Heritage and Corruption: The Two Faces of the Nation-State

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abstract

Benedict Anderson’s (1983) recognition of nationalism as an attempt to recuperate collective immortality from the mortal condition of individual humans has important consequences for heritage studies. In addition, the deep historical relationship between “heritage” and “inheritance” carries what J.L. Austin (1971) called “trailing clouds of etymology” linking heritage to particular models of kinship and property in Europe – concepts that maintained the survival of kinship groups in the face of the obvious facts of death and generational passage. Heritage is thus often conceived as a bulwark against decay and eventual disappearance.

In this spirit, most European (and more generally “Western”) conservation attempts, in various ways, to recover “authentic” or “authentic” versions of currently existing sites. Even when a series of phases is recognized, this entails an archaeological version of authenticity that still harks back to the 19th-century folklorists’ concern with the Urtext – a concept that was directly linked to monumentality through the phrase “monuments of the word” (e.g., Nikolaos Politis in Greece). More recent modalities of historic conservation and folklore alike, however, recognize the difficulty of establishing a convincing starting-point even for material remains and still more for what is now often categorized as “intangible heritage.” Aside from the difficulty that this evident similarity poses for the separation of heritage into mutually opposed tangible and intangible heritage, it also suggests that a fresh look at the language of permanence and decay in various cultural contexts would reveal a very wide range of temporalities underlying superficially similar understandings of heritage.

More particularly, heritage studies must recognize the culturally and historically specific nature of ideas about decay. Ever since the Romantic era, a concern with “ruins” and “fragments,” fueled by a tragic vision of decay and death, continues to dominate a great deal of heritage production – the redemptive strategy of the Judaeo-Christian world for resisting or reversing mortality. That mortality was attributed to the corruption of the flesh that is in turn theologically accounted the consequence of Original Sin. The etiology (or, rather, theodicy) of human imperfection is thus conceptually linked both to the motivation for heritage restoration and reconstruction on the one hand, and concepts of political and social corruption on the other. Occasionally, these elements even come dramatically together, as when underworld elements are found to have profiteered from the reconstruction of a church, as happened recently in Rome.

In this paper, I seek to delineate the strands of this conceptual genealogy in order to ask what its consequences might be for a better understanding of how and why conservation attempts are supported and/or resisted in places where the religious and more generally cultural context differs in significant ways from that of the Western settings for so much of the heritage
discourse. The absence of a model of “authenticity” etymologically linked to concepts of power (cf. Turkish effendi, Greek afendiko) and the authority of “the Lord” (Authentês), for example, is a priori likely to engender different reactions to Western modes of archaeological reconstruction than one would expect where instead Buddhist ideas about the impermanence of the material held sway. I therefore argue that a careful reconstruction (!) of the symbolic etymology of the concept of heritage would allow us to see more clearly where currently global discourses of heritage occlude or even oppress local models. Such a conceptual strategy would permit the development of a culturally more equitable understanding of what heritage means for local actors at every level.