

CULTURAL HERITAGE: AN INTRODUCTION TO ENTANGLEMENTS OF KNOWLEDGE, POLITICS AND PROPERTY

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ABSTRACT

Heritage is today actively implemented in policies globally, and yet the categorisation and instrumentalisation of the realm of cultural heritage entails rather contradictory aspects. In the discourse of culture, heritage is an abstraction, and what it signifies is subject to interpretation. This contribution* gives a brief overview of the contemporary discussion of the epistemological and ontological premises of cultural heritage. It has been stated that heritage is a social construction, and a mode of cultural production that emanates from a metacultural relationship. The critical assessment and theorisation of heritage includes an enquiry into tangible and intangible heritagisation, knowledge production, heritage politics, and the question of ownership.

KEYWORDS: heritage theorisation • critical assessment • knowledge production

The categorisation, political implementation and instrumentalisation of the realm of cultural heritage concerns today invested and engaged 'stake-holders' from cultural management to academia, and therefore this expanding field is in need of critical inquiry. Cultural heritage carries a strong potential for the acquisition of sociopolitical capital. Although it also renders channels for economic resources. Consequently, we witness its increasing role in culture-orientated politics at various levels, with particularly significant resonance observable on the international stage.

Contemporary studies of culture are increasingly preoccupied with discussing, celebrating, or deconstructing the epistemological and ontological premises of cultural heritage. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett had already called for heritage to be theorised fifteen years ago, arguing that folklorists and ethnologists tend to focus on that which counts as heritage with little concern for the instruments for producing heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 379). The latter would entail the rethinking of disciplinary subjects and practices.

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CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Despite the continuously expanding popular obsession with the past and veneration of patrimonial legacies, heritage is not a given, an already-existing something waiting to be unveiled, but rather it is constructed and produced, as has been demonstrated by numerous studies (see for example Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; 1998; 2004; Lowenthal 1998; Bendix 2000; Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge 2000; Peckham 2003; Smith 2006; Smith, Akagawa 2009). Heritage is a project of ideology that is dependent on ambivalent temporal entanglements: though claiming diachronic rootedness, it is a product of the new that “has recourse to the past” (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 369). Its conceptualisation depends on modernity’s sense that the present needs to re-forged links with a past that appears to be severed and lost in the changing world. Even as a term, its value-laden nature alludes to preservation and celebration of past elements of a reified culture that is intended to manifest ethnicity, locality and history; and yet the cultural politics involved with heritage proposes to address the concerns of the present, with a foreseeable perspective to the future. On the other hand, the employment of the notion of heritage comprises a capacity to overshadow the complexities of history and politics in its program to construct or sustain a status or a group, or equip particular objects or expressive forms with political resonance (cf. Bendix 2000). However, like all terms in the discourse of culture, heritage is an abstraction, and what it signifies is subject to interpretation and an evaluation that may fluctuate between positive and negative over time.

Heritage, itself a late-modern European conception and cultural phenomenon, is today actively implemented in policies globally; it has started to play an important role both in national and international culture-orientated politics from rather contradictory aspects – it serves the elites and general public to fuel national pride, whereas cultural traditions and suppressed history have become powerful tools for previously dominated regions or social strata. Thus it remains continuously worthwhile to question whom does heritage empower, or what the repercussions of (and impact on) collectives or individuals are in this process. When the dynamic nature of cultural expression becomes immobilised by the verbs “to preserve”, “to protect”, or “to safeguard” utilised in the realm of cultural heritage politics, the contemporary scholarship of cultural criticism wants to unravel how heritage constitutes and eventually transforms culture.

TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGISATION

An additional ambivalence concerns the claimed materiality or intangibility of heritage. On the one hand, cultural heritage is more widely known to be about place; about the situated, material, aesthetic and experiential aspects of culture. The dominant perception of heritage draws heavily from the Western European architectural and archaeological conservation and preservation practices that define it as material (tangible), monumental, good, aesthetic, and of universal value. On the other hand, a conceptual shift has occurred in the last decade that has legitimised the term “intangible” to define cultural expressions and practices (storytelling, craftsmanship, rituals, etc.) with the aim of being universally inclusive in avoiding the references to social stratum or inferiority

that are perceived to be present in terms like “folklore”, “traditional” or “popular culture”, and which global cultural politics considers too delimiting or prescriptive. At the same time the historicity of heritage needs to be formalised through material symbolism, which makes the intangible and ephemeral into something that has material form, be it on paper, a book, an audiovisual recording, particular elements of a festival, or an archive. However, in an epistemological sense, all heritage is intangible because of the value ascribed and its social impact, Laurajane Smith has contended (Smith 2006). The concept of heritage is used to legitimise, or make material, the intangibilities of culture and human experience. In essence, the polarisation into tangible and intangible is organisational and political, largely applied to demarcate target spheres and areas of expertise; it is the institutional distinction inside heritage industries that needs the division between tangible and intangible heritage. The recent re-theorisation of heritage not only as sites, places, performances or events, but rather as a social construction and cultural practice, draws attention to the process of heritage-making by applying and recognising the social significance of objects and expressions. Heritage is a social construction, a result of the process of “cultural work” wherein the creation of heritage is directed by the “authorized heritage discourse” (ibid.). The latter emanates from a close interconnectedness of relevant national institutions with international organisations such as UNESCO that has distinguished between the three major areas of heritage through its legal instruments of conventions: cultural, divided into tangible and intangible, and natural heritage.¹

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued that heritage as a mode of cultural production emanates from a metacultural relationship – heritage is created through metacultural operations (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; 2004), which lead the analysis of cultural heritage to the examination of socio-political and economic entanglements. Heritage is significantly instrumental in the existential and operational sphere of tourism; it plays an essential role in branding and marketing. The heritage industry collaborates with tourism: heritage converts locations and cultural expressions into destinations, while the tourism industry transforms no longer self-sustainable sites, objects, repertoires, and ways of life into economically viable representations of themselves (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; 1998). The making of heritage depends not only on conceptual valourisation, but value is added both to symbolic as well as material resources (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006). Cultural heritage has reformative and powerful organisational and economic significance. Regina Bendix has pointed out the exigency to understand the mechanism of heritage-making, the process of “heritagisation” by studying the role of the economic utilisation of heritage (Bendix 2009), which is inherently related to the programmes and legal instruments of international institutions (like UNESCO) that have established specific competitive and evaluative regimes in their policies and procedures of world heritage designations.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Yet, if cultural heritage is made and constructed, it first needs to be imagined. Cultural heritage becomes real when someone identifies it as such, which denotes a process of knowledge production that involves academic research. The analysis of the identifica-

tion and instrumentalisation process of cultural heritage requires a critical investigation of the making and social dissemination of scholarly knowledge in the context of cultural heritage research, of the mutual effects of cultural politics and academia. The awareness of heritage is epistemologically related to scholarship of history, art, ethnology, folklore, etc. – heritage is a certain way of knowing cultural objects, sites or practices. It involves particular systems of meaning that are employed by specialists. Thus knowledge-holders claim a particular authority that depends on empirical, rhetorical and metaphoric determinism that makes a world of order and creates a discourse of authority. The process by which that knowledge is acquired, learned, organised, stored and retrieved produces communities of expertise that are intimately tied up in relationships of power.

These developments derive from and are nurtured by the interaction of ethnographic research with heritage production and cultural policy-making. Academic and ethnographic research has entered the sphere of the public domain, with discursive impact on local communities and their cultural expression, on ethnic and cultural identities, and eventually on heritage production at the local, national, and international level. Knowledge needs to be framed – given a name, established with provenance and applicability – before it can be “bought or sold” (cf. Napier 2002: 289). Public presentation of heritage creates and implements knowledge that becomes incorporated into the modern social imaginary of those common practices that derive from and are legitimised by shared history. Cultural heritage results from a process of selection and identification that is subtly related to academic interests, but is put into force on the initiative of government, which establishes official regulations and interventions.

HERITAGE POLITICS

In the field of heritage policy, authority is accorded to expert knowledge and precedence given to professional interventions that create particular communities of interest. The discursive impact of the concept and perception of cultural heritage paves the way for a battleground of celebration and contestation among those entangled in the process of heritage production. Frictions appear based on cultural competence, conflicts between conservationists and innovators, hierarchies of authority. To a certain extent, these are opposed by local communities that claim ownership of particular cultural heritage, by communities for whom reaffirmation of their sense of community matters, and who thus participate in the process of heritage production.

Heritage is perceived to give a particular sense of community, of communal belonging. Though communities are seen as natural organisations of the populous, they actually come into existence through a need to organise boundaries and interact with the communities antithesis, e.g. the government (cf. Bennett 1998: 201). This becomes apparent in the context of making cultural policies where local communities find an outlet to activism, and seek to create an operational mechanism that provides them with agency in the instrumentalisation of local cultural policies. Then, policy-making will function and activate at the community level, depending on the inclusion (as well as exclusion) of community representatives. The claims for heritage involve policy making embedded in the framing of culture, its history and expression, which combine insider

activism with outside interests involving political gain. Heritage has become expedient for both economic and political purposes (cf. Yúdice 2003).

The identification and the evaluation of cultural heritage are inevitably surrounded by contestation. Programmes for its preservation and safeguarding pertain simultaneously to the politics of inclusion and exclusion: about who matters, who is counted in, who defines. The veneration of heritage tends to overshadow social inequalities (Bendix 2000). Heritage politics is never neutral, it is all about choice that is implicitly and explicitly dependent on a notion of purity, whereas it shuns the existence of, and qualities related to, hybridity. Heritage is selected or appointed in a complex process that involves particular politics when different groups simultaneously select and promote their symbols (cf. Klein 2006). However, the relationship between community and heritage need not always be good and comfortable (see Smith, Waterton 2009). Communities are not homogeneous, nor is their heritage; disjunctions occur, while the heritage claimed may not be consensual (Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996). A lot of social experience and practice can be related to contrast and conflict; they denote pain and suffering, as has been shown by studies on dissonant heritage. This reflects the complexities of how communities define and negotiate memory and identity, how they communicate and engage with each other.

OWNERSHIP

Heritage is about belonging, identifying and managing, defined by selection, exclusion and ownership. The policies of cultural heritage reveal presumably conflicting individual, communal or state perspectives observable in the predicaments of ownership, contested restitution or celebration. Property relations are ultimately social and political, whereas it appears to be easier to understand rights over things than rights between people. Property as a concept entails elaborations on politics and economy, when looking at the social organisation of rights and authorities over material and intellectual resources. Ownership is a product of interests; the possession or appropriation of something is grounded in the perception of established social and political domains. In the context of cultural heritage, the concern for objects should be paralleled with the analysis of the dynamics in claiming subjectivity in these relations, to analyse the conflict or potential in the ownership relations from the perspective of the individual or the community.² Communal property subsumes negotiated junctures with the state, rendering it significance in the discussion of property rights, and eventually pointing to the aspect of policy making. The discussions of ownership rights that involve government programmes and policies, take into account the particular state regulative system, complemented by analysis of status hierarchies, control and power.

CREATIVE DYNAMICS IN PARTICULARITIES

Regardless of the constraints rendered above in this survey of critical contemplations on heritage, human practice “surpasses rather than merely conserves the givenness in which it arises” (Jackson 2005: xii), and therefore we should look at the particulari-

ties, the creative interpretation, new intellectualisations and re-rendering of the diverse combinations of forms and imaginative ways of making sense of cultural heritage.

The opposing categories of stasis and dynamics appear in ongoing contestation in the cultural work of heritage. The conceptualisation of heritage claims a fixed identity, whereas the dynamics of cultural expression appears antithetical and irreconcilable with the stasis of heritage. But at the same time it also transforms – regardless of the temporal fixation implied with the celebration of the past, the expanding utilisation of the concept of cultural heritage is often combined with dynamic verbs denoting change – to reshape, to reform, to mobilise, to transform images, practices or resources (cf. Hafstein 2009). Thus there has to be a moment of creativity and agency in this picture. Though the prism of cultural critique renders heritage a great deal of agency, the actors involved and their agency in the process of production, maintenance and consumption – concerning both individuals and collectives – should continue to be of interest. The portion of society that does the constructing of it and uses it needs to be studied and analysed in order to understand cultural heritage and its prominent presence in the contemporary world. Heritage professionals use concepts, standards, and regulations to bring cultural phenomena and practitioners into the heritage sphere, while as a marker of identity, cultural heritage designates and points to collectivity, to community or nation. Cultural heritage constitutes social collectives and organises them around a “cultural residue” of sites, objects, or practices, and these heritage practises perform those collectives (ibid.). Heritage is likewise intensely related to locality – at global, national and local levels heritage is used to define a sense of place; it renders belonging there meaningful and provides it with a diachronic dimension.

The analysis of cultural heritage continuous to be necessary in the particularities of production, instrumentalisation or contestation that reflect creativity, which resorts to the re-conceptualisation and reflexive analysis of the social dimension in defining and valourising the preservation of representations, knowledge and skills of the past. In this first issue are gathered contributions that investigate the performance of intangible cultural heritage at festivals, different aspects of identification with place and the sense of communal belonging, the use of heritage in regional politics, the selective identification and production of cultural heritage, the power struggles of different actors in heritage industry, as well as the complications in defining and protecting different types of heritage, while the permeating backdrop to these cases is sketched by the potentials and constraints of the tourist industry.

Stein R. Mathisen looks at the constitution, production and performance of heritage in the context of modern festivals, which are versatile grand events for celebrating local or ethnic culture and history. Festivals reveal moments of branding, marketing and sale, which are inherently related to tourism, experience industry, or heritage industry. This reflects the globalising tendencies of the valourisation of heritage, embedded in economic processes. He identifies the creation of a narrative of cultural heritage deriving from a selection that reflects the design of borders and identity.

In her article, Maria Krom continues with the analysis of festivals from a perspective of appropriation of space and the making of meaningful place – how people engage with space by attributing markers of identity and symbolically configure power relations in the community. She observes performative practices related to place and belonging with regard to politically motivated processes of heritage creation on a personal and community level.

The contribution by Katriina Siivonen discusses a sense of regional belonging and cultural elements managed and used as brands in local development programmes, in relation to the process of cultural change and the effects of tourism. She argues that development programmes and the administration of cultural heritage bring forth tensions with the dynamic complexity of everyday life in the process of interaction between individuals and organised cultural constructions.

Arnika Peselmann looks at the making of cultural heritage in the entangled process of inventing folk art when social political interests turn a commodity into a value laden object that eventually lead to contested international, national, and local property claims. The meta-cultural operation related to the UNESCO heritage nomination process instigates the exclusive selection of 'right' heritage, in which actors from politics and academia operate to improve the socio-economic situation of the region by consumption and tourism.

Luis Silva investigates the creation of a new economic model of heritage and tourist industries in rural areas to provide social and economic revitalisation. He explores the design and implementation of the program, the physical interventions on historic villages, and the production of heritage and the cultural display of places for consumption in the global tourist market. The classification, appropriation, valourisation, and commoditisation of heritage according to international trends constitute conflicts, negotiations, as well as cooperation in which different kinds of power relationships are played out between political authorities, experts on heritage management, tourist entrepreneurs, and local populations.

Maili Roio investigates the entanglements of identification, ownership, and the legal protection of underwater cultural heritage on both national and international levels. She discusses the symbolism and the special conditions that apply to the management of underwater cultural heritage, which is inherently connected to scientific development and the advancement of technical equipment. The ownership of such heritage reveals complex dependence on state regulations, with ambivalent economic implications on the processes of its protection and its tourism potential, to which are added the predicaments of heritage related to war and conflict.

NOTES

¹ Divided between two conventions: In 1972, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, engaged in the conservation of sites and monuments of architectural ingenious as well as nature, claimed to present unique and universal value. In 2003 the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was sanctioned, concerning practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities recognise as essential parts of their identity construction.

² I have discussed the entanglements of ownership and property rights in greater detail in Kuutma 2009.

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