

The discursive construction of agri-food heritage in contemporary societies: conceptual approaches and theoretical debates

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Abstract

This essay addresses the three theoretical perspectives that have examined the agri-food heritage in the last 10 years. The objective was to identify and contrast the different positions, as well as to adopt different angles to address the agri-food heritage from rural studies. The forms of social approach that have contributed to the formation of a theoretical corpus on the agri-food heritage, are diverse, maintain contrasting approaches and before the discursive practice of their institutional precepts, generate considerable changes in the forms of appropriation, production, distribution and consumption of agrifood resources. For this reason, it is proposed to develop an interpretative theoretical framework through phenomenology, which accounts for the flows and relationships between discursive dimensions, which impact on the resignification of value, positioning and consumption of emblematic agro-food products by contemporary society. In addition, to contribute to giving voice to a type of emerging discourse, based on local dynamics, which articulate the appropriation of the various patrimonial discourses and the existing negotiations between the local and the global.

Keywords: counter-discourse, heritage studies, phenomenology.

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Introduction

With the advent of post-industrial society, neoliberal policies and food globalization, culture has taken on a central role in research on agri-food products (Bowen and Gaytan, 2012). Through the application of instruments to protect the diversity of the agro-food heritage (Pilcher, 2008), food consumption is placed at the apex between culture, identity and the market (Matta, 2016).

In this context, UNESCO, considered as the ultimate legitimating agent of cultural heritage (PC), natural cultural (PCN) and intangible cultural (PCI), is an institution that has encouraged the valorization of emblematic agro-food resources, through various initiatives, agreements and certification procedures (Santamarina *et al.*, 2014), based on limited and eurocentric heritage theorizing, without considering the differences between broader sociocultural contexts (Waterton and Watson, 2013).

Therefore, various theoretical approaches arising from the social sciences arise, which in the last two decades, have studied the agro-food heritage as a cultural phenomenon (Waterton and Watson, 2013) and as a complex phenomenon (Valencia, 1998; Espeitx, 2004; Waterton *et al.*, 2017), which must be reinterpreted in light of social, economic and cultural transformations, typical of “a hypermodern and neoliberal context” that combines patrimonial overproduction with global policies (Santamarina *et al.*, 2014).

“Grosso modo”, the document explores how the “essentialist” and “critical” approaches to heritage, provide ways to conceptualize and understand agri-food heritage in an antagonistic manner, where the anti-hegemonic approach, rather than opposing the first approach, seeks alternatives on the proliferation of agri-food heritage practices to demonstrate that the agri-food heritage is a social construct that maintains specific complexities according to its context (Prats, 1998; Gustavsson, 2012), which do not fit in the classification schemes of the institutional apparatuses.

The work concludes with the exploration of emerging approaches to agri-food heritage, which address how the agro-food conservation policies and programs influence society and how they are adopted, rejected and reinterpreted by those who reproduce the heritage.

Current and emerging trends in agro-food heritage

The expansion of the use of emblematic foods as “cultural heritage assets”, has led to configure a wide range of social perspectives, which have the task of demonstrating the cultural value of emblematic agri-food resources anchored to the territory. Therefore, this paper explores the ways of approaching the agri-food heritage, through different theoretical frameworks (Waterton and Watson, 2013; Brumann, 2014), for the analysis, interpretation and debate about the object of study.

The institutionalized discourse of agri-food heritage: heritage essentialism

The works that reflect this approach have been called by Brumann (2009) as “patrimonial belief”, by Prats (2006) as “essentialist approaches to heritage” and by Waterton and Watson (2013) “theories centered on the objects of heritage”.

This approach maintains features of managerial and marketing theory (Saiyed *et al.*, 2016), strongly anchored in the capitalist logic that maintains a prescriptive stance that privileges a political vision that appeals for the restructuring of the territory, through commodification of agri-food resources (Prats, 2006).

The range of works developed under this approach has a market orientation (Aaltonen *et al.*, 2015), the methodologies developed are typical of a technocratic approach (Waterton and Watson, 2013), and use elements such as identity and authenticity, as a differentiation mechanism (Di Meo, 2007; Espeitx, 2008; Bessiere, 2013).

These case studies are oriented to the development of practical tools and techniques for the management of heritage resources (Gustavsson, 2012). The predominance of the case study has to do with the emergent nature of agrifood studies, which is why it is an adequate method to approach new problems that require a tool that allows to go from reality to theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

This approach is characterized by an idealized discourse on the use of agro-food heritage perceived as an asset to generate development processes (Bessiere, 1998, 2013; Espeitx, 2004; Boucher *et al.*, 2012; Catania, 2016), constituent element of the territorial identity (Lody, 2004; Muchnik, 2006); a way of preserving ancestral knowledge and collective memory (Dormaels, 2012), a strategy of reconversion and productive sustainability of native biodiversity (Toledo and Barrera, 2009), a way of contributing to the preservation of food cultures (Duarte and Krajsic, 2013) and even, as an object of public policies (Morgan, 2009; Bedore, 2014), all relevant aspects for contemporary societies (Espeitx, 2004, Ortiz *et al.*, 2004, Fishler, 2010).

This position is materialized in inventories and catalogs of local traditional products (Gomez *et al.*, 2006; Cervantes *et al.*, 2008; Vandecandelaere *et al.*, 2010; González and Egusquiza, 2011), which seeks to identify their geographical characteristics historical, technological and economic, focusing on variables such as tradition and identity (Gomez *et al.*, 2005; Bowen and Mutersbaugh, 2013).

Other methodological approaches deal with the management and patrimonial categorization (Barrera and Bringas, 2009, Otero, 2015); revisions of institutional arrangements of cultural policies and specific patrimonial normalization programs (Iturriaga, 2004; Nivon, 2013; Castro and Ávila, 2015), theoretical-conceptual studies on the ways of approaching heritage and its various meanings (Arizpe, 2006; Ahmad, 2006); as well as the collection of experiences on its safeguarding and use (Topete and Amescua, 2013, Orozco, 2014, Bessiere and Espeitx, 2016).

In general, this perspective nurtures the bases for the establishment of public policies, where the institutionalized discourse on the valorization of agri-food products is materialized through intervention in rural spaces, which links agri-food heritage with tourism and economic development (Espeitx, 2004; Boucher *et al.*, 2012; Bessiere, 2013; Avilés, 2016).

Such valorization is possible insofar as the agri-food resource has a strong territorial anchorage (Espeitx, 2004; Barrera, 2009), as a form of opposition to the industrialization of the global food system (Bowen and Mutersbaugh, 2013), which allows its linkage with differentiated market niches, such as organic, denominations of origin and fair trade (Boucher, 2012), as well as the promotion of agri-food tourism (Thomé-Ortiz, 2015).

Critical perspective of agri-food heritage: heritage counter-discourse

In the face of "patrimonial hysteria" (Alvarez, 2008), and the diversity of work on the management, safeguarding and conservation of local resources, a series of pragmatic abuses and conceptual ambivalences have emerged about the processes of valorization of agri-food resources (Scharber and Dancs, 2016). Several authors have developed criticisms about technocratic approaches to heritage, in order to challenge the hegemonic paradigms of agro-food heritage (García, 1999; Almiron *et al.*, 2006; Prats, 2003, 2006, 2011).

This current analyzes patrimonial essentialism, under theoretical post-structuralist approaches such as discursive analysis, semiotics and deconstructionism (Waterton and Watson, 2013; Brumann, 2014) that represent an anti-hegemonic theoretical framework (Waterton *et al.*, 2006; Contreras, 2014; Rico, 2014; Roberts and Cohen, 2014).

With this, it seeks to identify the critical problems of institutionalized discourse to contribute to the development of its field of study, subverting the legitimizing categories of heritage value, showing the ambiguities and gaps in them, as well as showing the existing challenges on the fair sizing of the agro-food heritage (Smith, 2011; Gustavsson, 2012; Santamarina *et al.*, 2014; Del Marmol *et al.*, 2016; Bortolotto, 2017). These investigations deepen the patrimonial policies, through a fundamental criticism to make an alternative interpretation (Milroy, 1989) of the institutional and developmental discourses (Prats, 2005; Brumman, 2009).

Based on the assumptions of the critical perspective (Brumann, 2009, 2014), the operational and conceptual paradoxes facing agri-food heritage are presented:

Falsification: the invention of history, tradition or heritage narrative, which exalts the representative attributes of the narrators of history, to the detriment of other social groups and reality itself (Bak-Geller, 2013, Laborde and Medina, 2015). The invented speech obscures or embellishes the more or less presentable parts of the story (Hernández, 2009).

Petrification: the conservation of heritage, through the nostalgic recognition of the resource, which avoids or suppresses evolution and free innovation (Brumann, 2009, 2014), under the argument of authenticity (Van Zent, 2011; Bessiere, 2013).

Disubstantiation: divesting the patrimonial resource of its substantive content (Bruman, 2014). The legitimation of value of an agri-food product is based on positioning it and managing it as a competitive advantage of the territory (Pecot and De Barnier, 2017). The product is disconnected from its production context, converting it into an image (Bessiere, 2013).

Enclosure: delimit a circuit of possessors of a specific patrimony, to the detriment of other groups that produce and market it. Phenomenon associated with appellations of origin (Hernández, 2009, Bowen and Gaytan, 2012), where the legitimization and activation of objects and practices such as cultural heritage, is used to assert the power of the elites through the application of policies linked to the market (Ferry, 2003; Matta, 2016).

Heritage phenomenology: approach to an emerging discourse

This third position privileges empirical research to question the valuation of heritage and its social effects, through the ruptures and continuities in the daily life of its owners (Brumann, 2009), through a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach Dormaels (2011).

The methodological tool privileged by this approach is ethnography, which considers the experience of social actors, their motivations and personal histories as the main axis of research (Magaña and López, 2016). This strategy works dialogically to explore conceptions and dynamics about personal memory to overcome the eurocentric conceptions that condition heritage studies (Lander, 2000; Gustavsson, 2012), to give voice to the holders of heritage (Roberts and Cohen, 2014).

These works combine theories of representation with discursive analysis, semiotics, anthropology, mobility theory and cultural geography (Waterton and Watson, 2013). They deepen the social tensions and power relations that are built around agrifood resources (Gustavsson, 2012; Santamarina *et al.*, 2014).

This approach encompasses a series of case studies that focus on interpreting how personal identity plays out in physical, discursive or affective spaces where emblematic foods are produced (Waterton and Watson, 2013).

These works explore human rights and intellectual property as a field of struggles for social justice and respect for diversity from critical sociology (Sousa-Santos, 2011, Curiel, 2016, Collins, 2011), the presence of new social practices around food and power (Mintz, 1996, 2003), the new scenarios of hedonist consumption (Lipovetsky, 1989; Cardenas and Hernández, 2016) and counter-discourses in opposition to the dialectic of authorized discourse of heritage (Laurajane-Smith, 2006; Roberts and Cohen, 2014; Contreras, 2014).

Other studies interpret the social life of patrimonial resources (Appadurai, 1991; Kopytoff, 1991; García Calclini, 1993; Mintz, 2003; Bourdeau, 2012) as well as those that analyze the performativity of food (Ayora, 2013), to reflect on the use, value and meaning of agro-food heritage (Andrade, 2009; Worthen *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, a study group (Foucault, 1976, 1992, 2004; Van Dijk, 1999, Fairclough, 2003) studied the dimensions of power, conflict, negotiation and discursive practices that are presented in the various scenarios of patrimonialization of local foods (Smith, 2006; Del Marmol, 2007; Castro-Gómez, 2011; Martínez de la Rosa, 2015; Ruiz, 2015). This type of analysis adopts deconstructionist approaches that invite to reinterpret the universalism of institutionalized discourse to discover different logics of knowledge (Miltroy 1989; Smith, 2006; Grosfoguel, 2007; Andrade, 2009; Sousa, 2011; Brumman, 2014; Curiel, 2016).

The challenge of this analytical approach lies in avoiding looking at the agri-food heritage as an object, but observing how it is distributed, consumed and valued, making its relationship with social practices visible (Ferry, 2003, Collins, 2011). With this, alternative ways of valuing and using agri-food assets are proposed, which are not necessarily compatible with the institutionalized discourse (Curiel, 2016).

Debates around the approximation of agro-food heritage

Faced with the growing nomination of local foods as intangible cultural heritage, processes of valorization are reproduced that go from the local to the global (Poulain, 2012), under three basic precepts: i) conservation of the agri-food culture; ii) social inclusion; and iii) economic development. Where the identity, authenticity, values and meanings attributed to emblematic foods, remain at the center of debates on the agri-food heritage (De Jesus *et al.*, 2016).

Approach to the agri-food identity, different approaches

The essentialist assumptions of patrimonial discourse evoke a social concern about the blurring of agri-food cultures in the face of globalization. This opens the doors to an anthropocentric vision of reality that operates under the postulates of capitalism. For its part, the counter-discourse takes up these assumptions and confronts them with the values of consumer societies, questioning the essential and idealized value of heritage. Since the values attributed to heritage, as an identity marker, are inscribed in the market logic (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2001; Prats, 2006; Almiron *et al.*, 2006; Gyimothy and Mykletun, 2009; Silverman, 2015).

For example, the tourism commodification of heritage occurs at the expense of the relation of the cultural value of a local food and its conversion into economic value (Muchnik, 2006) and not as a way of experiencing the identity itself (Prats, 2006).

In this sense, Matta (2013) describes the conflict of interest among the agents involved in the process of creating value of Peruvian cuisine and the diversity of problems arising in the political arena. Likewise, the recent publication of Edouard de Suremain (2017), problematizes and makes evident the ways in which different actors translate the symbolic value of the agri-food heritage into economic efficiency (Muchnik, 2006), in both cases, we reflect on the processes of capitalist colonization that relates emblematic food products with new consumers (Curiel, 2016), through its relationship with tourism (Timothy and Ron, 2013). With what is concluded that identity is configured as an arena of cultural and political conflict from the last half of the twentieth century to today (Smith, 2012).

Paradoxes of the disubstantiation of the agro-food heritage

One of the conceptual and pragmatic paradoxes of the valorization of agro-food heritage is that, from the anthropological perspective, the PCI is lost or “dies” when it is disconnected from the society that produces it (Van Zanten, 2011; Topete and Amescua, 2013). Supposed to be controversial between an anthropocentric and a mercantilist perspective. From a conceptualization of the patrimony in movement (Waterton *et al.*, 2017), in terms of market, the agri-food heritage decoupled from the society that produces it becomes a singular resource, increasing its added value; likewise, its original meaning and function are transformed to regain value and be used in various spheres such as education, economics, aesthetics and politics (Barreiro and Parga, 2013). Hence, it is appropriate to consider that the agro-food heritage is always transformed (Ayora, 2007, Waterton *et al.*, 2017).

In this way the notion of authenticity seems contradictory, given that each generation transforms, innovates and reproduces the tradition according to their needs, for example the affirmation and transformation of gastronomy with local identity, recreates itself according to social and cultural transformations contemporary (Ayora, 2007).

Implications of the agri-food heritage enclosure

There are studies that make evident the contradiction between the cultural policies that protect, document and institutionalize popular culture (Iturriaga, 2004) and the vision of heritage as a cultural practice (Logan, 2012; Morgan, 2012), a notion that intercedes for a critical on the use, appropriation and management of the cultural heritage of marginalized societies, from the perspective of human rights and intellectual property (Nwabueze, 2015). With what is sought to contribute to a paradigm shift, based on the values associated with existence, legacy and cognition (Barriero and Parga, 2013), as well as the symbolic and non-monetary value of heritage (Cook, 2004; Lind and Barham, 2004).

These notions are proposed to eradicate the abuses of power of hegemonic groups, which in the face of the cultural and social changes of the 21st century (Curiel, 2016), resume the authoritative discourse (Smith, 2006) and the adjectives of emblematic foods, such as ideology that transforms social representations at the service of dominant power relations (Rotman, 2006). This is possible by positioning the socio-cultural values of the agro-food heritage associated with their market value (Curiel, 2016; Cárdenas and Hernández, 2016).

In this way, the same agro-food resource can be located at different scales and acquire different uses, which are oriented to satisfy individual interests, above social, ecological and cultural uses. For example, the case of Peruvian food (Matta, 2011, 2015), tequila (Bowen and Gaytan, 2012) and the fishing sector in Mexico (Magadan, 2016).

Importance of the phenomenological perspective for the study of agro-food heritage

The empirical studies show the social conflicts around the valuation of heritage assets (Del Marmol, 2007; Colloredo *et al.*, 2017). This leads to evidence that hegemonic discourses neutralize local actors, assigning subordinate roles and not considering them as major political

actors (Coca, 2014; Contreras, 2014). However, various investigations have shown that the hegemonic discourse can be used by marginalized actors as a counter-discourse (Ferry, 2003; Sousa, 2011; Contreras, 2014; Roberts and Cohen, 2014).

Critical and empirical approaches have shown that the agri-food heritage serves two purposes: as a political instrument (Lacarrieu, 2008; Andrade, 2009) and as a way of claiming social justice through the “politics of recognition” (Fraser, 2000), where identity and struggle for resources are intertwined (Smith, 2012).

This positioning proposes giving a voice to the subaltern groups (Guzmán, 2010), through new models of cultural management that articulate the civil society in the initiatives of valorization of local resources or the proposals of Dormaels (2011); González (2015) to analyze heritage from a heuristic and phenomenological perspective. The importance of these positions, lies in opening knowledge gaps that allow voice to the subaltern groups on how and what they adopt global patrimonial schemes and discourses and how they influence daily life (Beltran, 2017), at the time of identifying, how agri-food heritage relates to popular culture (Robinson and Silverman, 2015).

The empirical approach is fundamental for the full development of the field of agri-food heritage studies, which has important implications of an epistemological and methodological nature. Although the valorization of agri-food resources is a phenomenon of global reach, its study would not be viable if it were not; through, of the analysis of the ways in which this phenomenon crystallizes in the local scale (Thomé-Ortiz, 2015).

Conclusions

Through the different approaches to the agro-food heritage exposed, it has been possible to contribute to the academic debate on this object of study, showing that it is constructed from discourses, modeled according to actors, power relations, sociocultural contexts and historical dynamics. For this, it is important to take into consideration that the agri-food heritage is a multifaceted and unstable object, dependent on social, ideological and contemporary consumption transformations (Ashworth, 2014).

According to the three positions identified in the literature (essentialist, critical and empirical), it is observed that empirical studies are still shown as exploratory perspectives and are scarcely addressed. In another sense, no studies were identified that accurately address the relations of coexistence between the three approaches mentioned above and that identify how the different agents represented by these discourses interact. Therefore, there are still significant gaps in the analytical corpus of agro-food heritage, from the academic point of view (Medina, 2017).

Accordingly, it is proposed to analyze the interfaces that exist between institutionalized discourses and the empirical experience of emblematic food producers, based on the reconfiguration of subjectivity and intersubjective relations between the agents involved (Harari, 2016). It is assumed that the enhancement of agri-food assets has an interdiscursive character (Fairclough, 2008).

The proposal to explore the agri-food heritage from a phenomenological perspective, lies in vindicating the local subject and his experience in the growing transformation of values, uses and meanings of agri-food resources, which move in diversity of scales (Harvey, 2014). To understand how the different heritage positions manifest themselves in the daily life of the rural environment, as well as the relationship between heritage and popular culture (Robinson and Silverman, 2015; Beltran, 2017).

The foregoing is fundamental because institutionalized discourses, endorsed by hegemonic agents such as international or academic institutions, guide the management, utilization and conservation policies of the agri-food heritage, thus influencing the empirical experience of producers and therefore, in the resources that are strategic for food security, biodiversity, cultural identity and the quality of life of contemporary society.

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