Temporary poverty for the privileged class: Discourses on detachment and deprivation on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. A case study in Brazil.¹

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Abstract

The tourism linked to the pilgrimage through the trails to Santiago de Compostela has various interrelations with several social features. In a specific research done in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, I performed 34 in depth interviews with local pilgrims that had walked the trail to Santiago, trying to identify their motivations and their visions on the trail and the town of Compostela as the final destination of the trail. During those interviews a narrative arose strongly linking their class and level of economic income with their building of the spiritual and ethical meanings of the pilgrimage. Having in mind that Brazilian society holds strong levels of social inequality, and the fact that a one month length pilgrimage route in Europe is only affordable for the upper or upper-middle classes, the dominant discourse on “detachment”, deprivation, scarcity and a stark way of life as the declared primary learning of the pilgrimage puts questions on the entanglement of it with the spiritual and religious believes of the pilgrims as well as with the patterns of consumption before, during and after the trail. In addition, a close following of the preparation for the pilgrimage (readings, meetings, on-line forums) led us to the hypothesis that well before start to walk the trail, the pilgrims seek for the experience of poverty and deprivation, and the actual pilgrimage is, in a certain way, a confirmation of this expectation, that can be even seen as a strong motivation.

Our preliminary findings point to a relation between the spiritualist believes –typically mixed with Christian practices in Brazil in the upper-middle class since the 40's of the 20th century- and

¹ This paper is a part of the research project “Discourses, imaginaries and cultural behaviors about Santiago de Compostela as goal of the Ways of Saint James,” granted by the Spanish agency for science and research, the Ministry of Economy, reference code FFI2013–35521.
the building of a more positive discourse on the social and economic success, traditionally in conflict in a Catholic culture.

The research projects and the subjects of the research

The context for this research is formed by two different and interconnected research projects, one, developed in the University of Santiago de Compostela, looking for the impacts of tourism in the local community through the analysis of cultural products and the discourses of actual visitants to the city; the other, developed in the University Ritter dos Reis in Porto Alegre, studying the round-bound impacts of pilgrimage in pilgrims' home country.

This working paper shows a very early stage of the research. During 2014, from May to December, I conducted a series of 34 interviews with pilgrims from the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), mostly in its capital city Porto Alegre.

For selecting the respondents I first approach the “Association of Friends of the Trail to Santiago in Rio Grande do Sul” (Associação de Amigos do Caminho de Santiago do Rio Grande do Sul, ACASARGS, by its Portuguese acronym). I attended their monthly meetings and walkings, presenting myself as a researcher and contacting all the people that had been done the walking. I tooke note of their telephones and e-mails, and contacted them individually in the following days for making appointments for the interviews. Besides that, I interviewed people whom I was introduced to by other pilgrims, as well as others I contacted in a series of events the Spanish consulate in Porto Alegre organized through 2014.²

Because there is not an established universe of totality of the pilgrims from Rio Grande do Sul who walked the trail, I didn't set a number of interviews representative of it, but I interviewed as much people as I was able to, looking for their individual narratives rather than for a statistical representation of one major narrative. The response of the subjects was overwhelmingly positive towards my research, the vast majority of the people I contacted being willing to talk to me.

The case study: Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

For understanding the profile of the subjects it is necessary to understand the relative exceptionality of RS in the Brazilian context, which has cultural, economic and identity roots and

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² The Spanish embassies and consulates select every year a common topic for their cultural policy. In 2014 the topic was, coincidentally, the 800th anniversary of pilgrimage of Saint Francis of Assis to Santiago de Compostela, which grant me the opportunity to attend a participate in several of the events organized in Porto Alegre.
repercussions. RS has been, traditionally, one of the wealthiest states of the country, with a reputation of highly educated and politically involved population. Out of the 37 Brazilian presidents, 6 have been born in RS (losing only against the 9 from Minas Gerais) and even non-RS naturals, as the current president Dilma Rousseff (*mineira* herself), developed her political career in the southern state.

In the map can be both seen the geographical position of RS (the southerner state in the country), as well as the prevalence of presidents.


The Federal University of RS is one of the best ranked in the country, and, according to the [http://www.topuniversities.com/latin-american-rankings](http://www.topuniversities.com/latin-american-rankings) is in the top 15 of the Latin-American Universities.

The corpus

I will present here a preliminary analysis of the profile of the interviewees and the content of the interviews, being the goal of the paper to formulate hypothesis to be tested when the corpus of the research had been properly treated, rather than conclusions.

Because of the early stage of the research, I will take as a corpus for this approach several materials I have collected:

- the notes I took right after the interviews
- the recordings of the interviews, used as auxiliary because the transcription of the recordings is still in process, and I could not perform a systematic analysis of the contents
the notes taken as part of my participant observation as a guest in activities performed by pilgrims as meetings and walkings.

For the reasons stated above, my analysis will be qualitative, even if I intend to perform a quantitative analysis in the final stage of this research, through automatic content analysis of the transcribed texts of the interviews, with tools being tested by other colleagues of the research group. I won’t quote the interviews in this paper, because, previously to the transcription and content analysis, it would be just a random selection.

The interviews I performed were held in comfortable environments for the subjects, decided by them, and not rarely, at their own homes. I asked permission for recording the conversation, that was always granted it. Because they were talking about an important experience, and a positive one, they were in all cases very willing to talk to me. I designed a route sheet for the interviews, but I decided not to bring any questionnaires or even papers or notebooks with my during the interviews, using only a small recorder with the purpose of helping to bond closeness and a friendly atmosphere. I ask very few questions, and basically let the subjects talk about their experience, trying to bring to the table the key elements for my research: motivations, spirituality, expectations on the trail and the city of Santiago de Compostela, activities performed during their stay in town, identification of elements of local culture.

The profiles and narratives of the respondents

The prevalent profile of the subject is a person over the age of 50, not rarely already retired, with declared spiritual or religious beliefs. The current or former profession is one that require university training, as high rank employee of federal or state agencies, university lecturer, medical doctor, high rank manager on a private institution, etc. During the interviews, questions on their familiar and economic backgrounds were not asked, because the main interest was to obtain a discourse on the experience of the trail and the visions of the city of Santiago de Compostela as the goal of that trail. Anyway, there is a consistent evolution in the access to higher education in Brazil for the last two decades that shows at what extent university training was rare for the specific

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3 The Brazilian laws establish that a person can retire after 35 year of service, not being necessary to turn any specific age.
age gap of the pilgrims

Being able to conduct a good share of the interviews at the homes of the subjects, granted us the opportunity to see the neighborhoods they live in, the quality of the households, and whether and how they displayed elements related to the trail (as dedicated shelves to books on the topic, pictures on the walls, the shell or the stick that symbolize the walking to Santiago, etc.).

With few and rare exceptions of pilgrims with different profiles, more prone to walking as a wellness or social activity than to spiritual experiences, for most of them, as stated both in interviews and in the monthly meetings they held, as well as in books they published and in other activities they organize as lectures or book signings, the trail is described as a life-changing turning point. At the same time, they consistently describe the fact of doing the pilgrimage as a “calling”. We should add that several pilgrims are very active promoting activities for dissemination of the trail of Santiago and the physical activity of walking after their returning home. In their descriptions of the pilgrimage a word comes out constantly: “desapego”, the Portuguese word for detachment as the main lesson they learned during their pilgrimage.

Several narratives are permeated by the feeling of a tough process returning home, a kind of mourning for the experience they left behind, summarized as “the trail starts in Santiago” and/or as a strong desired of not ending the pilgrimage in the last days, and even having the feeling of walking slower as they reach the vicinities of Compostela.

Considering all those elements, we asked for the pilgrims to describe in what ways their

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4 According to Cibele Yahn de Andrade in 1995 only 7% of Brazilian population between the age of 18 and 24 years old have had access to higher education (https://www.revistaensinosuperior.gr.unicamp.br/artigos/acesso-ao-ensino-superior-no-brasil-equidade-e-desigualdade-social/). At the same time, the official report from the MEC (the Secretary of State for Education) in 2013 shows some concerns on the historical link between class and access to university training.

5 This aspect is highly relevant in the city of Porto Alegre, where the social differences are usually stated by the area of town where a person lives and by the king of building.
lives have changed after pilgrimage. Their answers can be summarized as follows:

- The trail is sensed as a profound spiritual experience
- Wealthy pilgrims elaborate about how they learn to live simpler and starker
- They consider the pilgrimage as life-changing
- They elaborate the idea of a calling, deeply rooted in the christian tradition of the life of saints.

Because of the dramatic way the pilgrims talk about the walking as a life-changing turning point and the experiencing of a simpler life, it could be reasonable to expect radical changes in their lives like moving homes, quitting jobs, splitting marriages, and so for. What we found instead is a narrative of “being able to live simpler” but not an actual changing toward a simpler life.

When asked directly about this, one pilgrim – particularly involved in promoting the trail, having done the walking several times, and displaying a quite large tattoo of the image of Saint James as represented in the Cathedral of Santiago - acknowledged that the attitudes of generosity, fellowship, sharing, etc. many pilgrims consider the “essence” of the trail are not reproducible back home, where fillings of distrust of strangers and fear of being assault are dominant in urban relations, particularly among the Brazilian upper-middle class.

We have found another major and dominant narrative in pilgrim's discourses, that mixes catholic/christian ideas of being rewarded for good actions or feelings and the spiritualist idea of receiving from life the good you deserve.

It is our hypothesis that positive images regarding spirituality, traveling and physical activity (particularly when non-competitive) compel pilgrims to build a self image that comforts and rewards them in a context of social inequality and helps to solve the eventual contradiction that could be poised by the assumption that they indeed could live with less but that they live instead in a relative privileged environment.

The trail to Santiago de Compostela seems to have an appeal of charm related to the high-profile of pilgrims who have walked the trail, particularly during the 90’s. Well known persons from the RS high society (journalists, magistrates, important businessmen, etc.) are pilgrims, which

6 Those are circumstances actually related for rare and individual cases, but is not a trend in any way.
underlines the idea of success attached to the pilgrimage, since the beginning of the dissemination of the trail among Brazilians with Paulo Coelho's book *The Pilgrim (O Diário de Um Mago)*, released in 1987 and considered as a self-help book. A famous Coelho's quote, from one of his most popular books, *The Alquimist*, it's at some extent present in the interviews “And when you want something, all the Universe conspires for you to achieve your wish” (“E quando você quer alguma coisa, todo o Universo conspira para que você realize seu desejo.”. *O Alquimista*, p. 48, 54a edição, Rio de Janeiro : Rocco, 1990)\(^7\), channeling the idea that they were *chosen* for walking the trail, that this was a kind of destiny they followed, sometimes hesitatingly. This very narrative being highly linked as well with the biblical account of the selection of the twelve apostles by Jesus Christ.

Related to this idea is a narrative recorded in several interviews according to which the subject encounters at some point of the way a very simple person s/he walks with for a certain amount of kilometers or days. In a subsequent contact after the trail, s/he discovers that person is actually very rich or very influential. This narrative, always told in a context that seeks to underline how humble pilgrimage turns a person, implies a fascinations for the social high-profile of people (or certain people) walking the trail.

Mixing all this ideas lead us to consider that, for pilgrims, at least in Brazil, the fact of having walked the trail contributes to build a positive image for themselves and for others based on the perceived essential goodness of the experience itself, characterized by compassion, generosity, and easy-going. If we have in mind the large number of pilgrims that became writers and lecturers after the experience, we could identify how the trail gives, in a way, a new identity for them. They become speakers of the trail, they found a public place as writers, commentators, promoters, etc.

**Conclusions and hypothesis for future research**

The main conclusions of this paper are preliminary and, as we said above, hypothesis for being tested in the development of the ongoing research:

- The narrative of the trail experience mixes elements from Catholicism and Spiritualism

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\(^7\) Even if it should be noted that the vast majority of the subjects declared an explicit refusal of Coelho's work, disregarding it because they don't consider the writer as an actual pilgrim, because he have assumed in several occasions that he didn't walk the trail until Santiago, having picked a bus in Cebreiro (a symbolic place in his book and in the pilgrim's narratives in general), because he realized there that his goals were already achieved. This points directly to one of the main theoretical foundations of the research, the Bourdieu's concept of homology. This would be developed in coming stages of the project.
with no relation between the actual religious practice of the subject and the prevalence of elements of either of those cults.

– The impacts of the trail in pilgrims lives are related to self image and the construction of a social role, rather to a changes in lifestyles.

– The regular practice of hiking as a physical activity is related to a less “spiritualized” vision of the experience of the trail.

– The trail works as an important way of display distinction (Bourdieu) not only because of the economic investment required for a month-length walking in Europe, but because it is both associated with high-profile professionals and with the idea of a spiritual calling not available to everyone.

The next steps in the research are the thorough analysis of the contents of the interview and the testing of this hypothesis against the body of research on the cultural consumption of Brazilian elites, the conformation and consolidation of those elites and their usage of religion, particularly regarding the mixing of the catholic background with spiritualist elements.

References

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