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Title:

Heritage as a biopolitical project? The production of 'civic consciousness' versus everyday life in the historic centre of Naples, Italy.

Abstract:

This paper intends to theorize heritage in terms of biopower; in other words how it constitutes a particular governmental strategy that seeks (but ultimately fails) to nurture among the local population a set of values about the past so as to also define and regulate appropriate public behaviour in the present. Naples provides a conducive setting for critically thinking about the interconnections between heritage and power and encourages us to move beyond self-evident truths about heritage as differentiated and contested.

Over the last two decades the harnessing of the architectural patrimony of Naples's historic centre has been pivotal to urban regeneration, as the ruling centre-left administration has sought, inter alia, to reimage the city as an international cultural capital. Heritage has also been accorded the fundamental role of moulding a socially cohesive, 'good' city in contrast to enduring images of urban neglect, which has coincided with attempts to determine and build consensus around the significance of the historic built environment. However, besides being one of Europe's largest historic centres, this part of Naples continues to be characterized by its predominantly lower-class residential population. Traditionally, the 'old' Communist Left had a complicated relationship with these residents; often viewing their collective values and practices as an obstacle to the construction of working-class hegemony. Since the early 1990s, this relationship has been reframed by the post-Communist Left's central political discourse of citizenship. Where they once lacked class consciousness, many local residents were now deemed to suffer from a 'civic deficit', particularly in relation to their understandings and uses of heritage (exemplified by motorized incursions into pedestrianized piazzas or the appropriation of restored monuments as goal posts by young footballers). Indeed, the centrality of heritage in local politics has rekindled age-old debates about entrenched divisions between an 'enlightened' civil society and a 'lumpen' mass that has yet to be inculcated with a culture of 'civicness'.

Drawing upon my ethnographic research in the historic centre of Naples as well as theoretical applications of Foucault's notion of biopower and critical anthropological studies of 'monumentality' (for instance in the recent work by Michael Herzfeld), this paper will highlight the calculative and disciplinary logic that underpins the stewarding of urban heritage and, in doing so, interrogate the common, corresponding claim that it constitutes a benign and politically progressive process.