Argentina during the 1990s. Besides, some neighbourhoods and areas of the City have been refunctionalized so as to attract investors and generate business deals. That is to say, this is an “urban renewal”³ which tries to turn obsolete, abandoned areas in strategic places in the city into attractive spots.

The aforementioned strategic use of culture as an economic resource is directly linked to the economic crisis which took place in Argentina in 2001. It is important to remark that “convertibility,” the international relation the country adopted in which the Argentinian peso was equalled to the US dollar, led to fluent, periodic foreign trade and international relations mostly favourable to the other countries: Argentina imported products at such low cost that local manufacturers could not compete against that. This situation was drastically changed with the crisis outburst and modified this ratio. This new situation affected the parameters of competitiveness and made the city a cheap place, making it one of the chosen international tourist destinations. Thus, the city’s situation changed from being in a national crisis to becoming one of the cheapest tourist destinations in the world. New strategies were therefore designed to attract international tourism, trying to position Buenos Aires as the “Latin American Capital of Culture.”

Inevitably after the crisis, Argentina “benefited” from the tourism boom which installed the formula of “culture as an economic resource”; this was studied by Harvey (1989) and Yudice (2004). This formula was set in a bigger context: urban culture as merchandise, which was proposed for the administration of local governments with a strong influence of culture management experience and Spanish theoretical production: Ballart Hernández and Tresserras (2001), Cortés Puya (2005), Santana (1997), Prats (1997), Puig (2004), etcetera.

SOCIAL-TERRITORIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN BUENOS AIRES CITY: THE STATUS OF THE QUESTION

The 1990s were identified globally with big territorial transformations in major cities, which can be considered among the most evident consequences of globalisation. Around the turn of the last century, the commercial exploitation of cultural historical patrimony played a major role and so did the latter’s relation with tourism and urban renewal processes. Buenos Aires was no exception to these changes.

In fact, the city has a diversified and heterogeneous, fragmented and unequal social-economical map, set in a general context of urban transformation associated with the deindustrialization not only of the central area but of the old industrial neighbourhoods nearby, with the move of several industrial
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