

Heritage Geographies: politics, uses and governance of the past

On 27th and 28th May, the University of Salento hosted, in telematic mode, the thematic conference "Heritage Geographies: politics, uses and governance of the past". The initiative was promoted by the International Geographical Union (promoting commissions: "Political Geography", "Cultural Approaches to Geography", "History of Geography", "Geography of Tourism, Leisure and Global Change", "Toponymy", "Geography of Governance") and chaired by Elenadell'Agnese, University of Milano-Bicocca and vice-president of the IGU, and Fabio Pollice, Rector of the University of Salento.

The conference was opened by the IGU president Michael Meadows, and introduced by a crucial keynote speech by Tovi Fenster (Tel Aviv University), entitled "Home, Heritage and Possession in Israel-Palestine".

After the plenary session, 141 geographers from all over the world discussed the theme of heritage, presenting their research and contributions in 14 thematic sessions: from the patrimonialisation of rural and coastal landscapes to the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism, from territorial narratives and identity dynamics to governance issues.

Finally, special attention was devoted to gender issues in Social Sciences, with the special thematic session promoted by WISER: Women in Social Sciences for Equity in Research.

In the closing plenary session, the presidents of the IGU commissions that promoted the conference summed up what had emerged during the conference, highlighting the salient points of the current geographical debate on the theme of heritage.

The discussion conducted in the plenary sessions, as well as in the parallel sessions highlighted some emerging theoretical-methodological trends and a wide range of cross-cutting issues that mostly concern:

- field research;
- the new possible contact points between tradition and innovation in research (with particular reference to the integrative tools for geographical investigation that are added to the more traditional ones, for the composition of a transdisciplinary methodology that can account for the typical scenarios of contemporary complexity and its dynamics);
- the use of geo-technologies for the conduction of context analyses necessary for the study of governance processes and the design of development plans.

This boosted a shared reflection on the role of the geographer and geography in the observation and interpretation of heritage as a complex idea, both with regard to preservation and enhancement issues – as well as management - and the processes of attribution of symbolic meaning including the related issues of power.

The debate has underlined how the discipline's task can - and must - be the recognition of its very special role in such a structured analysis, ascribable to the spatial vocation of geographical knowledge, which is thus able to give to the phenomena - and their observation - a "where" (an a priori category, fundamental for the unfolding of phenomena), through which to obtain information on meanings and possible implications of reality.

In the common space of discussion, different intellectual and human experiences came together, a real mosaic of trajectories that crossed in a rich and stimulating reflection, which was able to dwell on the friction points of the discipline, that is, on the need to become aware of its interpretative role and thus carve out the right space in the framework of social knowledge, starting from the

recognition of the importance of creating networks of interlocution and dialogue with other disciplines, as in a process of identification on a residual basis.

In this epistemological reflection on the positioning of the discipline the various interventions, both in the plenary and the parallel sessions, took turns offering the listener a series of case studies useful for a sort of mapping of geographical reality, from different perspectives of analysis. With different topics, experiences, interests, study and research paths, the speakers have shared different visions and interpretations of the world, reviewing the discourses, practices, traditions and the structuring of new processes that reshape the profile of heritage reality, always giving it new features.

In this, the digital acceleration of recent years plays a role of extraordinary importance, due to new social behaviors determined by the pandemic from Covid-19, has recorded a further and unprecedented momentum, generating renewed assets geographically relevant because they affect the space, its representation and the limes (increasingly thin and problematic) between the physical space and the post-pandemic virtual space, which also redraws the new geo-graphies of public and private.