

CHAPTER 16

HERITAGE POPULISM

How a Hyper-Place Turned into a Village

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INTRODUCTION

Militello in Val di Catania, the site where I carried out my ethnographic research, was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) in 2002 together with seven other locations in the south-eastern part of Sicily. It was also recently named ‘the most beautiful Sicilian village for the year 2022’.¹ In several of my works, I have used the expression *hyper-place* to define the institutional, cultural and historical stratification of Militello, conceptualizing this term in contrast to the idea of *non-places* put forward years earlier by Marc Augé (1993). In the face of the polarity between (ethnological) places and *non-places*, the opposition between essential and relational space/time that, according to Augé, characterizes the places of modernity, and the surplus of time, space and individuality that connotes *supermodernity*, the idea of *hyper-places* allowed me to imagine a location that participated simultaneously, and in the long term, in multiple discursive regimes and moral economies. Above all, this notion allowed me to avoid framing the poetics of space/time, forms of subjectivity and styles of action that I saw unfolding in my field within a linear and evolutionary conception of history, such as the one underlying Augé’s theses. Compared to Augé’s *nonplace*, my *hyper-place* displayed a hyper-excited and metaleptic relationship with the past, very different both from the presentism (Hartog 2003) underlying the historiographic and statist notion of ‘places of memory’ (Nora 1984) and from the space/time saturation of a *supermodern* condition. And at the same time, the men and women who experienced it appeared to be skilful manipulators of their positioning in multiple scenarios. They showed the ability to

represent themselves to the outside gaze, depending on the moment, as part of premodern worlds, a national/state modernity, or post- and late modern existential conditions.²

According to Augé (1993: 73), in the supermodern condition ‘ancient places’ that are not integrated into the discursive order expressing the feeling of the times are ‘included in repertoires, classified and promoted as “places of memory”’. In other words, they are constructed as heritage. Beginning in 1996 and for the following decades, I monitored the process of Militello’s inclusion in the UNESCO WHL. I wondered how the political and devotional logics, the poetics of the self and local actors’ agency were able to interact with the institutional logics, moral economies and principles of heritage construction, as well as the ideological foundations, of the late capitalist present-day from which they stem. After some initial enthusiasm, it seemed to me that for years local administrators and citizens showed a widespread lack of interest in, if not outright mistrust of, UNESCO recognition. Other towns in the area that were also included in the UNESCO WHL (Noto, Scicli, Modica, Ragusa and Caltagirone, and, later, Syracuse) quickly recognized the economic and cultural value of the quality label awarded by UNESCO and thus moved towards exploiting their status to promote tourism. My hyper-place (its local intellectuals and administrators, but also ordinary people) instead showed pride in their town’s monuments and the weight of their history, yet seemed to fail to grasp its economic potential.

This is why Militello’s participation and plebiscitary victory in the contest for the title of ‘Sicily’s most beautiful village for 2022’, associated with a series of touristic and cultural initiatives untaken by local administrators, intrigued me. It seems that applying the label of borgo/‘Village’ was enough to insert this ‘hyper-place’ into the especially mediatic, but also touristic, scenario for the construction of heritage goods, almost as if this label managed to remove from the UNESCO label a certain veneer of prestigious, yet useless, officiality. In this chapter I consider the shift towards a (more) explicit commodification of the kind of resilient context that the Militello hyper-place has seemed to represent for years now. I will do this by embedding this ethnographic case in a more general analysis of global scenarios and the logic of what has been called the ‘heritage scape’ (Di Giovine 2009; Geismar 2015).

A RESEARCH TRAJECTORY

In the second half of the 1990s, when I began publishing the findings of my ethnography, an anthropological and critical approach to heritage construction processes (patrimonialization) was rare both in Italy and on the international stage. In Italy, indeed, anthropologists focusing on so-called

'demo-ethno-anthropological (cultural) heritage' were all confined to the tradition of anthropological museology.³ There were no ethnographic analyses, at least in the Italian context, that investigated the political and intellectual processes of constructing 'cultural things' (anthropological and otherwise), the social scenarios in which these heritage processes took place, the institutional imaginaries that guided such processes and, at the same time, the practices that social actors implemented around and through so-called 'cultural heritage'.⁴ To find references that I could use to compare in some way, I had to look outside the national context.

The French *anthropologie du patrimoine* was necessarily my first comparative reference.⁵ From the outset, however, I realized that the social practices and processes I experienced in my Sicilian field were clearly less tractable than the ones my transalpine colleagues were highlighting in their work. I was struck, above all, by the gap between the ways of doing and being I observed and the conceptual, theoretical and political frameworks underlying the French approach to heritage. In French ethnology, the very notion of *patrimoine* was configured as an institutionally pre-packaged and hyper-disciplined bundle, a sort of black box inserted within what Jeudy (2001) would (self-)critically call the *machinerie patrimoniale*. The universe I saw swirling around me had very few of the space/time coordinates that granted order and compactness to the galaxy of French *patrimoine* studies. The universe I observed did not have the same ideas about the nature of space/time as the French literature, often imaged by the institutional gaze of French scholars as linear, measurable and irreversible, while the practices of 'my' actors depicted them as manipulable and restless. There were differences in the more general moral economy (Thompson 1971; Asad 2003) within which the agency of human beings was defined: the 'French' models took this moral economy as isomorphic with that of an ideal modern rationality, while it appeared to me to revolve around 'poetics of the self' and forms of subjectification centred on 'strength', aggressivity and manipulation. In my field, moreover, public space and public culture took on configurations that were not at all guaranteed, contract-based, or essentially politically and socially 'aseptic', making them markedly different from the public worlds and modes depicted in the studies of my French colleagues.⁶

Another, more similar, comparative landscape was that of Anglophone anthropology. In fact, as early as the beginning of the 1980s, various anglophone scholars had begun to use a critical lens to investigate the politics of culture and their relations with the functioning of nation states. Herzfeld's (1982, 1987) work on Greece, Handler's (1988) on Quebec and Holmes's (1989) on Friuli, together with numerous other studies, provided detailed indications for interpreting the patrimonialization processes that I saw taking shape in Sicily. Besides, my ethnography did not begin as an

investigation of ‘heritage-related’ issues. In 1997, in my second year in the field, I was already interested in understanding the relationships between politics, devotion, ritual, violence, memory and poetics of the self. In the very first months of that year, a process took shape before my eyes that had begun with the collapse of the Noto cathedral dome (March 1996); over the course of a few years (1997–2005) it led to the listing of ten local towns in the UNESCO WHL and, more generally, an increasing tendency to structure the cultural, economic and urban planning policies of the so-called ‘Noto Valley’ around heritage issues. Working in the field and archives to investigate the conflict between social groups, I was trying to understand how certain ‘monuments’, art objects and documents, along with elements of urban space, were being deployed in the complex and ancient political and ritual game involving two simultaneously ‘religious’ and ‘political’ parties. Indeed, all of these ‘objects’ acted as rhetorical tools through which people could manipulate relationships between antecedence and succession, priority and posteriority, and pre-eminence and subordination along chronological axes and in political scenarios. This took place in a public space and culture dominated by *pòlemos* rather than contract logics, and connoted by the social and political attributes of the actors rather than by their aseptic and formal parity.⁷ As the patrimonialization process commenced and was subsequently structured, these ‘objects’, whose performative value and capacity to provoke conflict I had experienced first-hand over the course of two years of fieldwork, were inscribed in a different discursive regime. The new regime needed to be understood, first in terms of how it was structured within institutions and then in terms of its capacity to interact with (and act on) local contexts. My book *L’UNESCO e il Campanile* (2003) sought to investigate both dimensions. It was immediately clear to me that an anthropological approach to patrimonialization processes must necessarily employ theoretical frameworks capable of simultaneously considering bureaucratic procedures, political and diplomatic logics, ideological assumptions, symbols and classifications, conceptions of public space, policies, the more general political economy, and the implied forms of ‘heritage’ subjectivity characteristic of supranational and national institutions, with their various effects and affects. At the same time, the theoretical frameworks suited for investigating these processes needed to analyse ‘local’ ways of constructing space/time, investigate modes of human agency and enable an ethnographically dense examination of the ways that the ‘self’ is constructed and expressed, as well as the more or less institutionalized moral economies within which subjects and localities have produced themselves over time, specifically in their relations with nation states and other universalist institutions (from the Church to transnational agencies such as UNESCO). After all, it is here, in the potential for heritage

processes to offer a privileged analytical window for observing political and politico-cultural processes, the frictions connoting global late modernity, and the conceptual reconfigurations that these processes impose on the social sciences, that we find the reasons for which heritage has ‘exploded’ – a development that was scarcely foreseeable at the turn of the century – as a central focus of contemporary anthropological discussion.⁸

DISCREPANCIES

Observing the initial stages of UNESCO patrimonialization, it was very clear that conflict was central to this process. From the outset, age-old conflicts between the elites of the different towns in the area were rekindled while new lines of tension surfaced (Palumbo 1998, 2003, 2006a). In that period, Lowenthal (1998: 329) had already presented a general denunciation of patrimonialization, albeit one that too simplistically counterposed ‘heritage’, partisan and manipulative, to ‘history’, based on scientific fact-finding; besides this study, the idea that patrimonialization produces conflicts intimately linked to the political sphere was not widespread. True, Poulot (1997) had revealed the strong iconoclastic tensions that had developed around the places and monuments of the *Ancien Régime* in the early French revolutionary phase. At the same time, however, as the revolutionary process stabilized, after two decades of heated debate, the association between monuments, works of art and nation-building – the core intersection of the modern notion of *patrimoine* – had set (and achieved) the goal of defusing possible conflicts. From the ‘beginning’, therefore, heritage and museums, as expressions and instruments of national identity and unity-building, displayed that pedagogical vocation that has continued to characterize nation states’ heritage policies ever since. After all, the heritage rhetoric, and ideologies of a supranational institution like UNESCO are also characterized by a similar pedagogical drive (Hafstein 2018: 19). While permitting regulated diplomatic competition inside its procedures, UNESCO has long denied (at least on a formal level) the legitimacy, much less existence, of internal conflicts within sites and so-called ‘communities’. Conflict-ridden places are instead relegated to specific lists of sites considered to be at-risk. Even when – as in more recent years – the UNESCO world itself has begun to explicitly reflect on the conflict surrounding heritage, the ideological system of this transnational diplomatic agency does not seem to be able to acknowledge the kind of conflict I had the opportunity to see operating in south-eastern Sicily. However much UNESCO action produces conflict, and the organization now seems willing to take it into consideration as an important feature of patrimonialization processes, there are some instances of conflict

that do not seem to be acceptable: specifically, that is, when it erupts uncontrollably and erodes that intimate social level labelled ‘community’, ‘group’ or ‘locality’ that UNESCO’s topological and typological apparatus, as expressed by the various conventions and particularly the one on intangible heritage, takes as an objective, basic and to some extent unassailable reality.⁹

And yet my ‘communities’, woven over the centuries in a fabric brimming with factional passions and bitter conflicts – albeit cloaked to the gaze of outside observers – represented just this kind of community. After two years of fieldwork, my view of the patrimonialization process could not, therefore, fail to be steeped in these characteristics. This ethnographic grounding shielded me from the risk – run by much anthropological research on heritage¹⁰ – of uncritically embracing some or all the dense cultural assumptions and heavy ideological presuppositions accumulating under the all-modern, Western and political notion of ‘cultural heritage’ (Handler 1988; Palumbo 2003).

OTHER, NON-SEMIOTIC FORMS OF OBJECTIFICATION

Analysing the discrepancies between UNESCO ideo-logic, local and regional political dynamics, space/time poetics and the multiple moral economies within which people’s agency and subjectivities are constructed has constituted a key focus of my research agenda. After the 2003 monograph, I turned my attention to the beating heart of local political passions, festivals, the role of ritual parties, and the ‘religion’–‘politics’ nexus. In a later monograph, I showed how the requirement to represent one’s political and ritual scene, objectifying it over the course of several centuries for highly diverse audiences and contexts, was a constitutive feature of local historical events (Palumbo 2009). Indeed, the various moves to ‘culturally objectify’ the festive scene were embedded in complex genealogies. Tasked with determining, for example, whether I had studied ‘festivals’ or ‘religious contests’ or, as my friends sometimes called it, ‘u jocu’ (the game) between the two rival churches and parties of St Nicholas and St Mary, I could not help but dwell on the expression ‘war of saints’. This phrase was used especially in the post-Second World War period by the regional and national press and, therefore, by some local intellectuals to define party-faction conflict. It is used even today in the village whenever someone wants to give the outside world a quick and deliberately schematic objectification of the complex social practices associated with it. The expression dates back to a novella published in *Vita dei Campi* (1880) in which Giovanni Verga enacted a parody of ritual practices of whose complex political significance he could not have remained ignorant. One of the not-necessarily intended effects that Verga

achieves with his narrative choice is to make it impossible to explicitly state on the public stage (which Shryock 2004 identifies as the display stage of neo-national public culture) the passionate and violent dimensions of jurisdictional and devotional rivalry without adopting an ironic stance. Judging from sources up to the first decades of the nineteenth century, the complex political and devotional, religious and passionate nature of the local world could be explicitly stated and represented. From Verga's novella onward, such matters were instead subjected to a process of 'folklorization' that conditions their staging, their narrative and public objectification. Writing at the beginning of Italy's unification and for an audience ready to be enthralled by the exotic allure of an Italian South only recently brought into the fold of the nation, Verga could still afford to look ironically at 'wars of saints'. Only twenty years later, in the midst of anti-Southern clashes, Giuseppe Pitrè (1900) definitively relegated 'religious contests' and other forms of violent devotion to the 'ghetto' of pathological medicalization, albeit while continuing, at least in part, to perform them as a prominent actor in Palermo's political scene. From then on, it has been possible to represent the passions and attitudes such as the ones I investigate only as scandal or pathological deviation from public and modern normalcy. They are thus moved 'off stage', concealed inside the intimate and publicly unspeakable mound of local identity.

At first glance, therefore, the phrase 'war of saints' appeared – drawing on Herzfeld (1987) – to be a *disemic* construction serving to provide a representation shared with people from outside the community, even while concealing intimate terrains of local social life in which many actively participate. In fact, the people I had interacted with in the field not only seemed to be skilled at genealogically reconstructing the forms of 'cultural objectification' that practices, beliefs and emotions related to political and ritual conflict had undergone over time; it was evident that they were also shrewd at positioning themselves among the different objectifications that 'history' made available to them, requiring others (whether an ethnographer or an official from some government agency) to position themselves in turn. This way of interacting with a 'professional stranger' revealed the relative inadequacy of semiotically derived cognitive models, models such as the one Herzfeld (1987, 1997) proposed first for the Greek context and then extended to Italy (2003), based on a sharp and, as it were, bifacial (*disemic*) opposition between public officialdom and cultural intimacy. My interlocutors' skilful practices remained impervious to the configurations of supposedly modern subjectivity and public space. At the same time, they even evaded framing within that particular accommodation between the ideal institutional-Weberian forms of the nineteenth-century nation state and the (regional, local) contexts of practice that Herzfeld's proposed *disemic* schema and

notion of ‘cultural intimacy’ were intended to establish. It was evident that the analytical problem was not how to frame the level of collective belonging that defined the threshold of intimacy (the region or the city or locality, rather than the nation state, as Herzfeld 2003: 6–7 suggested) in Italy (or Sicily). Rather, it was to show how a multiplicity of levels of aggregation could, depending on the moment and context, serve as either a sphere of formal representation or space of intimate and sometimes awkward closeness. And, in so doing, it was to understand how social actors could move skilfully between these levels without ever rigidly identifying with any of them. In the area I investigated, each of the many ‘identities’ institutionalized and objectified as part of a long-standing history can thus function as a formal and official level in one context, and as an intimate performative space in another (Palumbo 2006a, 2009, 2013b). In short, this context is not shaped by a rigid set of *disemic* oppositions between inside and outside, intimate and formal, secret and public, local world, region and nation state. Sicilian ethnography instead offers us the portrait of an institutional polycentrism that, through the contextual staging of areas of relative intimacy and alterity, produces a complex identitarian polymorphism skilfully exercised by social actors.

FORMS OF RESISTANCE, ATTACHMENT AND COMPROMISE

Social actors’ positions are thus embedded in a complex genealogy through which the ‘local community’, with all its innermost divisions, has provided objectified representations of itself, thereby shaping its relations with diverse and multiple ‘external’ scenarios. Because of my ethnographic research, it seems to me that, for twenty years (2000–20), the leading groups and most Militello locals viewed the move to become a UNESCO-listed site as nothing more than a specific, albeit limited, opportunity: the chance to access a new level of ‘identitarian objectification’ and achieve a new facet of their own ‘hyper-place’. This was an operation to be undertaken with detachment and a healthy dose of ironic indifference within the fluid landscapes of late modernity. Beyond this, until 2021 there was no real attachment to the UNESCO vision with its associated ideological scenarios and the educational mission such a vision entails. Above all, there was no real attempt to adapt policies, practices and configurations of the self to the ‘commodified persona’ (Bunten 2008) that, according to some anthropological and critical analyses, characterizes the ‘commodification-patrimonialization’ of tourism (Palumbo 2006a: 65; 2009; Collins 2015).

The stance we find in other towns of the ‘Sicilian south-east’ affected by the UNESCO patrimonialization process between 1996 and 2005 was

different. While Militello and Palazzolo Acreide displayed a kind of wait-and-see approach, municipalities such as Noto, Scicli, Caltagirone and Syracuse made a different choice. Here, patrimonialization has had generative effects, giving rise to new forms of identitarian aggregation and redefining the cultural and economic policies of the various cities. More generally, back in 1996 neither the expression ‘Val di Noto’ nor the label ‘south-east’ had any meaning for the majority of the population.¹¹ Only ten years after the UNESCO heritage-building process began, the national government passed Law No. 77/2006 allocating EUR 1 million to the ‘Cultural District of the South-East’, the association of cities involved in this process and created as part of the unfolding of the UNESCO procedures. In turn, these policies have had concrete effects on the area. Between 2005 and 2007, a grassroots movement protesting the oil drilling licenses that the Sicilian Region had granted to some multinationals took shape in this newly invented ‘south-east’. Young university students, tourism workers, agricultural entrepreneurs, politicians, neo-rural immigrants and local, regional and national intellectuals took to the streets to defend these entities (the Val di Noto and Sicilian south-east) that only ten years earlier (when the UNESCO heritage process and its governance effects had not yet materialized) had no significance in their daily experiences (Palumbo 2011). The leading players in this movement were concentrated in the cities of Noto, Modica, Scicli and Syracuse, not coincidentally the same places where local elites had adhered more directly and with varying strategies to heritage policies, triggering, among other effects, significant processes of urban and rural gentrification.¹² The two most inland and least easily accessible towns, Militello, first and foremost, and to a lesser extent also Palazzolo Acreide, remained on the margins of this process. Up until just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were less effective in attracting tourist flows and, therefore, quite insulated from these forms of gentrification. One consequence of these different ways of participating in patrimonialization processes is that only in the local areas that have been most open to such processes, accepting and amplifying their effects, do we see the emergence of ‘heritage emotions’ and identity and community sentiments sparked directly by UNESCO logic and its adoption (Palumbo 2011, 2013a; Fabre 2013). In contexts such as Militello where the governing classes and ordinary people alike have reacted with distrust and irony to these processes, on the contrary, identitarian passions continue to be rooted in political and devotional anxieties embedded in the town’s long-term existence. As I show below, these locally rooted emotions remain distant from the political and moral economy that is addressed by patrimonialization processes (Palumbo 2009).

SYMBOLIC ECONOMIES, MORAL ECONOMIES AND POLITICAL ECONOMIES

The political anxieties and factional passions of the people with whom I lived for almost three years could not be corralled into a shared ‘cultural heritage’, neither within the taxonomic and institutional procedures of the UNESCO system nor within the practices of the concrete actors involved in (at least) one local scene. The task, then, is to understand the reasons behind such difficulty and, complementarily, why heritage policies did instead prove effective in other similar nearby contexts.

A few studies by economists and cultural geographers dedicated to the case of south-eastern Sicily (Valentino 2003; Le Blanc 2006, 2010; Cuccia 2012) have sought to pinpoint lines of structural differentiation in this area that might explain why individual municipalities reacted differently to the patrimonialization process. Pietro Valentino is an economist and planning expert who authored the economic section of the Management Plan for the eight south-eastern Sicilian municipalities included in the 2002 WHL. In drafting this Plan, he wrote:¹³

The critical step for entering into a dynamic of economic growth that is stable over time and sustainable is to set up a network of activities that is extremely integrated and highly specialized, that is, through a development strategy that must necessarily involve the fusion of endogenous resources, in other words, of the resources that we might define as the ‘raw materials present in the local area’. . . . In this vein, it is necessary to plan and then manage integration processes both at the level of interventions and on the local level; it is necessary, in other words, to ensure that *a real ‘local product’ is created and offered, [a product] which, although complex and multipolar, can be perceived from the outside as having its own singular character.* (Valentino 2003: 241, italics added)

Constructing a ‘local product’ endowed with its singularity is the primary objective when planning the economic development of an area subjected to patrimonialization processes. In addition, the cultural dimension (material and immaterial, as specified both in the lexicon of district-level economics scholars and, significantly, in UNESCO language) occupies a central place among ‘the raw materials present in the local area’ to be transformed into a product. The precise meaning of ‘culture’ in this literature is not easy to understand, however, at least from an anthropological point of view.¹⁴ Generally, in this sector the cultural dimension (when not equated with art, monuments and knowledge, or reduced to a series of assets and potentially productive sectors), the social dimension (often identified with ‘social capital’ and ‘symbolic capital’) and the notion of the ‘symbolic’ itself, evoked but never defined, remain difficult to manage by forms of institutional

knowledge, with their disinclination for (self-)critique. The impression is that ‘community’, ‘local community’, ‘culture’ and ‘symbolic value’ play a ‘magical’ role in these areas, appearing as undefined concepts with essentialist connotations and thus being well-suited to supporting arguments that, at times, take on a tautological character. This is the case of the notion of ‘identity’ as used in the aforementioned ‘Val di Noto’ Management Plan:

The creation of a ‘system of Baroque’ in the area can trigger cumulative processes by attracting new tourist demand and, at the same time, creating ‘economies of agglomeration’ stimulated by the externalities resulting from the emergence of more highly ‘ranked’ services and the dissemination of new experiences and knowledge in the area. This system would be distinguished *by the Baroque brand, which can also benefit from UNESCO recognition*. Integration should take place both economically and socially by *strengthening local communities’ identity and sense of belonging*. *The growth of identity, if it succeeds in transforming Baroque heritage into an effective collective good*, could also have significant economic repercussions because, on the one hand, it would make the population co-responsible and co-participatory in the activities of preserving and valourising the assets and, on the other hand, it could stimulate entrepreneurial dynamism and transform it, if supported by cohesive activity on the part of local authorities and a functional system of governance, into a bottom-up planning process, a decisive factor for the success of the operation. (Valentino 2003: 243–44, italics added)

The ‘structural’ factors identified by economists and geographers (distance from the sea; challenging accessibility caused by precarious road and rail connections; the weakness of the economic sphere, increasingly tied exclusively to hillside agriculture) have certainly exerted a certain weight in making it difficult for the local context to take economic advantage of the potential represented by the patrimonialization process. To understand the lack of interest locals have shown in a heritage economy, however, it is also useful to identify other interpretive approaches that would be more accurate than the vague notions of culture, society, symbol and identity employed in economist analyses in capturing the various symbolic, moral and political economies at work in the patrimonialization process. Despite its structural limitations and economic and demographic decline, it cannot be said, for example, that Militello (i.e. its ruling class and a significant portion of its inhabitants) has lost that sense of ‘identity and belonging’ that, according to these economists of patrimonial culture, should play a decisive role in ‘transforming Baroque heritage into an effective collective good’. Quite simply, the identity and sense of community operating in this ‘hyper-place’ have a hard time relating to the label constructed during the patrimonialization process and to the imagined ‘identity’ of the heritage scenario. What is it, then, in the ways of being of people in a hyper-place such as Militello, that generates these frictions? And, complementarily, what is it in the heritage label that prevents it from suiting a local scene of this kind?

Answering such questions requires us to delve into the taxonomic and symbolic systems of the *machinerie patrimoniale*, to understand its logic and investigate its effects. After all, precisely because of their theoretical ‘naiveté’ in analysing symbolic and cultural dimensions, economics-complicit studies using the logics of patrimonialization end up making explicit some of the symbolic and ideological features specific to their operations. Founded on the logic of ‘cultural objectification’ and centred around the idea of possession (Handler 1988), heritage agencies and processes transform ‘cultural things’ into a particular kind of commodity. Nation-states retain the ultimate rights and duties of ownership preservation and management about these commodities, while UNESCO’s humankind holds ethical and formal ownership.¹⁵ In analysing the Sicilian case, it immediately seemed clear to me (Palumbo 1998, 2003) that the UNESCO patrimonialization process was based on producing intrinsically stereotypical and schematic labels and attributing them to listed place-sites. These labels work to grant each node of the world included in the various lists a differential heritage value, an intrinsic quality or identity that is proclaimed to be universal. Being included in the various WHLs involves being assigned or acquiring a ‘quality label’ that, by distinguishing this ‘good’ from any other, certifies its value as a precious commodity within a market that basically sells essentialized and stereotypical heritage identities for a global imaginary and tourist market. This cultural commodification process (Palumbo 2006a, b), that is, the construction of essentialized cultural specificities in terms of heritage commodities, is neither neutral nor sterile. As we have seen, it can generate emotional, social, cultural and political effects, or even forms of accommodation, if not outright resistance. To begin, it has effects on the bureaucratic and institutional level: the documents produced at various institutional levels during the processes, together with the literature – some of which is academic but nonetheless uncritical and engaged – have the effect of conferring reality on social entities and communities that simply did not exist before. ‘Things’ such as the ‘Val di Noto’, the ‘cultural district of the south-east’ or ‘the territories of the Sicilian Baroque’ are constructed as sociocultural realities by the objectification procedures of transnational agencies (UNESCO), national ones such as MIBAC, regional ones such as the Sicilian Region, superintendencies and numerous provincial and municipal administrations involved in the patrimonialization process I analysed. Thanks in part to the ‘organic’ activity of consortiums, ministerial officials, experts, planners, economists and urban planners, they become administrative realities. The commodification of culture can thus be said to generate new and distinctive institutional realities; activated and operationalized, these realities can in turn produce governmental effects (Palumbo 2010; Collins 2015; Hafstein 2018). In the ‘Val di Noto’, in the span of only a few years, under precise political and economic

conditions and thanks to the efforts of agencies at different levels (political groups, the press, the media, local and national intellectuals, universities with their scholars disciplined in heritage logics, cultural associations and, increasingly, tourism operators, NGOs and foundations), some sectors of local populations have come to treat these bureaucratic and institutional constructions as part of their identities. The imaginaries, moral economies and configurations of the self in which this takes place are themselves linked to global processes of commodifying culture. Such imaginaries include ‘Montalbano’s Sicily’, televised and mediatized;¹⁶ centuries-old olive trees, loved and cherished by managers for northern industrial firms who have moved to live in the countryside of Modica, and sold off by local farmers following the logic of gentrification; the original grain crops of Terra Madre, farmed biodynamically by Roman neo-ruralists; old abandoned farmhouses in the Ragusa area, renovated in sturdy stone with capital from outside the area and transformed into luxury resorts, showcasing the bright and sunny style imagined to be typical of those worlds, sometimes clashing with the opaque origins of the capital being invested; B&Bs appointed with art nouveau furniture, serving orange juice (often industrial) and ricotta *ravioloni*. However, they also include patron saint festivals that aestheticize themselves and put on a show for the outside eyes of television channels, photographers and tourists, or struggling confraternities that aspire to enter one of the books of the Regional Department of Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity’s Registry of Intangible Heritage (Registro delle Eredità Immateriali or REIS), managed by academic document-drafters.

Keeping in mind the ‘cultural commodity’ nature of heritage objectification, we might formulate in new terms the questions aimed at understanding why towns in the ‘Sicilian south-east’ have reacted differently to the patrimonialization process. Indeed, we have seen that the element that proved difficult to fit into the UNESCO bureaucratic apparatus was the intimately conflictual character of the local public scene. In Militello, people’s community loyalties continued to belong to the factional and jurisdictional subdivisions that have connoted the village’s existence for the previous five centuries, rather than the abstract, tamed label of ‘World heritage’. Compared to other, earlier and more deeply rooted objectifications of ‘intimate’ dimensions (‘the war of saints’, ‘u jocu’ or ‘parochialism’), heritage objectifications remained too formal and external. They could be played out in some institutional contexts as part of a long-standing dialectic between institutional polycentrism and a situational polymorphism of membership, but above all they proved unable to refer, even allusively, to the deeply contentious character of local social life. Even when political and economic tensions erupted beneath the heritage rhetoric in the broader area covered by UNESCO activity, these tensions remained unspeakable in the sphere

of patrimonialization (Palumbo 2006a). At first, I was inclined to assume that this cloaking of social and political conflicts at the grassroots level was a direct consequence of the way UNESCO's diplomatic imagery is institutionally articulated. Such an interpretation remains valid to some extent, but with the passage of time it became apparent to me that the reasons driving people to cover up conflict were more complex and overarching. In my view, the tendency of official heritage rhetoric to conceal politics, with its interests, tensions and stickiness, and render it unspeakable, as well as the move to suppress social life with its interconnections and passions, along with the removal of the concrete practices of real social actors, seemed to be indices of a more general tendency, specific to neoliberal political and economic systems, to decouple the sphere of production from that of consumption (Wolf 1982; Harvey 2007). The dematerialization of the economy, which can take place through the increasingly pronounced removal of the materiality of social ties, relations of domination and forms of exploitation, corresponds to a dematerialization and mediatization of social and cultural life. Seen in this light, the UNESCO WHLs system appears to be a transnational taxonomic system that – like other systems for classifying the global imaginary (Palumbo 2010) – produces formal labels (endowed with an iconic character) for an ecumenical marketplace of imagined immaterial and symbolic goods. The UNESCO taxonomic, bureaucratic and institutional system does not merely produce objectified and essentialized 'cultural things'. It also transforms these 'cultural goods' into labels of collective identities, themselves imagined as essential, abstract, rarefied and immaterial. Like 'localities' in Appadurai's (1996) analysis and in line with a tendency typical of neoliberal systems, these labelled identities are presented as exclusively cultural phenomena, separated from the political and social contexts within which they were produced. In a scenario of this kind, 'authenticity', 'typicality', 'antiquity', 'diversity' and 'identity' become symbolic resources for which and through which various institutionalized powers compete in the attempt to secure a (better) position in what Herzfeld (2004: 4) has called a 'global hierarchy of value'. The UNESCO system not only conceals fractional conflicts (such as those in Militello), violent forms of action (e.g. ritual processions involving violence on human bodies or figures of organized crime) and 'deviant' subjectivities (such as, for example, those described by Collins in his 2015 ethnography of a neighbourhood in San Salvador de Bahia) because they deviate from an ideal and ideological vision of public and 'democratic' space/time. It also produces new sociopolitical conflicts linked to its own institutional activity. At the same time, however, it removes these conflicts from the space of representation because the mechanism behind this system – and perhaps its main purpose – is to construct official, rarefied symbols (separate from the logic and concrete interests of the sphere

of political and cultural production) that can function as identitarian brands in a global marketplace of the imaginary. These are symbols that are capable, for that matter, of acting as instruments of a new neoliberal-style global governance (Palumbo 2010; Collins 2015; Hafstein 2018).

RAREFACTION

The institutional effectiveness of such processes relies on classification operations that require identitarian labels imbued with specific semiotic connotations. ‘Communities’, that is, social groups, are indeed always imagined as part of universes of meaning and through the workings of institutionalization processes. Groups of relatives (e.g. a *razza* of the Samnite mountains; Palumbo 1995) are imagined based on their sharing an onomastic trunk (proper names and a group moniker), a common land (the area where they live) and shared ‘biological’ matter (blood); a nationstate, on the other hand, employs other symbols that are more ‘stretched’ (Herzfeld 1992) but are directly founded on symbols of a more ‘elementary’ level (e.g. ‘brothers of Italy’, ‘sons of the motherland’, ‘shed blood for the motherland’). In heritage-oriented identitarian scenarios, ‘places’ and neo-communities are labelled using even more rarefied symbols: for example, the ‘troglodyticity’ of Matera (listed in the UNESCO cultural heritage WHL based in part on this criterion). This aspect is even more evident in the case of so-called ‘intangible cultural goods’, which, according to Conventions (both UNESCO and European), are supposed to be identified following a request by local communities or groups of individuals. The idea is that, by practising certain rituals or sharing specific techniques and knowledge, such communities apply to institutions for recognition, to be granted a heritage label attesting to their objectified cultural value. ‘Truffle hunting and extraction’ (the label under which the newly established UNESCO ‘community of truffle hunters’ are framed as self-identifying) or ‘the art of the Neapolitan *pizzaiuolo*’ (a quasi-DOC label that I imagine identifies a community of skilled artisanal pizza makers) are taxonomic categories expressing belonging and constructing identities that are less and less substantial, more and more rarefied. In short, they are less or not at all rooted in the spaces of intimate and substantive sociality or production and reproduction: they are symbols of symbols of symbols, objectifications of already objectified ‘cultural things’. In these cases, lacking ‘common symbolic roots’ (Herzfeld 1992), it is difficult to engage in that game of reciprocally manipulating the meanings attributed to symbols and stereotypes; the game that, involving both the top and bottom of the system, enables the state machinery to function on a daily basis. Being less ‘rooted’ in the everyday experiences of concrete social actors belonging

to local scenes, commodified and patrimonialized identities seem to be less capable of kindling affections, emotions or elemental feelings of belonging than identities (based on blood, kinship, family, dead and ancestors) of the domestic sphere. They also lend themselves less to the game of display and concealment, stereotyping and manipulation that characterizes relations between levels of collective belonging within a nationstate (Herzfeld 1997; Shryock 2004).

Schematization, abstraction and rarefaction of the labels marking specific social groups, thus giving them institutional life and form; the suppression of conflict, multiplicity of positionings and chronological fractures; disregard for, if not outright concealment of, the very logics driving label-production and neo-communities: if we concede that these are constitutive traits of patrimonialization processes, it is perhaps easier to understand some of the reasons that they are so contagious in the political-economic dynamics of our late-liberal contemporary age. The fact that heritage labels are so rigid and schematic, and at the same time sustained by an institutional drive giving them social life through a pedagogy of consumption and mediatized imagery, makes them very similar to a quality brand or advertising device. In this sense, the relationship between the brand and the social entity it stands for has a character that is both creative and iconic. It is creative because it produces new social 'realities', easily definable and immediately spendable in a mediatized market of cultural differences; it is iconic because forms of cultural difference (i.e. groups, individuals and 'communities') have a 'moral' (institutional and commercial) obligation to conform to the heritage label or brand: a 'community of Neapolitan *pizzaiuoli*' who produce pizza with starch-derived banana flour (a choice that is not altogether improbable if the *pizzaiolo* is a creative Ghanaian who has long lived in the neighbourhoods of Naples), or of heritage festive-machinery porters who choose to use a motorized wagon to pull their statues (a choice and change that is quite frequent in non-patrimonialized festive scenarios in Italy), would no longer properly represent the 'communities of practice' institutionalized through any of the various conventions or included in some List or Registry.

The point of view argued here is quite evidently opposed to the one advocated by heritage specialists through institutional, scientific, media and 'popular' rhetoric. Institutional experts, the many social scientists driven by participatory enthusiasm and an imaginary of care, together with sociologically specific portions of social groups, instead operate on the premise that it is the 'communities' in question (and therefore they themselves) who actively seek to be granted a heritage label. It seems obvious to me, however, that without a prearranged institutional mechanism and pre-existing configuration of the taxonomic and symbolic heritage scenario, such requests not only could not be evaluated – they could not even be put forward. There

is undoubtedly an ever-increasing demand for (being labelled as) ‘heritage’, but at the same time, the institutions in charge also display an ever-increasing tendency to further the superfetation of cultural differences and volatilization of social relations. World Bank documents and guidelines have been proclaiming for over thirty years that ‘culture matters’. To matter, moreover, ‘culture’ must be attributed value, produced and reproduced, objectified and rendered iconic in the form of differential identifying brands. The commodity character of cultural heritage is produced and played out precisely in the relationship between the demand for the patrimonialization of culture and the supply of disarticulated, fragmented and depoliticized culture, culture that is rendered ephemeral and, finally, packaged in the form of ready-to-wear symbolic brands.

IN THE END, A VILLAGE

With these final observations, we can now return to the site of my Sicilian research and its readiness to embrace the idea of (re)imagining itself as a village (*borgo*, in Italian). In my ethnographic writing, I have tried to understand the jurisdictional, economic and political stratification of this ‘village’, to explore its historical complexity and the specific poetics of self and action that have connoted its existence over the past five centuries. Having observed the process through which this ‘hyper-place’ was inserted into the UNESCO patrimonialization process, I wondered how forms of complexity, social practices and political and devotional logics could possibly relate to the moral economies typical of our late capitalist present that provide the framework for the logics driving supranational agencies. For years I have observed widespread disinterest, if not outright distrust, on the part of administrators and citizens about UNESCO recognition. Other towns in the area that are also included in WHLs perceived the quality label awarded by UNESCO as having economic and cultural value. My ‘hyper-place’ did display pride in its valuable sites (albeit always within a deep-rooted sectarian logic) and the weight of *its* history, but it did not seem capable of recognizing its commodity and heritage potential. For more than two decades, its ruling groups and ordinary people seemed to me mainly interested in continuing that game of concealment and unveiling, of ambiguous positioning and communicative defiance, that had for centuries shaped the building of relationships between their world and the diverse, multiple external settings in which they knew themselves to be encapsulated. UNESCO labelling was too simplistic, rigid and distant to serve as an effective and meaningful terrain of moral and performative attachment: it was viewed as a label tinged with an insufficiently comprehensible veneer of intellectuality.

Over the past few years, the situation seems to have changed. The area has suffered a sharp demographic crisis linked to significant economic decline, the historical town centre has become depopulated, a form of pastoralism that is invasive, and in some senses risky, has spread throughout the countryside and few tourists visit the area (compared to the well-documented exponential increase of tourism in other ‘Baroque’ centres). These shifts seem to have reduced the margins for game-playing and autonomy available to local actors. It seems to have been sufficient, therefore, just to apply the brand of ‘borgo’ (‘village’) to insert this ‘hyper-place’ into the mediatic and touristic scene of heritage goods, as if this label were capable of purging from UNESCO recognition that rhetorical veneer of prestigious officialdom that cloaked its intimate nature as a quality brand to be showcased in the market of cultural identities. The ‘village’ is a transparent commodity, to be packaged in a certain way and sold in that market. You would never imagine yourself as ‘the most beautiful village in Sicily’ (or as ‘the Village of Villages’) outside of a mediatized competition that offers itself up in a transparent and fixed way to an outside audience. No stratification, no friction or conflict, no historical fracture and no duplicity: the village, like heritage ‘communities’ but in a more explicit form, is an imaginary ‘community’ pacified and available for use.

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NOTES

1. By the website All Food Sicily (2022).
2. I used the notion ‘iperluogo’ in 2003 (41–50) and 2006. A few years later, Berliner and Istasse (2013) took up the notion again, but they did not seem to recall the way I had used it.
3. Cirese (1977); Clemente (1996); Lattanzi (1993); and Padiglione (1994).
4. Since then, the Italian landscape of critical studies on patrimonialization processes has expanded: see Pizza (2004) and the article included in this volume, Siniscalchi (2010), Bindi (2013) and Macchiarella (2011).

5. See Babelon and Chastel (1980), Chastel (1986), Jeudy (1990, 1995), Fabre (1994, 1997), Poulot (1997) and Audrerie, Soucher and Vilar (1998).
6. Studies employing a critical perspective also appeared later in the Francophone context: see Jeudy (2001), Tornatore (2004, 2011), Fabre (2009, 2013), Barbe (2013), Berliner and Bortolotto (2013) and Bromberger (2014).
7. Since 1600, the village's life has been shaped by an opposition between two 'parties' (*partiti*) identified with the parishes of S. Nicolò–SS. Salvatore and S. Maria della Stella: see Palumbo (1997, 2000, 2001a, 2001b and 2004).
8. Regarding studies conducted up to the middle of the last decade, see Geismar (2015); for the years immediately following, see Hafstein (2018). In general, some key sources are Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006), Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), Daugbjerg and Fibiger (2011), Collins (2015), Meskell (2015) and Herzfeld (2021).
9. See Hafstein (2018). Early literature emphasizing the importance of conflict includes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) and Noyes (2006).
10. For example, Breglia (2006), Di Giovine (2009), Brumann (2009), De Cesari (2010) and Bendix, Eggert and Peselman (2012).
11. The first – stemming from the administrative tripartition carried out in the Arab era – circulated in art-historical literature. The second, coined in Syracuse political and intellectual circles between 2001 and 2003 and linked to the idea of establishing a 'cultural district', gradually became established over the following years.
12. See Palumbo (2006a, 2011 and 2013a).
13. The Management Plan is a political and economic planning document that UNESCO required applicants to prepare at the moment of beginning the application procedure for listing the late Sicilian Baroque cities.
14. Cf. Santagata (2002), Santagata, Segre and Trimachi (2007) and Sacco, Tavano Blessi and Nuccio (2008).
15. This holds true even in the case of intangible 'cultural things', which, according to the 2003 UNESCO Convention, require recognition and self-attribution of significance by 'communities, groups and even individuals' in order to be entered into the list. In fact, nation states retain legal ownership over the recognized 'good' and bureaucratic responsibility for basic classification procedures.
16. The highly successful TV series *Il Commissario Montalbano*, based on Andrea Camilleri's novels and filmed in locations in south-eastern Sicily (Scicli, Modica), has sparked significant tourist flows to the area.

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