

EUROPEAN BRIEFING

Industrial Heritage Tourism and Regional Restructuring in the European Union

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the current trend among traditional industrial regions in Europe to launch initiatives in the field of 'industrial heritage tourism'. Increasingly, restoring and exploiting former industrial sites for touristic purposes is regarded as a useful strategy for regional renewal. After having discussed its background and categories, we argue that, theoretically, industrial heritage tourism could be an interesting 'new combination' for industrial areas in the European service economy. In practice, however, its effects for regional restructuring might be limited. Therefore, we suggest to re-use Europe's industrial heritage also for other economic activities than only tourism.*

1. Introduction

It is well known that since the 1960s most traditional industrial regions in Europe have entered a spiral of decline. Ironically, those very regions that were the forerunners of the Industrial Revolution had to give way to new growth poles in the European economy. In particular areas that were specialized in textiles, coal, steel and other heavy industries have suffered from structural problems. In several ways, however, public authorities have tried to rejuvenate what has been called Europe's 'rustbelt' (Cooke, 1995). At first, attempts were made to raise regional competitiveness by rationalizing the existing heavy industries. Later on, however, this defensive strategy largely has been replaced by an offensive approach. Often, the solution for structural problems of old industrial regions has been sought in localized policies and institutions aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and innovation. In some areas policy-makers also have done their best to attract multinational branch-plant investments to the regional economy. The Ruhr area, north-eastern England and Wales are prominent examples of regions where local governments have pursued such restructuring policies with varying degrees of success (Hassink, 1993; Cooke, 1995).

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At present, however, these policies are not the only strategies used to rejuvenate local economies. In a growing number of industrial areas in the European Union (EU) also the promotion of 'industrial heritage tourism' has gained popularity. Increasingly, this relatively new form of tourism is viewed as a helpful tool for regional restructuring (Harris, 1989; Mansfield, 1992; Goodall, 1994; Edwards & Llurdés, 1996). Industrial heritage tourism, sometimes also called 'industrial culture', refers to "the development of touristic activities and industries on man-made sites, buildings and landscapes that originated with industrial processes of earlier periods" (Edwards & Llurdés, 1996, p. 342). The idea is that industrial monuments may attract different types of tourists: older generations may search for nostalgia, whereas the younger ones may look for novelty. Industrial tourist activities are said to preserve a region's identity and to stimulate the formation of local service activities and employment. Gradually, in almost all declining industrial areas in Europe one can observe programmes to develop industrial heritage tourism. At the moment, such initiatives are undertaken notably in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, France, Spain and Italy. Also European policy-makers are increasingly interested in the development of industrial tourist activities. For example, the recently launched projects 'Wege in die Europäische Industriekultur' (WEIKU) and the 'European Route of Industrial Heritage' (ERIH) have been financed largely out of European funds (WEIKU, 1999; ERIH, 2000). The general expectation is that ultimately these "new forms of tourism developed around industrial monuments could play an important role in revitalising industrial regions, thus helping them to build a better economic future" (ERIH, 2000, p. 2).

This paper is concerned with the rise of industrial heritage tourism in the EU. Our aim is to reflect upon this recent phenomenon and to assess whether it can really contribute to the regeneration of Europe's rustbelt. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. To start, we describe the background of industrial touristic activities as well as their manifestations. Then, some theories are presented to place industrial heritage tourism in the broader picture of structural economic change in Europe. Next, we use this framework to argue that from a theoretical point of view this new form of tourism could be a device for rejuvenating old industrial regions. At the same time, however, one has to admit that in practice its effects for regional development might be rather disappointing. Finally, we conclude with some considerations that may be taken into account by those who are engaged in the restoration of industrial heritage in the EU.

2. The Rise of Industrial Heritage Tourism in Europe

The roots of industrial heritage tourism can be found in the UK, the 'birthplace of the Industrial Revolution' where the decline in manufacturing started earlier than in the rest of Europe. In this country the relicts of the period of industrialization were already explored after the World War II. Gradually, the interest in what was called 'industrial archaeology' spilt over to other stagnating industrial areas in Europe. In the 1980s the concept of industrial heritage tourism was occasionally propagated and applied as a strategy of regional restructuring, but still notably in the UK (Soyez, 1986; Harris, 1989). During the 1990s, however, its potential was highlighted widely. This was mainly due to experiences with industrial heritage tourism in the Ruhr area which culminated in the opening of a complete regional 'Route of Industrial Heritage' in 1999. On this scenic route tourists can visit 19 important settlements representing the region's industrial history in coal and steel. These 'anchor points' are connected and can be reached by different forms of public transport. Besides, visitors can explore 25 thematic routes in the region, such as a tour around the theme 'local railways'. This Ruhr Tour-programme was set up by the Emscher Park International Building Exhibition (IBA) (1989–1999) and is currently managed by the local government, the Ruhr District Association

of Communities (KVR). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this localized 'industrial culture policy' may have contributed to the success of local innovation policy towards structural change in the Ruhr area (Kilper & Wood, 1995; Knapp, 1998; Parent, 2000). Inspired by this alleged 'best practice', more and more regions in Europe have turned to industrial heritage tourism as an additional restructuring device. Initiatives in this field often emerge from private associations for industrial heritage whose plans are funded by regional, national and European authorities (Goodall, 1994). Recently, programmes have been launched in this way for example in Overijssel (the Netherlands), West Flanders (Belgium), Völklingen (Germany), Steyr (Austria), Telford (UK), Catalonia (Spain), Crotone (Italy) and Lorraine (France). Moreover, it is planned to add other European regions to the existing network of industrial landscapes. Ultimately, the result of these efforts should be a 'European Route of Industrial Heritage', starting in Ironbridge (UK) and ending in the Ruhr area (ERIH, 2000).

Obviously, all regions that apply some strategy of industrial heritage tourism have experienced a different path of historical development. As such, each of them disposes of a unique set of industrial monuments that can be used for recreational activities. Nevertheless, in the European context some general categories of industrial tourist attractions may be distinguished (Soyez, 1986; Edwards & Lluordés, 1996). The first group comprises industrial relicts in the field of production and processing. These attractions are rather popular among visitors and include numerous sites located underground (mines) or on the earth's surface (e.g. plants, blast-furnaces and shipping yards). Often these workplaces have been restored and transformed into museums demonstrating the history of industrial occupations. Some abandoned industrial sites provide tourists also with other amusement, such as films, concerts and catering. In other cases, however, industrial monuments are neglected consciously with the aim to show visitors the 'aesthetics of de-industrialization' (Edwards & Lluordés, 1996). Transport attractions make up the second group of industrial tourist attractions. They refer to industrial legacies in the field of rail, water and roads aiming to give the visitors a nostalgic or novel transport experience. The third category consists of socio-cultural attractions associated with a region's particular industrial past. Here, examples are former working-class houses and employers' estates. Some traditional industrial areas, such as Wales and the Ruhr area, offer all three groups of attractions, whereas other regions, such as those in France and Spain, exploit only a few of them.

3. Traditional Industrial Areas in the Global Service Economy

Given the increasing popularity of industrial heritage tourism programmes, the question remains how they may contribute to the regeneration of old industrial regions. In answering this question, it is natural to start with theoretical approaches that have been put forward to explain the decline of industrial areas. Traditionally, economic downturn of such regions has been linked to the occurrence of 'diseconomies of agglomeration' (Hayter, 1997; Boschma & Lambooy, 1999). In this view, factors like external shocks, congestion effects, inflexible factor markets and overspecialization induce a self-propelling process of industrial decline. In other words, these regions pass through Myrdal's process of cumulative causation in reverse (Hayter, 1997). Useful as this insight may seem, it offers little help in assessing the potential of industrial heritage tourism for regional restructuring. What we need instead is an approach that places the development of industrial areas within a more general framework of structural economic change. In this respect, we think that Fourastié's evolutionary three-sectors theory combined with product life cycle analysis might offer some relevant insights.

Outside the French speaking world the work of Jean Fourastié (1907–1990) is not well known. To some extent his theory may be related to economic base analysis as found in standard regional economics texts (see for example Vanhove, 1999). Economic base theory

divides the economy in basic (export) industries and non-basic (non-export or service) activities and asserts that there is a stable relationship between the development of both sectors. The idea is that an expansion in export industries leads to an increasing demand for services produced in the non-basic sector and thus to a multiple growth of total income and jobs. Like authors adhering to this theory Fourastié (1949) argues that the sectoral composition of the economy determines income and employment changes. Unlike economic base theory, however, his classification criterion is not the susceptibility of various sectors for export, but their capacity for technological change. According to Fourastié technological development is medium in the primary sector (agriculture), high in secondary industries (manufacturing) and low in tertiary activities (services). Although total production rises in due time, these inter-sectoral differences in technological progress change the composition of production: the supply of primary and secondary products grows much faster than that of services. Apart from this 'law of production', says Fourastié, simultaneously the 'law of consumption' takes effect. Despite the higher disposable incomes that result from economic growth, households cannot and do not infinitely consume primary and secondary goods. This tendency, also known as Engel's law, does not hold for services though. The richer consumers become, the more they prefer and demand services (e.g. touristic activities) compared to food and goods.

It is this lack of balance between consumption and production, Fourastié postulates, that sets in motion a slow process of structural change from an industrial society to a service economy. Empirically, this trend can be observed indeed in the EU over the last 50 years (De Bandt, 2000). However, this is not all Fourastié has to tell us. For he argues that the transition towards the service economy is associated with big adjustment problems, such as bankruptcies and rising unemployment in industrial areas. These difficulties result from the poor ability of industrial communities to react to the rising demand for services: firms and their workers are so accustomed to the industrial structure that they find it hard or are even unwilling to shift to new circumstances. Here, Fourastié meets modern authors that stress the importance of socio-cultural factors (e.g. institutional lock-in) to explain the decline of industrial areas (Grabher, 1993; Hudson, 1994; Boschma & Lambooy, 1999). Although it will be difficult, Fourastié stresses, industrial areas should do their best to take advantage of the service economy as much as possible, since only then they will be able to reduce the problems of the transition period.

Structural economic change, however, encompasses more than the emergence of a service economy. As economic base theory suggests, exports, or, more generally, trade may have an impact on regional development as well. In particular product and industry life cycle analysis points to such trade-related factors to explain locational dynamics (Vernon, 1966; Norton & Rees, 1979; Hayter, 1997). In the present context of 'globalization' the life cycle approach, dating back to Vernon's analysis of trading patterns of the US, provides a useful way of looking to structural change on the international level. In this view, products and industries evolve through various stages that also have a locational dimension: in each stage some regions in the world economy may be more suitable for production than other ones. The thesis of the life cycle model is that as soon as products become more standardized, the location conditions for production shift from highly skilled and high-wage regions to low-wage areas. In addition to the rising demand for services, we think, this phenomenon may explain the decline of older industrial regions in Europe. The industries upon which most of these areas depend (coal, steel and textiles) are typical examples of mature and mass produced activities that are confronted with strong competition from low labour-cost locations such as Eastern Europe and the newly industrialized countries (NICs). This trend of globalization, however, is a paradoxical process—and not just because economic activities still have to take place somewhere (Cooke, 1995; Morgan, 1997; Dicken, 1998). Globalization has weakened the sovereignty of nation states and has cleared the way for regional economies and identities.

As regions increasingly have been thrown upon their resources, local specificities (e.g. traditional economic strengths and socio-cultural characteristics) may make the difference in the globalized economy. For older industrial regions in decline this 'localization' may contribute to economic renewal, as it offers chances for local empowerment in 'mobilizing all a region's assets' (Cooke, 1995). Examples of such a localization that goes hand-in-hand with globalization can be found in several rustbelt regions like the Ruhr area, Wales and Sheffield.¹

4. Industrial Heritage Tourism as a New Combination?

Unsurprisingly, Fourastié's evolutionary three-sectors theory as well as product life cycle analysis have been criticized in the literature for their caricatural, deterministic and linear character (Aron, 1962; Storper, 1985). Nevertheless, both approaches enable us to place industrial heritage tourism in the context of structural change in the European economy. In the light of sectoral theory and life cycle thinking, restoration and exploitation of former industrial landscapes for tourism purposes is one of the ways in which industrial communities can go along with the rising demand among households for (leisure and recreation) services at the one hand and the force of globalization at the other hand. Moreover, the 'industrial atmosphere' and other institutions that are typical of such areas are not necessarily barriers anymore, but may be used instead as part of the industrial tourism product. By stressing the value of the local industrial past, the shift to tourism may also enhance the inhabitants' identity and encourage localization in an increasingly globalized world. Consequently, industrial heritage tourism may improve a region's image and function as a public relations tool to counteract public prejudices of industrial areas in decline (Harris, 1989; Mansfield, 1992; Goodall, 1994). In these ways, industrial tourist programmes might indeed contribute to regional economic restructuring. Thus, for Europe's rustbelt the turn to industrial heritage tourism could be an interesting 'new combination'—to paraphrase Schumpeter's term for innovation (Hospers, 2001). Theoretically, this strategy could resolve at least some of the problems that declining industrial areas encounter in the inevitable transition to a global service economy.

It is questionable, however, if the practical application of industrial tourist policy in Europe's old industrial regions fully corresponds with the theoretical case that can be made for it. More than that, in reality the contribution of industrial heritage tourism to regional renewal in the EU might be rather disappointing. In our view, there are several reasons that justify this pessimistic statement. To start, one can have doubts about the appeal of industrial heritage for the public. Industrial monuments are still not generally accepted as tourist destinations (Goodall, 1994; Edwards & Llurdés, 1996). In spite of huge marketing and promotion efforts pointing to the beauty of industrial culture, it will be hard to alter the idea most people have of tourism. In the words of Hudson (1994, p. 206): "There is no guarantee that a tourism based on nostalgia for a departed industrial past will prove more attractive to consumers than one based on sun, sea, and sand in southern Europe". This brings us to a more serious limitation of industrial touristic activities, namely their relatively low impact on regional employment. In general, the number of jobs these activities generate in local communities will be very limited. In any case, new employment in industrial heritage tourism can never fully compensate for the loss of jobs resulting from the closure of the former work places. For example, before its running down in 1990 515 people were working in the mine of Cardona (Spain), while as a tourist attraction in 1993 it employed only six people (Edwards & Llurdés, 1996). Moreover, the spin-off effects of industrial heritage tourism for the rest of the local economy will not be significant. Although tourists may spend some money in local services (e.g. restaurants and pubs), they normally will not stay overnight in hotels because industrial attractions are usually visited by day trippers (Mansfield, 1992). Finally, it is not only

the quantity of employment in industrial heritage tourism that should be taken into account, but also its quality. Obviously, working in heavy industry as a workman differs a lot from serving tourists and telling them about how it was in the ‘good old days’. In addition, such tourist jobs may be somewhat precarious in terms of job security (e.g. seasonal influences and part-time work) (Hudson, 1994). Thus, the shift of industrial landscapes from production centres to consumption places may involve quite a cultural change in local communities choosing for industrial heritage tourism.

5. Conclusion: Beyond the Strategy of Industrial Heritage Tourism

In an increasing number of Europe’s older industrial regions industrial heritage tourism has gained popularity as an additional policy tool to regenerate the local economy. The net result of these industrial touristic programmes, however, may fall short of the high expectations for them in the EU at the moment. To be sure, from a theoretical point of view, associations and policy-makers may be right about the potential of industrial heritage tourism for regional restructuring. But they are certainly too optimistic when stating that “new forms of tourism developed around industrial monuments could play an important role in revitalising industrial regions” (ERIH, 2000, p. 2). In our view, it is unlikely that in practice the effects of industrial heritage tourism will be large enough to rejuvenate an entire industrial region in decline.

This rather gloomy conclusion does not imply that Europe’s rustbelt regions should stop restoring their industrial legacy. After all, beyond a touristic function industrial monuments may have another part to play in the global service economy. In particular, we think that local industrial heritage could complement and reinforce other regeneration initiatives, such as local innovation policy and business support. In this respect, the striking words of Jane Jacobs—“New ideas must use old buildings” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 188)—may serve as a motto. At first glance, perhaps, it requires some imagination to conceive how run-down and abandoned industrial sites can be brought back to life. There is, however, ample room for policy learning in this field. In Europe and America several successful examples can be found that demonstrate the useful function former industrial buildings may have in developing new service activities (Cortie, 1997; Parent, 2000; Kirkwood, 2001). Aside from being inexpensive, these buildings often turn out to be popular places to work because of their large open spaces. New York’s SoHo and Vancouver’s Yaletown are well known examples of districts where warehouses and factories have been converted into offices, studios, workplaces for designers and trendy shops. In Dutch and German cities like Amsterdam, Hamburg and Essen older industrial complexes have been redeveloped as part of local enterprise and innovation policy in order to provide accommodation for entrepreneurs and researchers working in the field of new technologies (e.g. multimedia and software development). Other declining areas, such as Sheffield and Oberhausen (Ruhr area), have transformed parts of their former industrial zones into large shopping centres designed to attract shoppers from outside the region. The re-use of industrial heritage is not restricted to artistic, entrepreneurial, research and retail purposes though. Industrial monuments may be useful places for the establishment of call centres, conference rooms and providers of financial services as well (Richardson & Belt, 2001). If anything, these examples of new service activities in industrial areas show how Jacobs’ ideas can find practical application. Moreover, they suggest how the recycling of industrial heritage may fit in the framework of other localized regeneration policies. In our view, apart from being touristic attractions, old buildings might also act as breeding places for new ideas that possibly contribute to local economic development. In the end, such an extended re-use of Europe’s industrial relicts might be a more effective strategy for regional renewal than restoring these monuments just for touristic purposes.

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Note

1. The city of Sheffield is an example of an old industrial area in which localization has played a role in economic renewal. After many years of job losses in steel making, the deeply rooted local tradition in engineering has turned out to be a source for new economic activities. Recently, for instance, the Aerospace Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) has been set up in Sheffield. The AMRC is a partnership of local organizations (e.g. the university and development agencies) and Boeing, the world's largest aerospace company. The fact that for Boeing this centre is its first research facility outside the US shows that a local industrial base may experience a revival in the era of globalization (University of Sheffield, 2001).

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