



In Conversation with Taina Syrjämaa

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by Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro

TAINA SYRJÄMAA is full professor at the University of Turku, Finland, since 2010. Professor Syrjämaa currently serves as Head of the Department of European and World History and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Humanities (2020–2024). *Visitez L'Italie* is the result of her doctoral research, which focused on the history of Italian tourism promotion abroad during the interwar period. Thereafter, she directed her attention to the 19th century, conducting studies on urban history, particularly on the city of Rome as a lived space in the 1870s, the history of the exhibition medium, and the history of the belief in progress. Over the past decade, she has specialised in animal and multispecies history.

In the context of our research within the DIETALY project, we came across a text that proved fundamental to our understanding of the Italian government's promotion of the country to foreign tourists during the period between the two World Wars. The text is *Visitez L'Italie: Italian State Tourist Propaganda Abroad 1919-1943*, published in 1997 by Turun yliopisto. Syrjämaa's work offers a valuable and insightful perspective on the strategic initiatives pursued by the Italian government to stimulate tourism during the tumultuous interwar period. The book provides an in-depth examination of Italy's advertising strategies and their practical applications, shedding light on the evolution of the country's tourism marketing approach. The author's analysis is primarily concerned with ENIT and its extensive network of foreign offices. Through an accurate examination of the available historical evidence, Syrjämaa demonstrates how the institution played a pivotal role in coordinating and executing promotional campaigns, from the production of alluring travel brochures to the organisation of exhibitions



showcasing Italy's cultural and historical treasures. A significant theme that emerges from the text is the strategic use of Italy's rich cultural and historical heritage as a major attraction for international tourists. The government acknowledged the potential of leveraging iconic landmarks, ancient ruins, and artistic masterpieces to attract visitors and stimulate economic growth. This emphasis on cultural tourism was not merely a marketing strategy; rather, it was a deliberate attempt to portray Italy as a nation with a rich history and a vigorous present. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of primary sources, Syrjämaa presents a detailed account of Italy's strategies to position itself as a prominent tourist destination in the interwar period. Her work has not only facilitated the historic contextualisation of our research, but it has also enabled us to gain a more systematic and concrete understanding of the means by which ENIT promoted Italy abroad.

This interview was conducted via Zoom on 18 September 2024 by members of the DIETALY research project with Professor Syrjämaa, following an email correspondence with the author, whom we thank for her availability. The following four sections constitute the transcript of the interview, which encompasses the interviewee's research interest, the collection of materials, the presentation of research results, and the discussion of potential follow-up research.

RESEARCH INTEREST

In this section, Syrjämaa discusses the unique appeal of tourism promotional materials as historic sources, a focus that corresponds to her expertise in urban history, Italian history, and the formation of cultural identities. Her approach to institutional tourism promotional materials as artefacts that hold cultural significance and a deep social meaning offers insights into her scholarly research motivations and into how such research contributed to a deeper understanding of the shaping of the perception of Italy as a tourist destination abroad in the complex socio-political landscape of the inter-war period.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: As a historian, what led you to focus on promotional tourism material, which might seem to provide only indirect insights into social and cultural changes?

Taina Syrjämaa: Printed ephemera has not been (and unfortunately still isn't) highly appreciated when library and archive collections are created and maintained. One reason may be that they typically lack full bibliographical information and are therefore difficult to identify and register. Yet, I am convinced that it is worthwhile to study them as they have been highly visible, practically omnipresent, in modern consumers' everyday environment. Promotional tourism material has been very influential in shaping images and ideas of other countries, cultures and peoples. Booklets, brochures and magazines have been distributed free of charge; large, colourful posters have



decorated railway stations and many other public urban spaces; tourism news got even on radio waves in the 1920s and moving images, with and without sound, depicted the very best aspects of a potential tourist destination. Tourism promotion materials have been visible to a huge public, not just the millions of people who actually travelled abroad themselves.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: What motivated you to focus specifically on tourism promotion in Italy, as opposed to other countries or even Finland? Why did you specifically study ENIT's materials, rather than other private institutions like the Touring Club?

Taina Syrjämaa: I have been interested in (and fond of) Italy for a long time. In 1990, after having completed my Master's thesis (on American history), I studied Italian at a language school in Rome. It was a decisive moment after which I decided to combine my interest in international history and Italy. By chance, my professor had just received some funding for developing a research project on travelling and leisure and he could recruit me. Thus, I got the opportunity to start my research: I stayed for six months in Rome mapping what kind of research had been done regarding travelling and tourism so far and what kind of sources could be available. I was surprised to notice that very little had been written about Italian tourism promotion, although Italy has been one of the leading countries in investing public funding in tourism promotion and tourism has been of huge importance to Italy, especially in economic terms but also otherwise.

Before my study, commercial and private actors in the field of tourism had received the most attention, but I was fascinated by the question of how tourism had become recognised as such an important industry that it deserved funding from the State budget in the backwash of the First World War and how it consequently gradually became incorporated into the State administration. Italy was not alone in this development but it was among the pioneers. I was not discouraged by the fact that sources were fragmented and scattered – I guess, it actually motivated me to start my hunt to find sources.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: Why does your research stop at the immediate post-war period?

Taina Syrjämaa: The interwar period forms an interesting and important epoch in the development of modern international tourism. Travellers' social backgrounds changed and the new tourist, unlike previous travellers, could not stay for a long time and may not have had a classic educational background. His and her interests and means to travel as well as the need for information and guidance were thus different from previous generations of travellers. On the other hand, the epoch is also different from later mass tourism which boomed when jet planes started to carry great numbers of tourists in a few hours to the Mediterranean, to relax and party, especially at beach holiday destinations. Furthermore, in the Italian case, the interwar period more or less coincides with the Fascist era which also explains why I ended my study in 1943 (with a



brief postscript on RSI (Repubblica Sociale Italiana) which made some – rather futile – attempts to carry on tourism promotion).

Altogether my research period was extensive: I focused on years from 1919, i.e. from the founding of ENIT, to the Second World War. As a matter of fact, little was known of the preceding time, so I also had to survey the main features of the precedent stage, including tracing tourist activities of the State Railways. ENIT inherited many of its tasks and even ready-made promotional materials from the FF.SS. (Italian State Railways). All this meant a huge quantity of sources and work. At that time, I was adamant that it all was necessary, although my professor tried to convince me to select a less comprehensive research focus. Afterwards, I must acknowledge that he was probably right and, indeed, I would never allow any of my doctoral candidates to undertake such a huge task.

MATERIALS COLLECTION

In this section, we look at Syrjämaa's extensive efforts to collect the promotional tourism materials essential to her thesis, which took up three years out of her six-year doctorate. By surveying libraries, archives and even flea markets across Italy, Syrjämaa gathered approximately 300 booklets, and a diverse selection of other materials, but also fostered essential connections with librarians and experts in the field. In our conversation with Syrjämaa, we could not help but reflect on the challenges and rewards of our process of selecting primary sources, which was for many reasons more challenging and fragmented than we could have anticipated.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: How extensive was the body of material you collected for your research, and where did you source it? Did you have access to the ENIT library in the 1990s, or did you manage to find this large amount of material elsewhere? What was your reaction upon discovering such a large collection of previously unpublished material?

Taina Syrjämaa: I loved my exploration. I succeeded in finding ca. 300 booklets plus periodicals, published in different languages. I extended my search to a number of libraries and archives in order to find them, mainly in Rome, but also in Florence and Milan. On Sundays, I often wandered at the flea market Porta Portese where every now and then I could find additions to my own collection. I also found some booklets in the library of my own university in Turku. They had arrived to the library when private persons had donated their book collections to the library. Later, foreign printed ephemera was removed from the university library, but my department preserves those related to tourism. I did not only look for booklets but also other kinds of promotional material. The best place to study posters was the collection Ferdinando Salce in Treviso. I also found some manuscripts of tourist radio news in Archivio Centrale dello Stato and had the privilege of seeing some films in Cinecittà, produced by Istituto Luce and Direzione Generale del Turismo.



In addition to tourist promotion material, I consulted administrative documentation in Archivio Centrale dello Stato and Archivio Storico Diplomatico of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I also perused collections of legislation and parliamentary discussions in Biblioteca della Camera dei Deputati. Some materials were extremely hard to discover, like the bulletin of Direzione Generale per il Turismo. I'm very grateful to a number of librarians and archivists who helped in finding these materials. Often they seemed to be delighted themselves, too, as many of the materials which I used, were unknown to them. I treasure the memory of Archivio delle Pubblicazioni dello Stato, a small archive not far from the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in the EUR area, which had a notable amount of ENIT publications. Working there was easy and the staff was particularly kind and enthusiastic about my materials. To my sorrow, I've been told that the archive does not exist any longer.

Last, but certainly not least, I must express my gratitude to two wonderful historians at the University of Rome La Sapienza: prof. Ferdinando Cordova and prof. Lidia Piccioni. They kindly welcomed a young foreigner, they believed in my research and over the years have always been kind, helpful and supportive.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: Did you have any formal collaborations with ENIT?

Taina Syrjämaa: No, but I had an excellent personal contact in ENIT, as the then head of the press office dott. Franco Paloscia was interested in the history of tourism and had also published a volume on the economic history of tourism (*Storia del turismo nell'economia italiana*, 1994). Especially, in the early stage of my research, his support was an important encouragement for me. He also introduced me to two retired ENIT presidents whom I could interview. Meeting them was a wonderful experience for a young researcher.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This section examines the complex and nuanced relationship between Fascist ideology and the development of Italian tourism promotion during the interwar period. The emphasis placed on national identity and power by the regime is juxtaposed with a surprising lack of overt political messaging in tourism materials. The materials in question focused instead on Italy's rich cultural and historical heritage, appealing to foreign tourists' expectations.

The argument advanced by Syrjämaa is that such a strategic approach was driven by the realisation that tourism was a significant economic driver as well as a powerful tool for shaping Italy's international image. By avoiding the use of overt political messaging, ENIT was able to effectively attract visitors from diverse backgrounds, including those who may have been critical of the Fascist regime.



Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: How do you evaluate the influence of Fascism on the tourism production of that period, given that Fascism occupies a significant portion of the period you studied? In your view, which materials best reflect this influence, and why? Are there specific historical, political, or (more probably) economic reasons?

Taina Syrjämaa: My expectation was that the influence of Fascism would have been essential, but to my surprise, this was not the case. In the great majority of tourism promotional materials, Fascism played no visible role at all. In some instances, reference was made to some new “achievements of the regime” such as motorways or other new infrastructure. Only in the mid-thirties Fascist imagery started to become more visible in tourism promotion. It was probably more prominent in magazines which reported on current occasions and events than in the plethora of basic booklets which continued to present classic Italian sights in conventional style. Yet, even in this context, ideological discourse was absent.

In my research, I drew the conclusion that tourism was such an important phenomenon for Italy (it was estimated as the second most important source of foreign currency after the money sent by immigrants), that it could not be risked. Mixing political and ideological messages in tourism promotion could have irritated and expelled foreign tourists. It should be noted that even in administrative terms, tourist propaganda was separated from political propaganda. This course of action required a certain kind of opportunism and flexibility of the Fascist State. Yet, it should be noted that not only overt propaganda exists. Although the Fascist imprint was not that visible, tourism promotion and the overall tourism phenomenon itself could function as covert propaganda. Sunny Italy with its enormous historical and cultural patrimony continued to fascinate modern tourists despite political dissent – even better if the trains happened to run in time. Tourism was a way to make favourable opinions prevail abroad. Fascist Italy did not openly force its ideology on tourists and therefore it could infatuate foreigners who would not have approved of its politics.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: To what extent might the economic fragility and political fragmentation of recently unified Italy have played a role in the development of tourism promotion?

Taina Syrjämaa: Throughout the centuries of Grand Tour, Italy had been admired due to its past whilst its present was undervalued. When interest in tourist promotion first started to arise in the recently unified Italy, which craved recognition, this set-up was troublesome and could not be solved. In practice, it was history and culture that was offered to travellers in materials produced by hotels, railways and associations. Similar attitudes and problems persisted in the Fascist era. Tourism professionals avoided irritating potential tourists and mainly offered to them what they were supposed to want. Thus, there are long continuities in the selection of main sights and the way how they have been presented.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: How have the genres of promotional texts evolved over time, particularly given the noticeable decline in the use of brochures? We have



observed an increase in the number of magazines and newspaper articles, perhaps as a response to the need for greater authenticity with an American audience already accustomed to persuasive and consumer-oriented language, as you mention on pages 232-238. What is your assessment of this evolution?

Taina Syrjämaa: In the beginning, when ENIT inherited booklets and posters of the State Railways, the selection was quite limited. Over the years, the assortment expanded. Whilst expensive printing methods were used to obtain quite ambitious aesthetic quality in booklets, also a series of tiny, cheap brochures, printed on thin paper, were launched which suggests diversified needs and contexts of use and distribution of printed matter. In general, the tendency was, however, that the importance of visuality grew. In the 1930s, especially magazines with their large-size pages privileged images over texts.

Advertisements and articles in foreign newspapers and magazines were used quite early, but they were rather expensive to arrange. Italian tourism promoters were aware that an article, which would look like as produced by the journalists of the newspaper or journal itself, would probably inspire more confidence than a paid ad. When I did my research in the 1990s, it was difficult to trace articles and ads. Now digitised newspaper collections may offer means to trace them more systematically and to discover potential changes over time.

RESEARCH FOLLOW-UP

Syrjämaa's pioneering work on Italian tourism promotion during the interwar period has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the field of tourism history. Initially focused on examining ENIT and its promotional aims, her research has since broadened to address wider themes of mobility and cultural exchange.

It is noteworthy that Syrjämaa was never contacted by either institutional bodies or private organisations following the publication of her work. This notable absence of formal recognition has not deterred her, as she hopes that her work will continue to inspire and guide upcoming generations of scholars in their understanding of tourism's role in shaping national identity.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: After the publication of your thesis in 1997, we noticed you published only one other article on the same topic of research. Could you please explain the reasons for this – if possible? Was there perhaps a lack of interest from ENIT in pursuing further exploration of the evolution of foreign-language tourism promotion?

Taina Syrjämaa: It is true that I rushed into other research topics after my dissertation, but I did publish more than one article on this theme [see the list of selected readings provided at the end of this article]. I started to teach at the university at the same time as I began to do my post-doctoral research. The time available for research was quite limited and I dedicated it to the new theme (Roma Capitale as a lived space). Yet, I did



not abandon the history of tourism entirely, but have continued to teach history of travelling and tourism ever since. Furthermore, although my more recent research topics may seem to be far removed from tourism, I usually always end up with issues regarding mobility – even in my current research focusing on animal history.

Giulia Cavalli and Viviana Mauro: After all these years, how do you reevaluate your work? What interest do you have in reading our research, and how might it relate to your own findings?

Taina Syrjämaa: In the 1990s there were only few historians studying the history of modern tourism internationally. Historians paid mostly attention to earlier elite travellers who often had literary output and ignored the era of tourists who had not produced tangible historical sources themselves. As a phenomenon, modern tourism was often also underestimated. At the time, it was quite ordinary to write even economic history without referring to tourism – one of the biggest industries! The research on the history of tourism was not always taken seriously which was quite frustrating. I wanted to show that studying tourism is (at least) equally important and serious than any traditional topic.

I did basic research mapping, discovering and documenting sources which were fragmentary, scattered and partly also at risk of being lost. I wanted to create an overall picture of ENIT's operations abroad as one of the most advanced tourism promotion systems in the world at the time. In order to make sense of these publications, it was essential for me as a historian to contextualise ENIT and its booklets, posters, films and other promotional activities in the Italian administrative and political structure as well as with international trends in tourism industry. I hoped that my work could serve as a basis for other researchers and make it easier for them to continue. I've been delighted by some calls from historians who have later studied similar themes in other countries. Hearing about your ongoing research project is the best thing I could have ever hoped for! I am really excited that your project is focusing on a detailed analysis of the contents of tourism promotion materials and can hardly wait to learn more about your research results.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite being separated by over two decades, *Visitez l'Italie* and DIETALY engage in a unique, synchronous dialogue, building upon Syrjämaa's pioneering doctoral work. As noted in the introduction, discovering *Visitez l'Italie* marked a pivotal moment in our research, providing an essential foundation for the historical contextualization of our study. Syrjämaa's meticulous work on *Visitez l'Italie* serves both as a foundational text and a methodological guide, offering invaluable insights into the strategic use of Italy's cultural heritage to construct an appealing national image during a complex historical period.



Our analysis of ENIT's promotional materials from the 1919-1959 period builds upon Syrjämaa's work, offering a deeper understanding of how language, culture, and history have shaped Italy's image as a tourist destination. This approach reinforces the importance of a diachronic perspective in tourism research and highlights the necessity of a critically grounded historical framework for analysing tourism promotion (see Agorni in this issue). Syrjämaa's focus on the cultural and historical aspects of tourism communication, along with her insights into exploiting cultural heritage to shape a national image, has led us to examine not only how tourism language in Italy has evolved, but also how cultural identity has been shaped through diverse institutional tourism promotion materials.

Our interview with Syrjämaa validated some of our preliminary findings and provided us with a fresh perspective on our methodological challenges. As we look ahead to continuing Professor Syrjämaa's work through projects like DIETALY and its future research developments, we aim to explore similar questions within broader, comparative frameworks, ensuring that our contributions will continue to influence the ever-evolving field of tourism studies.

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