

When the Barbarians Invade the Periphery

The Commercialization and Destruction of the Catalanian Pyrenees

Miguel Amorós

February 24, 2018

In a globalized world, and therefore in an urbanized society, where a good part of the population has enough buying power, its own private automobile and sufficient “free” time, businesses serving the needs of recreation and escape are becoming the fastest-growing economic sector. Leisure occupies an increasingly more important place in the alienated life of the people of the major urban concentrations [*conurbaciones*]. In the periphery, with the collapse of industrial production due to declining competitiveness and a lack of technological innovation, the economy took refuge in other activities that involve less “value added”, such as, for example, logistics, construction and, above all else, mass tourism. This was what happened in the Spanish state, and, as a corollary, in Catalonia as well. With the onset of the crisis of 2008–2014, at least in the Catalanian region, industrial tourism became the main driver of the economy, which inevitably entailed a considerable environmental impact and a profound alteration of the territory on a qualitatively greater scale than all previous changes taken together, leaving an unprecedented ecological footprint. Tourism “is a source of wealth” and “a driver of growth”, according one of the Generalitat’s technocrats, but it is also an industry that gives rise to immediate disruptions; it is a factor of disequilibrium and trivialization of the first magnitude, as well as a source of low-wage jobs and a powerful factor for the promotion of industrial food. Foreign investment, the construction of new urban concentrations, with their infrastructure and buildings, the super-exploitation of the cultural, historical and natural patrimony, the waste of energy, the pollution and the accumulation of waste on a vast scale, etc., are the heralds of a new territorial reality. These signs of barbarism reveal the true meaning of what government leaders, technical specialists and expert advisors call “injecting value” into the territory, “optimizing” its resources, “making it profitable”, and, to top it all off, “offering incentives for the development of entrepreneurial skills” and “cultivating leadership”. This lexicon, borrowed from the marketing industry, clearly indicates that what they have in mind is the conversion of the territory into a commodity. As a result, the local patrimony, customs, history and the natural landscape itself constitute a new type of capital. When the valorization process, which is also a process of regulation, is fully deployed, all other kinds of activity that do not fit into the territorial side of the economic “supply” formulas, that is, activities that do not give rise to monetary profit, such as, for example, traditional agriculture and livestock-raising, disinterested cooperation, barter, hospitality, or free recreational activities, are living on borrowed time. We will pay for everything, for gathering mushrooms, for camping,

for sitting quietly and meditating by a waterfall; the enormous demand for recreation will soon render payment compulsory for every activity in the territory. The total conversion of the territory into a diligently managed business, or to express this same idea in technical jargon, its transformation into a “brand”, leaves its inhabitants outside the decision making process, expropriated, since the only needs that matter are those demanded by the accumulation of capital and the dynamics of power, not those of the residents of the territory. Life in the mountain counties will then be totally redefined by the political, administrative and financial hierarchies that will control, at each and every step, the use of the territory, a use that will be determined by a continuous series of development plans, each worse than the previous one.

This trend has a long history. What we are witnessing today is nothing but the integration of a regional market into a global market. The process of the commercialization of the Pyrenees Mountains began during the 1960s with the construction of the first ski resorts (the first one was built at Baqueira-Beret), but it did not really take off until the 1980s with the generalization of the ownership of second homes, and exploded a decade later with the avalanche of skiers, the growing popularity of adventure sports, and the now-common practice of spending one’s vacations and weekends in the country. The first phase did not have much of an impact, since not everyone owned a car back then and the cars that were owned by ordinary people weren’t very reliable for long trips, and television, which had by that time made its appearance in proletarian homes, kept people glued to their couches. The second phase was worse, since the generalization of private automobile ownership multiplied the mobility of the city-dwellers. Leisure was “democratized”. The third phase, corresponding with the creation of the Pyrenees “brand”, required State intervention to build highways and other basic infrastructure. The Barcelona-Manresa highway was finished in 1994 and the Manresa-Berga highway was completed in 1999, opening the floodgates like never before to the urban hordes. The ongoing decline of livestock-raising and agriculture, the final crisis of the textile industry, and the closure of the mines opened the door wide to the intensive exploitation of snow, rivers, meadows, forests, mountain peaks, houses in the country and backwoods trails. The fourth phase, that of the internationalization of the brand, began in 2004 with the creation of the Euroregion known as Pyrenees-Mediterranean, accompanied by a multinational program of violent and extremely disruptive development of the territory, based on an increase in the number of recreational facilities, the systematic expansion of transportation networks and a deliberate project of social disintegration. Thanks to the interested contribution of foreign capital, the mountainous territory will be completely “redesigned” to accommodate the arrival of a wave of tourists from other countries. Tickets for air travel, an excursion to the casino, and a day at the beach will be included in the price of the package deal. The goal can be none other than the complete transformation of the Pyrenees counties into a vast theme park, an alpine Disneyland.

First, the industrialization of the Catalonian economy, followed by tertiarization, created a monster, the Barcelona metropolitan area, which constituted an urban system in conjunction with other, lesser metropolitan areas connected by roads, highways and beltways. And this monster harbored a large middle class whose desires to consume territory had to be taken into account. Life in the metropolis had become so impoverished, and so claustrophobic, that a widespread longing to disconnect from it for even a short time, to escape to nature just as the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats did in the past, was irrepressible. For this class, and for the proletariat that imitated it as much as it could, leisure was not relaxation and inactivity, but a reason to set oneself in motion and to do whatever was fashionable. Thus, the neurosis caused by the deterioration of

urban life lies at the origin of the commercialization of leisure, which turned it into just another kind of work. “Free” time, thanks to the stress and emptiness of private life in the urban areas, became the raw material for an industry that would inflict a demographic upheaval on the Pyrenees counties, disarticulate the territory, orient the life of the people towards consumerism, pander to the vulgar tastes of the visitors and ruin the beauty of the landscape. The mountain sunburn would become a mark of distinction among the people of Barcelona and other metropolitan areas, a trophy, the trademark of the Pyrenees brand. It was among those who thus sought refuge from the metropolis that the capitalist regime found its most fervently loyal social base, ready to vote as directed for any pro-tourism candidate; and all the candidates were pro-tourism. In the meantime, the major beneficiaries of the invasion of motorized weekend warriors fleeing boredom and ennui were gloating over their success at FITUR¹ and over the recognition of the Pyrenees zone as a first class tourist destination by the European Union. The Pyrenees were submerged in the European market and Barcelona shared with other major metropolitan areas on the other side of the border the role of colonizer. It was the latest form assumed by the idea of progress: the noxious and malignant rule over nature and society by science, technology, the economy and the State.

Tourism isn't cheap; it must be connected with the transmitting centers. It therefore requires huge expenditures on highways, petrol stations, access roads, power lines, pipelines, garbage dumps, tunnels, bridges, etc. Thousands of vehicles traverse the zone each day causing traffic jams during the weekends and holidays, so that there is an urgent need for new traffic lanes, bypasses, interchanges and various other improvements. Considerable expenditures on the provision of accessory services, supplies and non-residential structures are also urgently needed, such as, for example, parking lots, chairlifts, water supplies for the snow-making machines, horse stables, garages and storage facilities for mountain bikes, all terrain vehicles, 4x4s, canoes, kayaks, white-water rafts, motorbikes, hang-gliders, and installations for ski lifts, etc. All mountain sports, from heli-biking to whitewater rafting, and from trekking to snowboarding, are just so many manifestations of the primordial capitalist mentality: the taste for competition, for overcoming obstacles, for demonstrating endurance, for the cult of hard work, for risk-taking, for exhibitionism.... The spirit of capitalism is reborn with the sportsman and even more so among the spectators.

Real estate deals are conducted with fewer hindrances in the counties of the interior than in the coastal regions and the metropolitan areas, since profit is the only factor that counts and the economic profits from tourism, compared with any of the activities that it is replacing, are vastly greater. Hotels, campgrounds, houses in the country, advertising for vacation getaways, discotheques, fast food restaurants, shopping centers and huge numbers of automobiles, reproduce the conditions of the urban habitat and impose the values of a life that is the prisoner of consumption. Real estate prices and rents skyrocket, the native folklore is degraded into a spectacle, local festivals take on a superficial and corny atmosphere; the past is turned into a museum exhibit and moral bonds between people are replaced by other, commercial, bonds. The tourist has no interest in knowing the places that he tramples, and much less their inhabitants, which is why he will conform to the stereotype of his kind. He is not too demanding when it comes to authenticity: a few elements of local color and a few local specialties are enough for him. The guardian angel of kitsch accompanies him and protects him from an excess of originality: vulgarity and bad taste are in the driver's seat. We could say that the metropolis provides a new material and spiritual

¹ International Tourism Trade Fair [translator's note].

form to the territory; it standardizes it, weakens it and corrupts it without the territory being able to defend itself, for a lack of forces and means. Tourism leaves the local capacity for social interaction in a much more fragile state than ever before. It means the end of the community spirit and the helping hand, and of the very idea of the “people”. When the car became a kind of prosthesis for the inhabitant of the big city, the territory was completely subjugated by the city and ended up reflecting it in all of its aspects. The territory is now a peri-urban space, a satellite of the Barcelona metropolitan area and its vicinity. The parasitic life now plays a decisive role in the territory and as a result new entrepreneurial and neo-rural classes are emerging within it, connected directly or indirectly with the one-way development now underway. To change things in the countryside, things will have to change in the city. To restore the old ways of life without shifting the burden of economic costs for such a change onto the periphery, it will be necessary to dismantle the center. No liberation of any kind will be possible unless we put an end to capitalism, but we cannot put an end to capitalism if we leave all its structures intact.

As the labyrinthine destructive forces of tourism gain more and more ground, diversify and become more mobile, and wild spaces are subjected to mass consumption and depersonalization, the landscape is eroded and nature retreats, the flora soon disappears and the fauna withdraw and migrate wherever they can. The contradictions of developmentalism are manifested in the form of out-of-control urbanization, environmental crisis, resource depletion and social malaise. Although the awareness of the eminently destructive nature of economic growth has yet to assume the form of open opposition, with the exception of minorities engaged in indefatigable battles in defense of the territory, the anxieties of those who are economically dependent on tourism concerning losses occasioned by the over-saturation of their districts by the tourism industry, have awakened a certain kind of sensibility in favor of conservation and environmental protection. The magical expression, “sustainable tourism”, issues from the mouths of the representatives of the so-called “stakeholders” [“actores sociales”]: employers associations, environmentalist groups, trade unions and political parties. While the market model is unquestioned, the proposal is made for “alternative local development”. The promoters of this kind of development want to associate consumption, devastation and growth with good times, economic recovery and equity, on the basis of “instruments for intervening in and transforming the economy”, that is, with laws, ordinances, taxes and fees, contracts and programs promoted or supported by the stakeholders. They do not want to de-commercialize the territory, but to implement a somewhat less aggressive form of exploitation, by resorting to the supplementary use of a marginal economic network that is supposed to palliate the effects of and serve as a counterweight to the endless pillage implied by totally unregulated development. Nothing is challenged; certainly not the capitalist system. They call for a sustainable use of the land without even considering de-urbanizing it; they talk about the right to choose and cultivate one’s own food without proposing measures against agribusiness and the food processing industry; they demand rational legislation without also demanding the repeal of existing laws that are so permissive with regard to dubious practices; they extol certain traditional customs without questioning the legitimacy of existing commercial law; in short, they want a less conventional, more ecological tourism, disregarding the fact that ecology and tourism are mutually exclusive. In any case, this soft and fluffy tourism will never affect more than a minuscule part of the existing market demand; it will never approach the popularity of mass tourism. The new middle classes of the counties of the Pyrenees are anxiously watching their territory being destroyed, since their interests will be harmed over the long run by this trend, but they do not want to confront those who are responsible. They are romantics and

materialists at the same time, bourgeois and popular. They are sitting on the fence. They want development and progress without the consequences these things necessarily entail. They want harmonious relations with the environment without removing it from the reach of the market economy or the control of the State: they want rain (or, more precisely, snow) *and* good times.

Neither the regeneration of the territory, nor the restoration of its authentic inhabitants, can be achieved with half-way measures, nor can they be legitimately brought about by government administrators, politicians or the economy itself. Co-management between government authorities, trade unions, associations of young people, and employers, is only a mechanism to harmonize the most catastrophic sort of development with the interests of the half-domesticated population, for the purpose of rendering conflicts unnecessary. The typical clichés of “sustainability”, “responsibility”, “participation”, “transverse democracy”, “quality”, “local”, etc., make this perfectly clear. Territorial democracy is something completely different and instead involves the capacity of neighborhoods or districts for autonomous self-organization and living in common without either leaders or commercial mediations. To revitalize the territory we have to de-parasitize it, which means that we have to remove it from the economy through a plan for decentralization, de-industrialization and de-urbanization that will involve, on the one hand, a confrontation with the ruling classes and their political servants, and on the other hand, extensive ruralization. The ruralists must stand on a solid commitment, for they need clear goals and strategies for achieving those goals. Occupations and mobilizations for the defense of the territory must allow for a correlation of forces favorable for the autonomy of the rural population, precisely in order to encourage a new and different kind of exodus from the conurbations, so that not only will people be available to repopulate places that have been or are currently being abandoned, but the conditions will be created in which a network of farmers and livestock raisers can be articulated that will be able to resist laws, regulations and administrative controls. Despite the fact that more than five hundred Catalan municipalities are in danger of extinction due to their locations outside the circuits of the tourism industry, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to engage in free resettlement of the affected towns and villages and to pursue independent agriculture. The State gets involved when private initiative has not already done the job: it forbids settlement, registers all the livestock, counts the trees and measures the acreage of the cropland, monitors the seeds, in short, it establishes the conditions for all authorized activity. It mandates the labeling of products, its files contain photographs of the land and buildings, it prohibits direct sale of products by farmers to consumers, establishes quotas and fixes prices, levies specific fees and collects taxes. Few are those who openly defy these laws and regulations, and their voices are not heard from so far away. Others prefer to be “pragmatic” and fall into line. Even so, the struggle continues. The defense of the territory has two sides, one destructive, and the other oriented towards reconstruction. It is a two-pronged struggle to liberate the territory from financial and administrative straightjackets, and to promote a free, deeply-rooted way of life in the country, in equilibrium with the environment and alien to the law. It is a constant battle to stop the big useless projects of the developers and government bodies, and to block the passage of the frenzied urban hordes; and it is at the same time a battle to create forms of self-government and collective labor, to restore open councils, neighborhood committees and the commons. It is therefore also a struggle to rediscover the city, to give it human dimensions, to manage its affairs from the agora. A free territory cannot exist if it surrounds an enslaved city, nor can an emancipated city exist within a servile territory.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Miguel Amorós
When the Barbarians Invade the Periphery
The Commercialization and Destruction of the Catalonian Pyrenees
February 24, 2018

Retrieved on 11th May 2021 from libcom.org

Notes for a presentation at the Berga *casal d'avis* [social center] scheduled for February 24, 2018, in commemoration of the seventh anniversary of the founding of the group, Piolet Negre, a hiking club in Berga, in northern Catalonia. Its webpage, still under construction as of February 2018, features a quotation from Élisée Reclus that evokes overcoming nature's obstacles: "Free nature with its beautiful landscapes, upon which we gaze, its laws, which we eagerly study from life, and its obstacles, too, which we must overcome, ought to be our real school" (Élisée Reclus, *The History of a Mountain*, tr. Bertha Ness and John Lillie, Sampson Lowe, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, London, 1881). See: pioletnegre.wordpress.com/ [translator's note]. Translated in February 2018 from a copy of the Spanish language text, entitled, "Cuando los bárbaros invadieron la periferia: Mercantilización y destrucción del Pirineo catalán", obtained from the author.

theanarchistlibrary.org