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THE RISE AND FALL OF TOURISM IN VENICE

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Abstract

This thesis is based on a review of sources which allow to trace the transformation of Venice over the last decades: from a traditional tourist destination to a mecca of mass tourism and finally to a ghost town during the COVID-19 pandemic. The boom in tourism brought economic growth and greater prosperity, but was accompanied by negative consequences which resulted, among others, in a population decline. Warnings from UNESCO and citizen protests regarding mass tourism and cruise traffic have pushed politicians to develop strategies for a better management of tourist flows, some of which have already been realized. Since February 2020, Venice has been facing a completely different situation: the drastic decrease in the number of tourists, due to the travel restrictions in response to COVID-19, strikes at the heart of the local economy and demonstrates how dangerous dependence on tourism can be. The crisis, however, presents an opportunity to reflect on the future of Venice. One approach would be to change the image of Venice so that mass tourism is replaced by quality and slow tourism, which would improve life quality for locals and might stop and reverse the process of Disneyfication and population decline.

1. Introduction

Tourism and travelling have gained in the last years more and more importance around the world, as already stated by the Chinese premier Li Keqiang in 2016 at the first World Conference on Tourism for Development in Beijing, when he declared that this activity for Chinese has become a necessity instead of a luxury (Newhouse, 2016). Also, researchers, like Leo Theuns, have been dealing with the question whether tourism should be still considered as a luxury (Theuns, 2014) and major hotel chains like “Marriott” have decided to see it as a basic need, especially for the Millennials and the generation Z (CPP-Luxury, 2018). Even if there might be still a discussion about the elementary character of tourism, there is no question about its crucial role in the economy of most countries. This sector provides 10% of the global GDP and in 2015 one out of 11 jobs around the world had a strong relation with tourism. In addition, each one of those jobs may create 1.5 jobs in industries indirectly related to this sector.¹

Not only countries but also multiple regions and cities have tried and are trying to promote themselves as tourist destinations in order to increase their revenues, experiencing in the last decades a process of touristification, which entails changes of urbanization, nature and infrastructures, which are necessary to meet the presumed needs of future visitors.² In this way, the economic success achieved by incrementing the tourist flow is counterbalanced by several negative aspects of touristification, such as increasing congestion and housing prices

¹ World Economic Forum, available at <https://reports.weforum.org/travel-and-tourism-competitiveness-report-2017/tourism-and-job-creation-advancing-the-2030-development-agenda/>, accessed on December 20, 2020.

² IGI Global, available at <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/touristification/76860>, accessed on February 1, 2021.

(Sequera & Nofre, 2018), degradation and loss of local traditions. Paris, Barcelona, Prague and many other destinations in Europe are going through this process – but the most emblematic example is Venice which, before the pandemic, became a Mecca of mass tourism where in 2018 more than 36 million of tourists have spent the night (Vendettuoli, 2019) but nowadays the city is suffering from the absence of tourism, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Until a couple of years ago, when you asked a person who was about to visit Venice, he imagined a romantic gondola ride, watching the creation of the Murano glass, visiting Piazza San Marco and Palazzo Ducale and perhaps an exquisite dinner with a breathtaking view. To put it in a nutshell, this person was looking forward to an unforgettable experience in one of the most romantic cities of the world. If you had asked the same question before the pandemic, the answer would have been quite a different one. During the last years Venice has become known as the cradle of tourism phobia and photos of overcrowded streets and of anti-tourist demonstration have been on all kinds of newspapers, deteriorating the public image of the city and discouraging some people from visiting it. The locals also are suffering from the effects of tourism like increasing housing prices that enforces the loss of population, decreased to 54.000 residents in the Centro Storico, really few, compared to 23 million tourists in 2019. This means that the annual rate tourists per resident for the historic center is 370, much more than the corresponding value for other tourism destinations like Barcelona or Mallorca where the rate is 3.3 or 4.7 (Viriglio, 2019). During this time the many economic, social and environmental impacts of over tourism in Venice on the population, infrastructure and nature have changed its perception. These transformations, accompanied by a deterioration of the life quality in the city (Cristiano & Gonella, 2020), could even lead the UNESCO to put Venice on the “List of World Heritage in Danger”, if the management of tourist flow and cruise liner traffic does not improve (Hackett & Frade, 2017).

At this point it is important to mention that the evolution of Venice did not end with its peak as mass tourism destination, but it is rather the opposite. In 2020 we were facing a completely new situation, a worldwide pandemic, which affects severely the tourism sector: even tourist hotspots are deserted, and the economic damage is already enormous. On the other hand, worldwide restrictions and travel bans have given nature the chance to start breathing again, like the lagoon of Venice where the water quality has significantly improved and some fish species have reappeared (Mousazadeh et al., 2021).

Already before the pandemic there existed a debate about the future of Venice, because of many negative impacts of mass tourism on the city and the threat of UNESCO, which was one of the reasons why politicians started to seek and implement new management strategies aimed to eliminate some critical elements of mass tourism. With the pandemic, this debate has intensified focusing on the question whether the path of mass tourism is still the right one or if the city must develop a new approach in order to prevent further population decline and deterioration of life quality. This pandemic is the perfect opportunity for tourist destinations to reinvent themselves, to promote a new image and assure a sustainable future. In the case of Venice, the main questions are: Should the city maintain its current economic focus or is it a viable option to promote other

sectors, reducing the weight of tourism? Can Venice convert from mass tourism to quality tourism or slow tourism?

2. Historic evolution of tourism in Venice

The fame of Venice as “tourist destination” started already in the end of the 17th century when it was one of the obligatory stops on the “Grand Tour”, a journey through Europe undertaken by young men of the upper class.³ In order to understand the importance of tourism nowadays in Venice, it is necessary to have a look to its evolution after the Second World War (WWII).

Some of the first construction measures after WWII in Venice, a city spared from bombing, were carried out in two hotels, one of them being the Hotel Bauer, where a modern wing in the rear was created during the 1940s. Along with the inauguration of the new train station St. Lucia in 1954, these were for a while the only efforts to attract tourism. During the postwar economic boom, the tourist arrivals began to increase, exceeding significantly the ones before WWII and the shift from elite to mass tourism resulted in a shorter average stay. The opening of the airport “Marco Polo” in 1960 and of the island terminal “Tronchetto” facilitated the arrival of tourists in the historic center which doubled from 1952 to 1982. The image of Venice as a dying city, enforced by population decline and “acqua alta”, also contributed to increase its attractiveness. Nonetheless, in 1977 only 1% of the population of the historic center of Venice worked in a job directly related to tourism, a percentage which will rise considerably later on (Zannini, 2014).

The increase of tourist arrivals was significant and attracted the attention of researchers, which tried since the 1980s to analyze the pressure that tourism has on the population of Venice. In 1988 the economists Jan van der Borg and Paolo Costa came to the conclusion that Venice should not have more than 20.000 tourists per day (Van der Borg, Costa as cited in Zannini, 2014), a limit often exceeded, for example at the Pink Floyd concert in 1989 which was attended by 200.000 people. Since the 1990s the drastic fall of air travel fares has caused a general augmentation of tourism favoring urban destinations like Venice, the “floating city” that everybody had to see before it might disappear because of the rising sea level. From this moment on, the touristic sector and the numbers of tourists started to grow significantly from year to year, like in 2012 when the city registered 8% more tourists than in 2011 (Zannini, 2014). In 2019, Venice was considered the “world capital of mass tourism” where at least 23 million visitors arrived (Viriglio, 2019).

Just one year later, in 2020, the image of the city and the everyday life of the citizens changed drastically because of the COVID-19 pandemic which brought the economy of Venice to its knees because of the absence of touristic incomes.

³ Wikipedia, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Tour, accessed on January 13, 2021.

3. Impacts of tourism in Venice

Tourism can have a great variety of effects on an urban system which depend both on the kind of tourism and of the structure of the destination itself. In order to understand the conditions, the city has to deal with, it is necessary to consider the main consequences of tourism in Venice, positives and negatives, that are summarized in the following paragraphs.

3.1 Tourism benefits

As mentioned above, tourism is one of the main sectors in Italy's economy, so it seems obvious that for a city like Venice this activity would be even far more important. One should expect to find extensive statistics which allow to determine with sufficient precision the economic impact of tourism on the city, but in reality, it is rather difficult to measure, because the boundaries of this sector are not always clearly defined (Regione del Veneto, 2018). But even if there is no exact data of tourism turnover and its contribution to the GDP of Venice, one easily can comprehend its fundamental importance considering some key figures: in 2018 more than 36 million of tourists have spent the night in Venice, about 15.8 million in hotels and more than 20.7 million in bed and breakfast (Vendettuoli, 2019). About 1,200 hotels and a continuously increasing number of non-hotel facilities (Lock, 2021), together with restaurants and bars (more than 1,000 only in the historic center) stand for 30,000 jobs (Vendettuoli, 2019). In addition to the accommodation, restauration and retail sectors, with all their indirect effects, Venice is one of the main beneficiaries of the growing cruise tourism which represented 3% of the GDP of Venice in 2017 (De Forcade, 2019). These numbers support the thesis that "Venice is a one industry city; it relies on tourism, like our bodies rely on food to survive" (Edwards, 2017).

A positive side effect of tourism is that it normally increases the awareness of the local heritage which often results in an augmented appreciation of it. Residents observe that tourists come from all around the world to visit and admire Venice. The consequence is a growing desire and willingness to protect and restore this patrimony, which leads to more investments by individuals and foreign and international institutions. The association "I comitati privati internazionali per la salvaguardia di Venezia" works in close cooperation with UNESCO and reunites 21 organizations from 11 countries whose purpose is to finance restoration projects and to "exert a constant watch on its artistic, urban and natural heritage". The single organizations operate on the basis of reports of state organs, which express their concern about specific monuments or works of art, and they can choose on the projects to support.⁴

Further, tourism promotes the cultural exchange between travelers and residents, both getting in touch with different cultures. The "Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte", the "Mostra internazionale di architettura" and the "Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica" are important cultural and social events which attract not

⁴ Città di Venezia, available at <https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/comitati-privati-internazionali>, accessed on March 1, 2021.

only tourists but also residents who are eager to see innovations and works of art from around the world and to interchange their impressions. These events are not only a must for experts and amateurs, but are visited also by many students and scholars, as they also include educational activities (Mattioli, 2019).

The increasing competition in the tourism sector in Venice creates a need for diversification. There are a growing number of local operators, including non-profit associations,⁵ who are targeting niche markets and offer tours or other events that allow to discover a different Venice. Guided by locals, tourists shall immerse in the original “Serenissima”, like during a “Bacaro Tour” (bacaro is a typical venetian bar, where local’s culinary specialties are served) or a kayak trip through the narrowest canals of Venice.⁶

3.2 Tourism costs

The increased tourist arrivals at Venice are a double-edged sword: the positive effects are countered by numerous negative impacts that have caused a change in the attitude and the behavior of the venetian population, often leading to tourismphobia.⁷ One main reason, besides the social impacts which will be described in section 3.2.2, is the environmental degradation, especially the pollution of the air and of the lagoon.

3.2.1 Ecological impacts

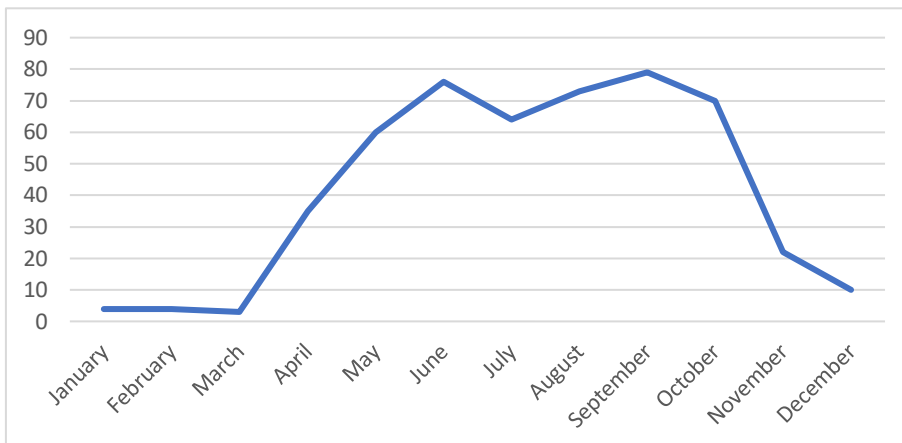
Similar to other destinations such as Barcelona, Venice is not only affected by the general environmental impacts like increased waste, but also has to struggle with the ecological consequences of cruise tourism. This kind of tourism is one segment of the tourism industry which has experienced the biggest growth during the last two decades, but its impacts are disproportionate in comparison to its share of the world economy as a whole (Féernandez, 2012a).

⁵ Venice Wiki, available at https://venicewiki.org/wiki/Turismo_di_massa?fbclid=IwAR3iHhHZGvC13EfekwRBL_wWlIF4Pfn_tRTMaYSKMcEknHjJmG2NsvmnS4tQ, accessed on March 4, 2021.

⁶ Venice Kayak, available at https://www.venicekayak.com/?gclid=Cj0KCQiApY6BBhCsARIsAOI_GjbDVGt3I5GAfh0qy3NIhJHTOWQSNTJO0q_ghY_FLllymK58CQTsa8caAI8QEALw_wcB, accessed on January 10, 2021.

⁷ Encyclopedia. available at <https://encyclopedia.pub/2110>, accessed on April 1, 2021.

Graphic 1. Monthly cruise arrivals in Venice in 2019



Source: Own elaboration based on the data from Città di Venezia (2020)

This statistic shows the monthly arrival of cruise liners in 2019, being September the one with the highest number, namely 79 “(Città di Venezia, 2020). One of those vessels is the MSC Opera which can accommodate 2.679 passengers plus 728 crew members and with its dimensions (274,9 m x 28,8 m x 54 m) changes the silhouette of Venice.⁸

Graphic 2. Cruise liner in Venice



Source: Own elaboration

⁸ Wikipedia, available at https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/MS_C_Opera, accessed on January 13, 2021.

But the cruise traffic not only affects aesthetics, but it also causes serious ecological problems, two of which are addressed in the following sections.

a) Damages in the lagoon

The transiting of these ship-based “amusement parks” through the Giudecca Canal produces hydrodynamic effects, mainly wave actions, which compromise the integrity of the ancient and fragile foundations of the city.⁹ Sometimes, the cruise ships might even cause direct damages like in 2019 when MSC Opera collided with a river cruise ship and the dock, causing injuries and considerable damage (BBC News, 2019). Another negative ecological impact of cruise liners is due to classic antifouling varnish applied on the hull of the vessels in order to assure faster movement and lower fuel consumption. These chemical coatings have ecotoxic impacts for bacteria, algae, crayfish and fish (Umweltbundesamt, 2018). In the last years several researchers worked on finding a substitute for these products which already have been tested and applied successfully but nevertheless the classic antifouling varnish is still used on most of the big ships (Breur, 2020).

b) Air pollution

Air pollution is an environmental problem which you would not expect in a practically car-free city. In fact, however, in 2017 Venice was on the third place in the ranking of the most cruise polluted European port cities, just after Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca, as far as sulfur oxide emissions are concerned. A research conducted by the European Federation for Transport and Environment, which compared the amount of SO_x emitted by cruise liners with that emitted by light duty vehicles (LDVs), has evidenced that luxury cruise liners are responsible for a large share of the sulphur oxide levels: in Venice, that doesn't have a big local passenger car fleet, the ratio between these two emission sources is 20.21 (27,520 kg vs. 1,362 kg), much higher than in Barcelona or Palma de Mallorca where these values are 4.82 and 9.38 respectively (Transport & Environment, 2019). These numbers are not surprising, as some estimates suggest that the air pollution generated by one large cruise ship is equivalent to that of 350,000 motor vehicles (Férrandez, 2012b).

3.2.2 Social impacts

a) Overcrowded city [spaces and public transport]

In the last years, the increasing number of tourists, arriving by air, train, car and on cruise ships, has caused more problems for the locals to move through “their” city, some of them even had to change their routines in order to avoid overcrowded spaces and public transport. An illustrative example is the situation in the waterbuses, called vaporetti, where the Venetians, who must use them for their daily movements, often have difficulties to sit down or even to get on them,

⁹ Comitato No grandi navi, available at <http://www.nograndinavi.it/cosa-chiediamo-2/>, accessed on December 20, 2020.

because a waterbus trip on the Canale Grande is considered a must-do activity by many tourists. This problem is intensified by the fact that before the pandemic, in Venice there just existed an all year long high season (Morse Teel, 2019) and that any adaptation of infrastructures and public transport is by far more difficult than in other cities, because of the nearly unchangeable structure of Venice where the capacities of the canals have already reached their limits (Secolo d'Italia, 2013).

Additionally, to the problem of congestion, there has been observed also a change in the travel motivation of many visitors, which is another reason for a more negative attitude of Venetians towards tourists. Barbara Warburton Giliberti, an English professor at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice, has observed: previously a mean tourist was more prepared and curious to discover the cultural heritage of the "Serenissima", whereas shortly before the pandemic it seemed that a big part of the crowd just wants to brag about it and check it off their to-do list (Padovese, 2019). This type of tourism culminates in the "turista mordi e fuggi" ("tourist bite-and-flee"), particularly disliked by the local population, because he stays only a couple of hours in Venice and spends little money, before he returns to his accommodation outside of Venice or leaves it on a cruise liner (Croce, 2020 and Fernández, 2012b).

The massive and overcrowding tourism, combined with the lack of effective management of the arrivals of tourists and cruise liners, has also risen concerns at UNESCO which has threatened to put Venice on the List of World Heritage in Danger, the so-called "black list" (Parini & Fersuoch, 2016). This classification includes sites in risk because of armed conflicts, processes of industrialization and insufficient norms for the protection of the nation's heritage.¹⁰ Same concerns have been expressed by Europa Nostra, an European Federation for Cultural Heritage,¹¹ and the European Investment Bank Institute which in 2016 declared Venice the most endangered site in Europe and invited UNESCO to put Venice on the "black list" (Hackett & Frade, 2017).

b) Gentrification

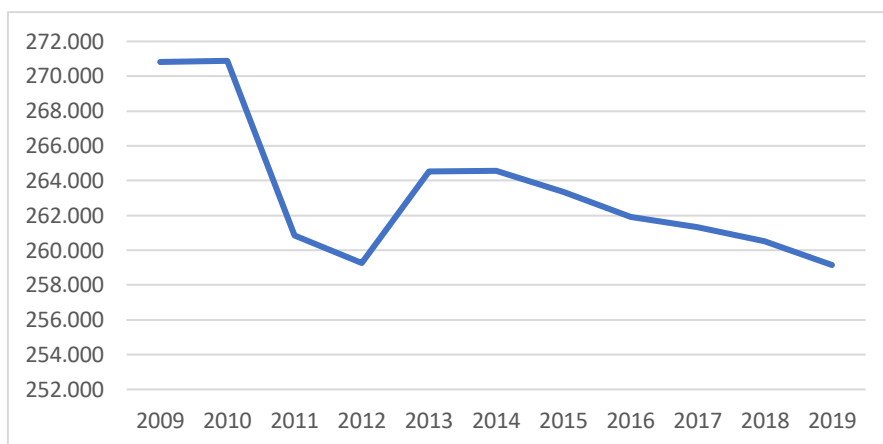
Another negative social side effect of tourism is a process of gentrification that has transformed the character of many areas and caused a general price increase, especially for housing. Real estate prices in Venice are amongst the highest of Italy (Martín et al., 2018), varying between €3.900 and €7.100 per square meter depending on the residential area and reaching €13.000 in good locations, for example directly on the Grand Canal (Engel & Völkers, 2018). Such prices are not affordable for lower income groups, for example young people; when they want to leave the parental home, they also must leave the historic center which contributes to an increase in the average age of the native population in this area (VeneziaToday, 2018). The residential space available to locals is declining because a part of it is converted for tourist use and this

¹⁰ UNESCO, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/158/>, accessed on January 6, 2021.

¹¹ Wikipedia, available at https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europa_Nostra, accessed on January 13, 2021.

transformation is accompanied by a price-driving effect, which further results in a social change and a total population decline in the commune of Venice.

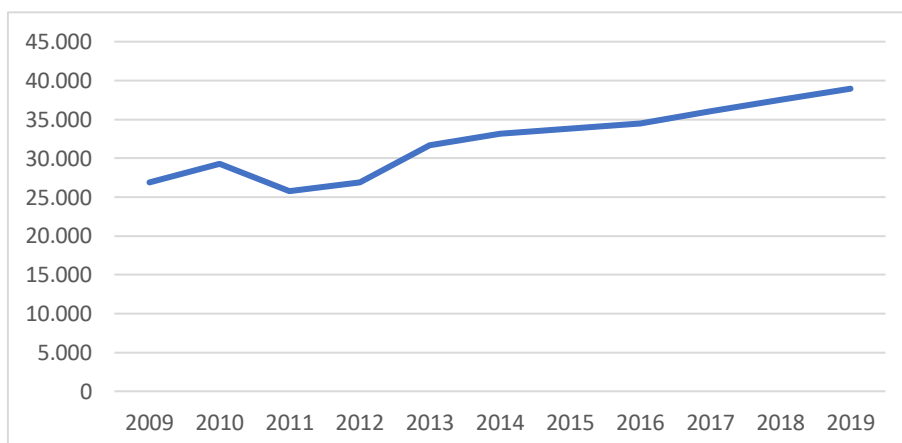
Graphic 3. Evolution of the population of the Commune of Venice (2009 - 2019)



Source: Own elaboration based on the data from Tuttitalia.it.¹²

Although the total population is declining, it is possible to observe that during the same period of time, the amount of foreigners who are living in the commune of Venice has increased, being in 2019 nearly 40.000 persons, this could be because more foreigners are buying their second residencies in Venice (Martín et al., 2018).

Graphic 4. Foreigners living in the Commune of Venice (2009 - 2019)



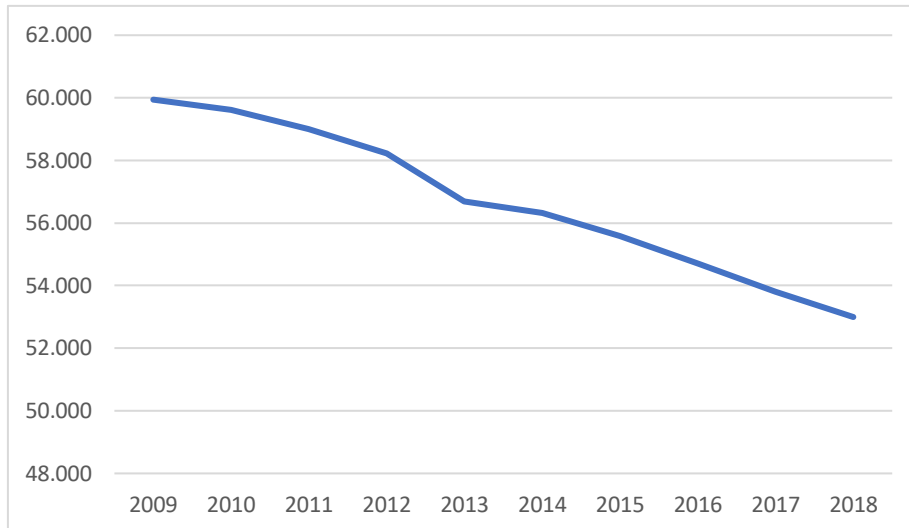
Source: Own elaboration based on the data from Tuttitalia.it ¹³

¹² Tuttitalia.it, available at <https://www.tuttitalia.it/veneto/40-venezia/statistiche/popolazione-andamento-demografico/>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

¹³ Tuttitalia.it, available at <https://www.tuttitalia.it/veneto/40-venezia/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri-2019/>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

Special attention should be paid to the number of residents of the historic center, which in recent years has been rapidly decreasing and which evidence how the increasing tourism pushes Venetians to leave the heart of their hometown (Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019).

Graphic 5. Population Historic center (2009 - 2019)



Source: Own elaboration based on the data from Città di Venezia.¹⁴

c) Venice = amusement park?

The above-mentioned conversion process also favors the evolution of the historic center towards a museum and shopping environment whose main goal is to meet the demands and wishes of tourists. This transformation can be noticed in different aspects, one of them is a notable change of the commercial structure during the last decades, which can be attributed to two main reasons:

1. The price increases in the real estate sector not only apply to apartments but affect also retail spaces. In the main shopping streets of Venice, the rent for a store of 100 m² can reach €600.000 /year; owners of non-touristic stores usually cannot afford such financial burdens and therefore disappear making room for big brands (Libero Quotidiano, 2014).
2. The second reason concerns the kind of goods demanded by tourists and their spending behavior. A large part of the tourists, especially cruise ship passengers and the so-called “turisti mordi e fuggi”, spend little time in Venice and desire mostly just a proof of having been there. This is why, normally after the obligatory photo at the St Mark's Square, their path directly leads into one of hundreds of souvenir shops. A survey about the shopping behavior of tourists in three main

¹⁴ Città di Venezia, available at <https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/serie-storiche>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

destinations has shown that they spend in Venice less than in Milan or Florence, i.e., only €23/day, 40% of it in souvenirs (VeneziaToday, 2016).

These factors have caused a profound change in the commercial structure of Venice, characterized by the multiplication of souvenir shops and the disappearance of other stores. The working paper from the University Ca' Foscari "Effects of Tourism on Venice: Commercial Changes Over 30 Years", prepared by Francesco Zanini, Fabio Lando and Manuel Bellio, illustrates the evolution in the sector of retail stores from 1976 to 2007 and evidences a substantial shift: while the number of tourist stores in this period increased from 303 to 997, the number of grocery stores went from 720 to 276 (Zanini et al. 2008). And this dynamic did not stop in 2007, as pointed out in a more recent article (Libero Quotidiano, 2014).

In the face of this massive shift in favor of tourism, not only Venetians, but also travelers who know la "Serenissima" from previous visits, complain that they have difficulties to recognize the city, which undergoes a transformation into a kind of amusement park, perhaps already concluded.¹⁵

d) Increasing business volume: yes, but does this imply an improvement in the job situation for locals?

Earlier on, while explaining the positive effects of tourism in Venice, it has been pointed out that tourism may improve the general employment situation, but does this mean that the jobs created by hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops will benefit the locals? The question has been examined by Nino Baldan in an article published in 2019 which explains why the local workforce not necessarily profits from the tourism boom. First of all, the increasing job offers relate mainly to low-skilled activities which sometimes, even despite the low payment and their often seasonal character, seem to be more attractive for the younger generation than ancient professions and traditional crafts that are suffering also from declining demand.

Other elements that characterize the evolution in the low-wage sector are the increasing price pressure from mainland establishments and a growing number of foreign workers who are used to harder working environments and lower salaries and are ready to accept conditions that do not always comply with the legal requirements, like working without regular contract. Both these factors do not improve the employment situation for the economically weaker residents of the historic center and may be one of the reasons for their exodus towards the mainland, for example to Mestre and Marghera, in addition to the higher housing and living costs and the overcrowding discussed above (Baldan, 2019).

¹⁵ Comitato No grandi navi, available at <http://www.nograndinavi.it/cosa-chiediamo-2/>, accessed on December 20, 2020.

4. Management strategies of tourism

The congestion of the historic center and the cruise liner traffic have led to the creation of social movements against overtourism and its consequences. The most important of them, which has achieved international visibility, is the committee “No grandi navi”, an association that has been founded in 2012 with the aim to stop the arrivals of cruise liners at the core of Venice and its lagoon, since this kind of traffic implies ecological damage and incalculable risks.¹⁶ Under the pressure of this civil movement and the UNESCO threat, the authorities of Venice have developed some strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism and to limit, or at least better manage, the number of visitors

All the strategies that will be explained in this section have been developed already before the pandemic and some of them were even partially realized a few years ago, for example the limitation of the size of cruise ships and the priority lines for local waterbus passengers, whereas the implementation of the smart control room and the approval of the latest plans about the routing of cruise liners have taken place during the pandemic.

4.1. Priority line for waterbuses

One of the issues that locals are most annoyed about is the overcrowding of “vaporetti” which not only causes long queues, but also means that they, on their way to work, sometimes cannot board and have to wait for the next ship. In order to solve this problem, the public transport company has divided the waiting zone at the busiest stops into two areas with automatic access control: one for residents and commuters, the other one for tourists or non-residents who are admitted on board only when the privileged group has already embarked.¹⁷

4.2 Entry fee and smart control room

In order to face the problem of overcrowding, the authorities of Venice plan to rely on two elements: technology and price. In September 2020, on the artificial island Tronchetto a smart control room was inaugurated. The main purpose of this center is to control the traffic and to manage efficiently tourist flows and events, improving also public safety. The smart control room will be interconnected with turnstiles, which will be located at strategic access points of the historic center. These gates have yet to be installed and should have a double function: direct the tourists from more to less frequented areas and serve as access barrier that opens only for visitors in possess of an QR-code which they will receive after having paid an entrance fee (Bottazzo, 2020).

This entrance fee will vary according to the tourist pressure expected for a given day. This estimation will be made in the smart control room using statistic data

¹⁶ Comitato No grandi navi, available at <http://www.nograndinavi.it/cosa-chiediamo-2/>, accessed on December 20, 2020.

¹⁷ Actv, available at <http://actv.avmspa.it/it/content/inizio-di-imbarco-prioritario-ai-servizi-di-navigazione>, accessed on February 1, 2021.

and real time information provided from cameras and sensors in the relevant areas (Bottazzo, 2020). According to the tourist pressure, the days will be classified into different categories: green, red, black and standard (colorless). While the normal entrance fee on standard days will be €6,00, the price on red or black days will rise up to €8,00 an even €10,00; on the other hand, green days with lower inflow will be incentivized by a reduced fee of only €3,00 (Città di Venezia, 2019). The purchase of the access ticket will be possible through different applications or may be included in the price paid for the hotel room. Venetians, as well as persons who come for professional or medical reasons, do not have to pay any fee.

Even if the smart control room is already operating, the system as a whole is still not activated as the exact conditions and regulations have not yet been determined.

4.3 Routing of cruise ships

In the past, there have already been several projects to mitigate the ecological impact of cruise tourism on the fragile ecosystem of the Venetian Lagoon, for example a limitation of the size of cruise ships allowed to transit the Giudecca Canal or a better distribution of arrivals and departures.¹⁸ Since such mild measures eliminate neither the environmental problems nor the risk of accidents nor the concerns of UNESCO and since the Venetian economy is not willing to sacrifice the revenue from cruise tourism, various solutions were explored to keep these ships out of the most vulnerable parts of the historic center, like creating an offshore port or relocating the port to the Lido island or to the industrial area of Marghera (No grandi navi, 2017).

Another project, that has been supported long time by the mayor of Venice, foresaw that the cruise liners should pass through Canale dei petroli, used by cargo ships and oil tankers, and then through Canale Vittorio Emmanuele III, in order to arrive at the existing port San Basilio from behind, avoiding the Giudecca Canal. This proposal has been criticized by environmentalists, especially because of the consequences that the dredging of the Canale Vittorio Emmanuele III would have for the lagoon system (No grandi navi, 2017).

The most recent decision dated 25th of March 2021, regarding the routing of cruise liners comes directly from the responsible ministers of Italian government who agreed to temporarily divert the traffic of large ships from Venice to Marghera and to also launch a call for ideas, in order to definitely and structurally solve the problem of big ships and move them out of the lagoon (MiT, 2021).

5. Venice without tourists: The COVID-19 Scenario

In February of 2020, the vision of Venice with fewer or even no tourists became reality. In a couple of days, lockdown regulations and travel bans caused by

¹⁸ Vela e Motore, available at <https://www.velaemotore.it/venezia-vela-11233>, accessed on March 23, 2021.

COVID-19 pandemic transformed the overcrowded capital of mass tourism into a ghost town.

As a consequence of this, during the following months nature started to reconquer the canals of Venice and its lagoon. The improvement of water quality, due to reduced water traffic and less polluting discharges from engines, is one of the most remarkable positive effects that have been observed (Braga et al., 2020). Various species of animals, which had disappeared in previous years, have returned to the venetian ecosystem (Mousazadeh et al., 2021). At first glance, these changes seem to indicate that Venice is heading towards a greener future, but researchers warn that such statements should not be made prematurely. The decrease in emission and pollution rates all around the world is a phenomenon that often accompanies economic crises, as explains Glenn Peters from the Center for International Climate and Environment Research (Mossetti, 2020), and for this reason is limited in time. The post-crisis recovery usually results in a greater increase in emissions than before, because investments to "save the economy" are normally aimed at a quick recuperation rather than at long-term environmentally friendly alternatives (Mossetti, 2020).

For most Venetians, however, the ecological benefits are secondary, compared to the economic consequences which a region focused mainly on tourism has to endure, like loss of income and jobs. Veneto is the most visited region of Italy and the only one which was listed in 2017 among the top ten regions of Europe in terms of overnight stays, as it was on the fourth place (Buffolo, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that travel bans hit this region particularly hard. From 2019 to 2020, the number of nights spent by tourists in accommodations have dropped by 54.4% and there was a 61.1% decrease in arrivals (Regione del Veneto, 2021), so that the loss in tourist spending has been estimated at nearly 4 billion euros (la Repubblica, 2021). The situation is even slightly worse in the province of Venice itself, where the nights spent in accommodation went down from 37,951,808 to 16,866,552 and the arrivals from 9,979,780 to 3,699,264,¹⁹ generating an estimated drop in tourism revenue of 2 billion euros. Such a decline inevitably also has an impact on employment: nearly 100,000 of a total of 366,000 employees are in a critical situation, as they are working in the sectors that suffer most from the crisis, like hotels, restaurants, transport. And they do not know what their future will look like, because many employers do not expect a recovery until 2022 (Adnkronos, 2020).

6. A different future for Venice? A note on current debate

During the COVID-19 pandemic, "Venezia da Vivere", a network of web magazines and social media, and the St Mark's Square Association have seized the opportunity to launch the project "Riscrivere il futuro" (translation: "Rewrite the future"), an open dialogue with citizens about the rebirth of Venice which also includes interviews with personalities from politics, business and culture. These

¹⁹ Regione del Veneto, available at http://statistica.regione.veneto.it/banche_dati_economia_turismo_turismo2.jsp?fbclid=IwAR1dZY3XWbZrYT8TYPAAT_qYPjHXrUB-PkChctoOkZNPj2Kka2zyVKjhPEk, accessed on April 1, 2021.

interviews clearly show that most of the aspirations regarding the future are quite similar.

One of the most widespread wishes is to counteract the “Venice Syndrome” which is the phenomenon of overtourism associated with the depopulation of urban centers (Martín et al., 2018). To achieve this goal, interviewees agree that two main requirements must be met: an improvement in the quality of life and an easing of the strained housing situation. The latter problem could be mitigated by introducing a rent relief for residents as well as fiscal benefits for landlords renting to residents. As far as the quality of life is concerned, it will be necessary to act on several levels, because various components must be addressed. Most of the interviewees agree the desired improvement requires substantial change, away from low-cost mass tourism towards slow tourism or quality tourism.²⁰ Measures that could promote this conversion include incentives for a longer stay, for example benefits proportional to the number of nights spent in the historic center,²¹ or the organization of specific events, like dedicating an edition of the Biennale of Contemporary Art to the respectful relationship between man and his city.²² Locals also emphasize the need to strengthen other economic sectors in order to reduce the dependence on tourism,²³ whose dangerousness became clearly visible during the Corona crisis. Life quality could be further improved by ecological measures aimed to decrease air and water pollution; these measures could include, as sustainability specialist Marco Capovilla explains, the conversion of public transport waterbuses to electric propulsion and the use of low-impact antifouling paints, detergents and cosmetics.²⁴

7. Conclusion

This thesis has outlined the development of Venice towards a mass tourism mecca, whose economy is largely dependent on this activity. The undoubted commercial success is contrasted by serious negative aspects such as overcrowding, pollution, gentrification and population decline, that diminish the life quality of residents. This evolution, which has reached its peak in the years immediately preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, has generated protest movements and pushed politicians to develop better management strategies, some of which have already been implemented. So far, however, these strategies have not led to a redimensioning of the importance of tourism which is still of vital

²⁰ Venezia da Vivere, available at <https://www.veneziadavivere.com/come-immagini-venezia-nel-futuro-alberto-olivetti-hotel-dragomanni/>, accessed on February 22, 2021.

²¹ Venezia da Vivere, available at <https://www.veneziadavivere.com/come-immagini-venezia-nel-futuro-antonio-rosa-salva/>, accessed on February 22, 2021.

²² Venezia da Vivere, available at <https://www.veneziadavivere.com/venezia-nel-futuro-didier-quillon/>, accessed on February 22, 2021.

²³ Venezia da Vivere, available at <https://www.veneziadavivere.com/venezia-nel-futuro-stefano-croce/>, accessed on February 22, 2021.

²⁴ Venezia da Vivere, available at <https://www.veneziadavivere.com/venezia-nel-futuro-marco-capovilla/>, accessed on February 22, 2021.

importance for locals, as evidenced by the economic and social crisis caused by the Covid pandemic, whose long-term impacts are yet to be seen.

During the Covid crisis, Venetians experienced some improvements in quality of life, but also had to realize how dangerous the dependence on the monoculture of tourism is: on the one hand, they were able to rediscover an almost forgotten Venice without crowds and pollution; on the other hand, the closed souvenir stores, restaurants and hotels made them realize how lifeless their city is without the streams of visitors. The pandemic has also intensified the discussion about the touristic future of Venice, especially about the question whether tourism in post-COVID times will/shall be the same as before. As is obvious that a city like Venice, because of its uniqueness, will always be a one of the most popular tourist destinations, but perhaps it is possible to learn from the past and to get away from mass tourism, moving towards a more sustainable and balanced development.

Such a transformation not only requires a better management of tourist flows, but also changes in the socio-economic conditions. Regarding the type of tourism, it will be necessary to reduce the number of day tourists (“mordi e fuggi”) and to (re)attract visitors interested in history, culture and experiences off the beaten track, with respect for the artistic heritage of the city, ready to stay for a longer period and to spend money – the key words here are Slow Tourism and Quality Tourism. This strategy should be supported by measures that strengthen other sectors of the local economy, both in the field of new technologies and in traditional crafts, in order to stop the exodus of residents and to reverse the trend.

The interaction of the two strategies, i. e. the combination of tourism-related steering mechanisms with efforts to improve residential quality, could finally interrupt the vicious circle of mass tourism, Disneyfication and population decline – if politics, business and population agree to go down that path.

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