Revitalising place-based commercial heritage: A Cultural Political Economy approach to the renaissance of lambic beers in Belgium

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ABSTRACT
This paper studies the intricacies related to the revitalisation of commercial products that have recently been assigned with cultural heritage values in the context of post-Fordist consumption. Underpinned by a conceptual lens that combines reflections on heritage dissonance and Cultural Political Economy (CPE), the paper describes a qualitative study of lambic beers in Belgium. After being almost wiped out by the 1990s, lambic brewing has made a spectacular recovery due to a combination of global economic drivers and local sector-wide collaboration. However, the addition of cultural heritage values to the commercial product, which fuelled the sector’s economic regeneration, brought along challenges now there is less concern about the sector’s immediate survival. Alongside governance complexities, different interpretations among stakeholders of what constitutes ‘tradition’ have complicated defining the boundaries between collective and individual interests, which runs parallel with identifying where cultural values stop and economic values begin. Heritage dissonance, in this case, centres around struggles of finding a collective semiotic response to safeguard the sector’s agency in the context of its post-Fordist embedding, including prevailing ‘craft’ cultural/economic imaginaries. Concluding, the application of CPE to the lambic beer study reflects the framework’s value for understanding dissonant heritage values.

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Introduction
There is widespread awareness that the values people, organisations and companies assign to heritage objects, practices and symbols are diverse and often contentious. For example, cultural heritage is simultaneously employed in many places for urban and rural (re)development (Al Rabady 2013; De Cesari and Dimova 2019; Wang and Aoki 2019; Hayes 2020), symbolic consumption and lifestyle creation (Featherstone 1990) and economic accumulation (Holt 2006). In a period of globalisation characterised by the seemingly unlimited availability of consumable cultural markers related to the uniqueness of localities, local histories and spatial identities (Lash and Urry 1994), heritage conservation tensions, particularly regarding intangible heritage values, have proliferated.

One of the classic tensions following from the co-existence of multiple heritage values is the one between cultural values associated to heritage and economic valuation (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000). Next to potentially compromising the heritage values through commercialisation (Firth 2011; McKercher and Du Cros 2012), the commodification of cultural heritage raises
questions of ownership, intellectual property and local control of heritage sites and intangible cultural values, habits and processes (George 2010). For example, while heritage tourism could lead to civic pride and local awareness of heritage values, it remains a commercial sector in which achieving both profit generation and heritage conservation from a social and cultural perspective is a constant balancing act (Orbasli and Woodward 2009). Similarly, cultural heritage preservation and urban regeneration may go hand in hand, yet often lead to one-dimensional heritage interpretations favouring capital accumulation (Orbasli and Woodward 2009; Firth 2011; De Cesari and Dimova 2019).

But what happens with the tension between cultural values and economic valuation when an emplaced, historically grown economic activity – a commercial product or production process – is at the basis of the heritage values? The focus on place-specific characteristics, histories and products in the globalising post-Fordist economy has led to the increased recognition of location-specific and historic market-based products and production processes. These could be rejuvenated as a consequence, albeit within a value system relating to contemporary needs and experiences rather than referring to a static past (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Stoffelen 2020).

This paper zooms in on the intricacies related to the revitalisation of commercial products that have recently been assigned with cultural heritage values in the context of post-Fordist consumption. It uses a case study of lambic beers in Belgium. Lambic beer brewing, which has a very particular production process and is historically embedded in the Zenne river valley near Brussels, was in dire straits at the end of the 20th century when only a handful of breweries remained from what was once a booming industry and social practice. Nowadays lambic and related beers such as gueuze and kriek have become highly wanted products in the global beer community. The foundation for this apparent success story was laid at the end of the 1990s (RingTV 2011). The transition that the product has undergone in two decades could be seen as a typical example of the changing role of symbolic consumption products in a globalising world. Underpinned by a conceptual lens that combines reflections on heritage dissonance and Cultural Political Economy (CPE), this paper analyses the renaissance of lambic beers to answer the following question:

Which global-local success factors, but also underlying fields of tension, can be identified in seemingly successful place-based commercial heritage revitalisation processes?

To answer the question, the paper deconstructs the cultural/economic heritage revitalisation process of lambic beers using a qualitative research design. The paper contributes to heritage studies by linking up heritage dissonance with CPE. The paper shows that this conceptual lens allows unravelling the global-local intricacies involved in the renewed attention to market-based activities to which consumers assign cultural heritage values.

**Fields of tension in heritage conservation: a Cultural Political Economy reflection**

Cultural heritage has become a real societal institution in the sense that there has been an ‘increased importance of cultural practices and institutions in every area of our social lives’ (Du Gay et al. 1997, xxviii). Following the growing societal attention to heritage, Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) famously described cultural heritage as dissonant: ‘the discordance or lack of agreement and consistency as to the meaning of heritage’ (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000, 24). Instead of describing a particular heritage form, dissonance is intrinsic to all heritage processes and refers to the importance of reflecting on intangibles in heritage conservation (Smith 2006; Kisić 2013). Heritage dissonance has been applied, amongst others, to consumer orientations, referring to dissonance among people’s perceptions when consuming cultural markers that signify several, sometimes conflicting meanings (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Kisić 2013); to communities, their place meanings and the social conflict resulting from technocratic or expert-led heritage
management (Waterton 2005; Smith and Waterton 2009); and to tensions between cultural and economic heritage values, often in the context of commodification of cultural heritage, for example for tourism (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).

Following from the discussion above, there is consensus, particularly in critical heritage studies, that the relation between cultural and economic values of heritage is not one between ‘intrinsic’ cultural values and ‘extrinsic’ economic values (McKercher and Du Cros 2012) but regards a multidimensional domain of friction and potential synergy. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), paying particular attention to dissonance in heritage tourism, already noted that heritage production is often market-driven as the decision to select and package potential heritage resources into heritage products is driven by production and consumption choices for monetary or identity-creation purposes; hence, for simultaneous economic and cultural value creation (see also Rizzo and Throsby 2006). Furthermore, Du Gay et al. (1997) argue that cultural products are, simultaneously, produced, consumed, represented and regulated for economic and cultural value creation, including profit generation and identity creation. In the current globalising neoliberal world, where local cultural objects and processes have become global heritage commodities, economic values often form an unavoidable part of the recognition of processes, sites and products as constituting heritage.

The emerging framework of Cultural Political Economy (CPE) provides a solid lens for understanding the political and economic mobilisation of, and tension between, multiple heritage values. CPE can be traced back to Raymond Williams’ work on the intersection of structural capital relations and cultural expression (Kenny and Stevenson 1998). The framework has recently been detailed in particular by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum. In its current form, CPE integrates critical semiotic analysis into political economy (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008). Building on a critical realist perspective, CPE departs from the idea that the world is intrinsically complex and cannot be grasped in its totality (Sum and Jessop 2013). People make sense of it through a process of complexity reduction, which happens through semiotics in the form of imaginaries. Imaginaries are the ‘semiotic systems that shape lived experience in a complex world’ (Sum and Jessop 2013, 26). Constructing imaginaries provide actors with agency to meet their interests, despite being bound by structural (political economic) pressures.

An important nuance is that not all imaginaries are deemed equal. Some imaginaries are selected and retained at the expense of others. Established imaginaries institutionalise political and economic regulation and accumulation strategies (Sum and Jessop 2013). Put differently, cultural meaning-creation through constructing imaginaries embeds political-economic actions in society. The cultural, thus, organises and reproduces social and economic structures in everyday life (Kenny and Stevenson 1998).

Imaginaries, for example regarding the interpretation of certain heritage objects or processes as being valuable, are thus not intrinsic or neutral. The imaginaries are partly path-dependent (historically embedded) and partly path-forming (structuring for the future) processes. These processes consist of: selecting and privileging an imaginary from a range of alternatives; retaining the imaginary by building it into institutional roles and strategies; and reinforcing it in social structures to establish an unquestioned, seemingly natural ‘common sense’ discourse (Jessop 2010). In summary, CPE ‘acknowledges the powerful role of privileged actors such as policymakers to structure meaning-making processes, and offers an analytical entry point to expose why certain economic formations and interpretations are selected and become powerful’ (Paul 2012, 383).

Heritage studies are a late adopter of CPE despite the approach’s potential to connect well-established perspectives regarding heritage dissonance and the view of heritage as political, cultural and social phenomena (Gentry and Smith 2019). Applied to heritage, CPE allows understanding how certain imaginaries – in this case, regarding society’s engagement with the past – and their institutional backing in agencies like UNESCO and heritage charters come to dominate over alternative imaginaries and, thereby, organise and structure social, political and economic life. In the most basic application, CPE interprets heritage values as an intrinsic avenue of negotiation,
selectivity and, hence, dissonance; one where certain associations with the past are selected, reinforced and retained, while structured by an economic context of neoliberal globalisation and underpinning power imbalances (Kenny and Stevenson 1998). Dominant heritage values, such as the western-centred and institutionalised ‘authorised heritage discourse’ (ADH) that interprets heritage values to be intrinsic to material objects and the domain of expert assessment and management (Smith 2006), are thus not neutral but underpin certain accumulation strategies (Sum and Jessop 2013). They reflect the domination of one out many visions regarding society’s relation to the past; one where the values and interests of some are met but those of others are ignored.

While relatively inert, such an institutional and semiotic organisation and privileging of heritage values can be re-negotiated. Previous heritage interpretations, such as an ADH, may lose hegemonic power yet are still path-structuring. Put differently, there is no ‘clean break’ with the previous situation when it comes to re-negotiating heritage values. In terms of heritage dissonance, ‘dissonance can be activated and recreated even if there has been a long-term agreement about what certain heritage is, means and represents. An earlier sedimented discourse can, at any time, enter the play of politics and be problematised in new articulations’ (Kisicć 2013, 30).

Furthermore, CPE is not just about which heritage story or imaginary is selected. It is also about how this story is mobilised and internalised. For example, it provides a lens for interpreting spatial scale as a strategic instrument for selecting, retaining and institutionalising heritage values (Kenny and Stevenson 1998). From a CPE perspective, heritage discourses could be seen as tools for finding economic and/or cultural meaning within a world characterised by global-local economic relations. Heritage revitalisation processes, for example, often underpin national identity discourses or back up regionalism claims (Smith 2006; Roppola et al. 2020). Moreover, heritage is regularly commodified to sediment global economic flows within a certain locality to compete with other places for inward investments. Su, Bramwell, and Whalley (2018) provide an example of this by applying CPE to heritage tourism contestations in Nanjing, China. The followed ‘CPE approach prompted assessment of how economic relations in the built environment were intertwined with tourist meaning-making and identities in the cultural/semiotic societal sphere’ (Su, Bramwell, and Whalley 2018, 38–39). The study described how tourist-oriented commercial development around heritage precincts resulted in different responses among individuals who use the site for their cultural meaning-making. Further reflecting on the role of the spatial embedding of such processes, yet without applying CPE, Stoffelen and Vanneste (2016) identified spatial tensions regarding how, often stereotyped, whisky and other ‘Scottishness’ images are commodified for tourism in Speyside (Scotland). The presented natural unit of marketing these cultural images, the Speyside Scotch whisky area pushed by powerful global whisky brands, mismatches with heterogeneous spatial identities among communities and political regulation that remains embedded in the territory of administrative council areas. These contrasts hinder co-construction of communicated imaginaries, resulting in the sedimentation of decision-making power among the brands (Stoffelen and Vanneste 2016).

In both examples, a CPE interpretation could combine a reflection on the content of the heritage imaginaries selected and institutionalised, and on the mobilisation of these imaginaries, including underpinning power relations. Both cases stress how cultural meaning-creation, in the examples with tourists as consumers, interact with location-specific political-economic relations. A CPE lens unravels the arrangement found between the semiotic (the communicated heritage values) and the structural (for example, the scalar organisation to mobilise these values) to meet certain political, economic and/or cultural interests of empowered actors.

**Study area**

Lambic and derived beers such as gueuze and kriek are associated to the Zenne river valley in Belgium, including the capital city Brussels and the Pajottenland area west of Brussels. Lambic is
a beer of spontaneous fermentation resulting from exposing the wort (the mixture of mashed malted and unmalted wheat, hops and water) to the open air, thereby exposing it to airborne microorganisms present in the environment. The particular sour flavour of lambic beers is largely ascribed to the *Brettanomyces* yeast strands, most famously *B. bruxellensis* and *B. lambicus*, named after the city around which lambic beer brewing is historically located and the beer itself. Spontaneous fermentation of wort is possible around the world and could include similar or even the same yeast strands as in traditional lambic brewing in Belgium. Yet, the specific composition of the microorganisms responsible for the fermentation and genetic diversity within the same yeast strands give credibility to the claim that the location in or near Brussels and possibly even the location of the individual warehouse has an influence on the final flavour profile of the beer (Thompson Witrick 2012).

The production of lambic beers dates back to the Early Modern Period (±16th-18th century) and probably even earlier. By the 19th century, the product had become a real social practice in Brussels and its surroundings. Many pubs brewed their own lambic or blended casks from different breweries. Several brewers were mayors of towns in the area. Lambic was a daily drink for many, especially farmers working the fields. By the beginning of the 20th century, there were roughly 80 breweries in and around Brussels and an additional 200 blenders (RingTV 2011). For a detailed history of the lambic sector, see Van den Steen (2011) and Lambic.info (n.d.).

The number of lambic breweries steadily declined in the second half of the 20th century. The low point was reached at the end the century when only a handful remained. Since then, lambic beers have enjoyed a renaissance. They have become highly sought-after in the global beer community owing to the product’s specific flavours and the appealing story and symbolic, place-based values underpinning the product. During the time of the empirical research, fourteen professional lambic breweries and blenders had a visible market share (Figure 1). They are dispersed over Belgium’s

![Figure 1. Location of lambic breweries and blenders active after 1945 (status April 2020). The list of closed breweries is sourced from Lambic.info (n.d.).](image)
three federal Regions, with most being located in Flanders (specifically, the province of Flemish Brabant) and one each in the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region. A few start-up plans were presented during the empirical work as well, reflecting the sector’s dynamism. With the product’s recent transition, including the ‘glocal’ characteristics of and attention to the product, as well as its cultural heritage values, lambic and derived beers form an interesting case to apply CPE and evaluate seemingly successful place-based commercial heritage revitalisation processes.

**Methodology**

Considering the paper’s objective to reflect on success factors and tension between economic valuation and cultural heritage values involved in the lambic sector’s rejuvenation, a qualitative enquiry using semi-structured interview was most pertinent. I held eighteen interviews between August 2019 and January 2020. Respondents included 11 lambic brewers and blenders, local to regional policymakers in the fields of heritage conservation, tourism and regional development, a local interest group and two entrepreneurs. I attempted to meet all brewers and blenders as well as the Belgian beer industry association. These efforts proved unfruitful. Nevertheless, I interviewed the majority of people active in the sector, from the industry and from supporting policy fields, with indications of data saturation appearing in the final interviews. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour 45 minutes. Included topics were the sector’s general evolution, its economic viability, cooperation practices, local embedding, heritage values, supporting policies, and future development challenges. I transcribed all interviews and returned the documents to the respondents for member checking. The returned files were used for the data analysis.

I followed the data coding and post-coding strategy described by Stoffelen (2019), using NVivo software to facilitate the process. First, I descriptively coded the transcripts by adding topic labels to the text, summarising the respondent’s remarks. This first round of coding was descriptive (i.e. without conceptual abstraction) and non-comparative (i.e. without looking for patterns in the data). The second step consisted of pattern coding: I compared and aggregated the descriptive topic labels to establish structure in the coded data. I then compared the pattern coding scheme to a newly created provisional coding scheme: an ‘empty’ coding tree established using the study’s literature review. By comparing the empirically grounded pattern coding with the literature-inspired provisional coding scheme, topics highlighted in the literature and emerging from the interviews were systematically cross-pollinated. I then used the combined ‘hierarchical’ coding scheme for the second-round coding of all transcripts. Up to six hierarchical levels were present for some of the aggregate themes. Lower-level nodes were more directly connected to the data. Higher-level nodes (aggregate themes) were more abstract. **Table 1** describes the two highest-level themes resulting from the coding process.

For the post-coding analysis, I summarised the content of all nodes to move from individual text excerpts positioned under a coding label to identifying larger results (patterns, similarities,

| Aggregate themes                                                                 | Second-order nodes                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cultural values of lambic beers                                                  | Spatial and temporal embedding of production                     |
|                                                                                 | Consumption and identity                                         |
|                                                                                 | Regulation and governance                                        |
|                                                                                 | Representation – marketing and tourism development               |
| Lambic beers and revitalisation of attention                                     | The product itself                                                |
|                                                                                 | Revitalisation of lambic                                         |
|                                                                                 | Economic embedding                                               |
| Fields of tension – dissonance of heritage                                       | Challenges in governance                                         |
|                                                                                 | Commercial heritage                                              |
|                                                                                 | Cooperation challenges                                           |
|                                                                                 | Marketing challenges and weaknesses                              |
|                                                                                 | Spatial issues                                                   |
differences, conflicts in vision and opinion etc.). The summarising content analysis document was used for triangulation with policy documents and gathered promotional material. Finally, careful reading and cross-referencing between the summarised nodes led to the identification of the main results.

The results section is structured according to two of the three aggregate themes. The content of the overarching node 'cultural values of lambic beers' is integrated in the discussion of the two other main themes since it is at the basis of describing the revitalisation of attention and the sector’s dissonance. This embedding of the content of one of the main nodes within the other two reflects ‘the rather hierarchical relationship between nodes typical for NVivo’ (Stoffelen 2019, 2205, see Schiellerup 2008) and, hence, the value of the post-coding analysis.

Results

Changing cultural and commercial heritage values of lambic beers over time

The upturns and downturns of the lambic sector are linked to fluctuations in the increasingly globalising beer sector. After the Second World War, lambic breweries struggled to compete with the more standardised, stable and cost-efficient production of lager beers. Consumer tastes became sweeter because of the popularity of soda drinks. The limited market position of lambic beers led to a vicious circle in terms of product quality. Sales were low so limited investments could be made in the production facilities, resulting in a variable and often poor quality of the final product. This did not help for generating sales, resulting again in fewer investment opportunities and further reducing quality:

It was survival. People made beer and it was a bonus when some of it could be sold at one point. . . . In the 80s, there was no money so no money could be invested either. That was a problem. Then the quality goes down. . . . It lasted until the 90s until there was some sort of a revival and that was still very slow. (Representative, brewery)

I drank old gueuzes in the 80s. You had to have a lot of courage and sacrifice to empty the glass. . . . There was a lot of bad stuff on the market. (Local respondent)

Several breweries changed their recipes by adding artificial sweeteners. Even though this practice is nowadays lambasted by some craft beer purists as ‘un-authentic’, it did allow breweries to survive when there was not sufficient interest in the original, un-sweetened product. Interviewees regularly mentioned that ‘the sweet has saved the sour’. In fact, some brewers still depend on their sweetened range to survive today. Other breweries continued with their previous, traditional practices but became marginal or closed altogether at one point. Only a few breweries remained viable with only their original product. One respondent credited the supplementary cultural activities initiated at that point – probably the first time for the lambic sector – for the brewery’s survival:

I understood then that I could save the brewery, that I could find new clients, with cultural activities . . . If I hadn’t done that back then, we probably wouldn’t have been here, sitting and talking. (Representative, brewery)

The respondents traced the first changes to the 1990s. Attention to the product steadily increased in the 2000s and accelerated in the last 10 years. Most respondents mentioned that, even though local recognition started to increase, the growing international attention provided a driver for the sector’s rejuvenation. The basis for the international exposure was already laid in the 1980s, among others by the beer and whisky connoisseur Michael Jackson. This was followed up in the 1990s and early 2000s with several English language publications including the popular book Lambic Land. Advances of the internet and social media have further fuelled the international attention. One brewery representative summarised that ‘the village market has become the world market’ (personal communication).
According to the interviewees, the rejuvenation of lambic beers followed the increased societal interest in speciality products that contrast with standardised mass-produced supply in supermarkets. This shift to post-Fordist production and consumption patterns, characterised by an increased valuation of cultural and place-based characteristics of consumption products, increased the profitability of craft beers. Lambic beers have a high potential in this regard. The production process, the historical socio-spatial embedding in the Zenne valley, the beers’ flavours and degustation techniques all lend themselves for storytelling and experience creation:

The story is simply real. You don’t have to invent anything. The beer is unique. It’s truly bound to the region. (Representative, brewery).

To tap into the potential of this story, most breweries and blenders have started, or indicated that they will start, with guided tours, beer degustation facilities and other on-site experience-generating activities. Furthermore, there was a remarkable consensus among respondents that lambic production could play a role countering the degradation of traditional rural landscapes and poor returns for farmers by sourcing locally, creating local consumption markets and establishing local tourism network connections. Specific strategies to get this done are hardly present as beer production remains the breweries’ core task. Visions regarding how to develop these ideas in the future and use them for marketing also differ between breweries (see below). Nevertheless, the observation that different players have similar core values on this matter is an indication that the sector’s growing profitability slowly leads to its growing socio-cultural and socio-economic embedding in the area.

The rejuvenation of the lambic sector was not self-evident despite the beers having the right ‘craft’ characteristics, recently interpreted as constituting cultural heritage values by often non-local consumers. The sector was almost wiped out by the time post-Fordist production and consumption patterns gained ground. The respondents identified several factors that allowed the lambic sector to tap into the arising opportunity. The main driver identified by the respondents was the establishment of the association ‘HORAL’ in the 1990s, propelled by the actions of a few key individuals. HORAL’s objective is to promote and advocate the traditional craft involved in lambic brewing and blending. The association focuses on the protection of collective interests but stays clear of commercial discussions. The group had a few achievements early on that set the stage for the sector’s revival. Again led by a few key individuals, old gueuze and old kriek obtained the Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) European designation, protecting the production method but not limiting the production to the Zenne valley. In the early 2000s, an appeal by HORAL resulted in a change of legislation from the Belgian food agency that threatened to bar the use of wood in food production environments, which would have forced the closure of all lambic production facilities. HORAL was also at the basis of the first sector-wide experience-creation project with the development of Toer de Gueze in 1997, a biennial festival that grew to attract roughly 10,000 visitors in 2019. Collective efforts to increase and stabilise the products’ quality and the international visibility of some brands with high aspirational consumption values further improved the sector’s market positioning. Most respondents were convinced that if HORAL would not have existed, traditional lambic production may have disappeared altogether:

The lambic sector would have looked very different [without HORAL]. I think it wouldn’t have existed anymore. It would have been the end of it. (Representative, brewery)

[Without a few individuals] it would have been gone. Definitely. . . . I think you can only put the feather on the cap of one person. . . . He dragged all the rest along and made them work together again. He understood that you can’t do it alone. You don’t have a culture that way. (Local respondent)

The renewed attention to local products and crafts, thus, provided an economic driver that made the sector’s revitalisation possible. A good example is the motivation of relatively new lambic producers. Most of them grew up in the area and consider lambic beers part of their cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the current dynamism of the sector follows from the perception that it is now
economically feasible again to open a lambic brewery. A respondent from a relatively new brewery mentioned:

If it would have been the end of the 70s or the beginning of the 80s, I don’t think I would have done it [started the brewery]. The economic factor plays a role. At some point we reasoned that hopefully … we can get something out of it. (Representative, brewery)

The embedding of lambic in the consumer-driven, market-based beer sector also brings challenges. High prices can be fetched abroad due to the aspirational, symbolic values assigned to lambic beers by international craft beer enthusiasts with reference to the historic legacy and place-specific production process. However, dependence on international markets also makes breweries susceptible to fluctuations in demand, not in the least from the American market which has shown recent signs of stagnation. Many interviewees emphasised the importance of local embedding, to create strong ambassadors but also to establish a buffer for the more volatile international market. Moreover, some mentioned that the authenticity of the product depends not only on local production but also local consumption, which could be undermined by higher price setting when the focus shifts to targeting international markets:

We make authentic lambic beers but when they’re only drunk by foreigners you lose your authenticity, your history, your identity eventually. That’s absolutely not what we want. Belgium is our home market, and when another foreign market collapses … [leaves pause hanging] (Representative, brewery)

When we succeed in getting a regional produce designation but we can’t make people in the area consume it, we’ve made a mistake. (Representative, brewery)

When foreign visitors come here, they have to find our products everywhere on the menus. When they can’t find the products, where is the story then? (Local entrepreneur)

The product’s cultural values, centred around the recent recognition its historic significance and the traditional, place-based production process, are at the basis of the sector’s economic revitalisation. Yet, there is also a clear sensitivity around romanticising the cultural heritage values for commercial purposes when attempting to tap into this potential. As shown in the next section, struggles with delineating the boundaries between collective and individual interests, or identifying where the cultural values stop and the economic values begin, is a reason for ongoing dissonance of heritage values of lambic beers.

**What is traditional lambic brewing? The dissonance of cultural and commercial heritage values of lambic beers**

Considering that the craft beer market is becoming very congested and competitive, most interviewees felt the need to attract customers through experience creation, storytelling and product innovation. Despite the strong story that is already available, the perceived need to innovate further blurs the boundaries between the cultural and economic heritage values of lambic beers. One respondent summarised the challenge:

Where is the line between maintaining tradition and still following the market? This is a difficult question. (Representative, brewery)

Different breweries have different perspectives on how this balance should be struck. All respondents, without exception, found it crucial to safeguard traditional values and characteristics of the production process. However, different interpretations of tradition, and how tradition could be commercially used, appeared during the interviews. Even though most players largely agree with each other on the basics and find market strategies a matter to be decided upon on an individual basis, two opposite perspectives have established in recent years. The divisive question is if tradition means following the historical production process as closely as possible or if it means trying to understand the traditional process in detail and optimising it and innovating using current
knowledge and technology. Proponents of the first interpretation argue that lambic production should go back to how it was before to protect the product’s authenticity. This sometimes includes local sourcing of ingredients, utilising old grain and fruit varieties, establishing networks with local farmers, and limiting innovations with lambic, such as gueuze from steel keg for servings from draft. Some respondents on this end of the spectrum stressed their role in the regional economy through initiating local production networks. This approach regularly leads to higher prices because of the local sourcing of ingredients. It also creates symbolic value which translates into commercial value, not in the least among international craft beer enthusiasts. Respondents genuinely felt that they are protecting the tradition, in contrast to others who are freer in their interpretation of tradition:

It’s a development that has to be made for the whole area. Going back to how it all was. Pulling along a lot of people, passionate people, craftspeople, in the wake of the popularity of lambic. … We’re convinced that a tradition has to be continued by stubborn people, not by changing the product to the customer’s wishes. (Representative, brewery)

The most vocal proponents of the second interpretation see tradition as respecting the style and the process but ‘you’ve got to be able to write the next chapters’ (personal communication). According to these respondents, this ‘next chapter’ consists of innovative products departing from traditionally produced lambic, and/or improving the quality and the control over the production process. The latter requires improving the knowledge on the production process and using refined, modern techniques and brewing installations to optimise the different stages of the classic production process. Respondents on this end of the spectrum argue that completely reverting to past practices inevitably leads to a selective interpretation of tradition. Improved techniques allowed developing higher quality and more stable beers than before, which is needed in the current market:

People today expect that it’s brewed in a charming, authentic brewing room but what they taste should actually come from a modern facility where there is excellent control over the quality of the process. … This leads to miscommunications, the strangest stories. (Representative, brewery)

Is it traditional to make something … and not to try to make a better beer? I think it’s more important to make better beer. … To be [truly] traditional, we wouldn’t clean the barrels that much, we’d work dirtier, and we’d have more acetic acid [unwanted in lambic production] in our lambic. (Representative, brewery)

Apart from the mentioned discussion whether gueuze can be put in steel kgs instead of bottles, the contrast between both perspectives mirrors in the presence of two parallel projects on reintroducing the traditional but low-yield variety of sour cherries needed for producing old kriek. One project focuses on cultural value and experience creation as well as encouraging the earlier-mentioned area-inclusive development:

We want to get the fruit from as close as possible to us and pay a decent price for it. We pay [a certain amount] per kilo to encourage people to climb a tree and pick cherries. Also from a socio-cultural perspective. What we see is that it’s mostly the older generation who start planting trees again and pick the cherries together with their children and grandchildren. … We have a dream to make a kriek with 100% local cherries our standard kriek again. (Representative, brewery)

The other project departs from a more scientific basis. The cultural approach is seen by contributors as a nice practice but not a realistic one from a production perspective:

We have to look out for a certain cultivation of cherries that is of interest to us. If we plant it, it must at least be disease resistant. We can take one from nature. It may just look like it, but it can also be one that contains a certain disease and fungus. Then you shouldn’t use it because you will spread it on a larger scale. … [The other approach] is of course a nice story. It would be nice if everyone did that [planted cherry trees]. But from a production perspective … it’s impossible to achieve good quality control. It’s like a bakery saying, ‘for every loaf that I bake, I’m going to get a kilo of flour from someone else’. (Representative, brewery)

The discussion above shows that the distinction between individual and collective interests – central to HORAL’s working, as outlined above – is not that clear-cut and overlaps with the blurred line
between cultural and economic heritage values of lambic beers. The interrelation between cultural and economic heritage values is, thus, at the basis of the rejuvenation of a sector that was in dire straits in the 1980s and 1990s but also at the basis of growing tension that has coincided with this rejuvenation, particularly now the sector has become more profitable and less concerned about its immediate survival. HORAL finds itself in a position where it should strike a fine balance. Most interviewees mention the good mutual relations and the importance of continuing collaboration within HORAL, despite some commercial differences. However, the inevitable overlap between collective and commercial interests has also led to some internal disagreements, leading among others to relatively slow decision and implementation processes and a few membership cancellations:

There aren’t many professional domains where producers try to make something together and organise something like the Toer de Geuze. We’re competitors but we can still work together. I think that’s a great achievement. (Representative, brewery)

It was important to be together to respond and take a position and send letters as a professional association. But now it has become less important. (Representative, brewery)

It may get easier to distance oneself from collaborating by saying ‘we can do it better ourselves so we no longer need you’. I see that a little more than before. (Representative, brewery)

A binding factor is that most interviewees agree that the sector would benefit from a European spatial designation like a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) or Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). The earlier-mentioned disagreements, though, also reverberate in this discussion. Some of the more traditionalist breweries want to include the sourcing of ingredients, so the soil together with the air, while breweries positioned at the other end of the spectrum want to emphasise just the traditional fermentation process, which has a clear socio-spatial historical embedding by itself.

Because of the blurry boundary between commercial and common interests, many respondents mentioned that the current sector-driven regulation could be complemented by public sector involvement. A neutral, external party may bring actors together for dealing with supplementary activities such as future area-inclusive development and sector-wide tourism network creation. Many respondents agreed that this should happen without handing over control or transferring responsibility for sector-led initiatives upwards as this could thwart local dynamism. Many remarks were also made about current inefficiency of many public investments. Moreover, public sector regulation of these topics is complicated by historically rooted territorial issues. Most respondents regard the provincial level the most logical partner considering its larger strategic means than the more accessible but less endowed organisations on the Pajottenland/Zenne valley level. Yet, the relation between the Pajottenland and Zenne valley area, west and south of Brussels, and the provincial government with its seat in Leuven, east of Brussels, is historically poor:

This area, with Brussels in between, has a double feeling towards Leuven. [People feel that] either they interfere, or they abandon them. (Local respondent)

The most-mentioned potential coordinating organisation, the provincial tourism organisation, independently presented itself as the most likely coordinator as well. It also recognised the historically grown sentiment described above. Very recently, its working reorganised so that systematic cooperation with the area west of Brussels could be developed for the first time in the near future:

Keeping in touch with the local level is very important. Here in Leuven, we’re far away from the Pajottenland so it’s important that there’s a local structure. We’ll try to bring people together to work more efficiently and [thereby] coordinate the existing but parallel actions [so that it] benefits all. (Policymaker)

The new policy plans seem a fruitful strategy to complement the existing sector-driven regulation but the same core sensitivities remain: alongside coordinating between existing, overlapping and
sometimes parochial policy actions – a widely noted problem in the area – future success depends on finding the uncontested cultural and economic core values within the sector, including where the boundary lies between individual and collective matters.

**Concluding discussion**

This paper zoomed in on the intricacies related to the revitalisation of commercial products that have recently been assigned with cultural heritage values in the context of post-Fordist consumption. Using a case study of the renaissance of lambic beers, the paper contributes to heritage studies by exploring the utility of Cultural Political Economy to analyse contested heritage values, as well as by unravelling the global-local tension between economic and cultural values in particular for commercial heritage revitalisation.

The lambic sector is driven by the globalising beer market in which the ‘craft’ of commercial products, particularly when associated to historical practices and specific locations, is transformed into cultural heritage values. In a sector typified by post-Fordist consumption, this cultural value associated to the product by an increasingly global consumer base translates into commercial value. As such, the global post-Fordist embedding of the sector, including the ‘craft’ cultural/economic imaginary, provides structural economic pressure on the lambic sector. On the one hand, the case study showed that this pressure provided the context that made the renaissance of lambic beers possible. On the other hand, it forced a semiotic response from the sector to manoeuvre in this global field of structural economic pressure and underpinning consumers’ imaginaries. While the characteristics of the traditional product and production processes neatly fit this global cultural/economic imaginary, providing opportunities for the sector, tensions appeared as well. The dependency of some breweries on their sweetened range even today, a practice at odds with the dominant craft imaginary, is one example.

In fact, economic and cultural values of lambic have been interrelated for centuries, but nowadays with an additional experiential layer related to the global attention to and heritage recognition of the historically grounded, place-specific product as part of post-Fordist consumption. In response, quests of mobilising the sector’s agency were successful and strongly collective to start but became more individual over time. Almost all involved actors see and value the interrelations between the products’ cultural values (the product’s ‘traditional’, emplaced characteristics) and economic values (commercial viability and product attractivity). However, there is disagreement on how this interrelation could be turned into a stable, hegemonic association. Different breweries pursue their economic agency with different imaginaries regarding what is traditional and how this tradition could be commercialised. At the time of writing, the co-presence of several distinct cultural/economic imaginaries resulted in active dissonance (Kisicć 2013), which also influences how, with whom and around which topics future collaboration is foreseen. The identified dissonance regarding constructed imaginaries requires continuous communication among involved actors to select, reinforce and institutionalise a new, collective ‘common sense’ discourse (Jessop 2010) about the sector’s tradition and legacy; not a straightforward feat in a commercial marketplace where public policy, individual and collective interests meet.

The application of CPE to the lambic beer case study reflects the framework’s value for understanding dissonant heritage values, particularly when it comes to the interrelations between economic and cultural heritage values. The awareness that cultural and economic value creation is interconnected is well-established in heritage studies. CPE’s emphasis on the interrelation between the structural and semiotic (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008; Sum and Jessop 2013) provides a nuanced framework for deepening these reflections. CPE provides a strong exploratory framework that moves beyond identifying that heritage is dissonant or describing which possibly conflicting heritage values are associated to commercial products. The CPE framework gives pointers as to why actors assign different values to the product, in which structural economic context this takes place, which strategies are followed and which tensions are present when
attempting to construe one hegemonic imaginary towards the future to safeguard stakeholders’ agency. Future theoretical cross-fertilisation with existing heritage frameworks and empirical applications will bring out additional nuances of CPE’s utility for heritage studies.

In the final analysis, the lambic sector flourishes in economic and cultural terms compared to a few decades ago. Despite tension over imaginaries, the sector is still characterised by a relatively strong collaborative mindset. Future negotiations over the sector’s core values as well as the rolling out of complementary activities may buffer the sector for market volatility and, thereby, safeguard the economic and cultural future of the sector. As such, the lambic sector is a relevant social laboratory for future research on (strategies countering) dissonance of commercial heritage.

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