“Civil society”, “heritage communities” and the protection of cultural property during armed conflict

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During and in the aftermath of armed conflict, cultural property is under serious threat by collateral damage, looting and intentional destruction. The specific phenomenon of intentional destruction is framed in the rhetoric’s of contemporary conflicts, in which heritage is used in the process of fabricating an ethnically homogeneous territory during ethnic cleansing operations. Cultural heritage bears conflicting values. Top-down approaches can fail to meet the needs of the local communities involved. A bottom-up approach by civil society actors is thus an asset. An awareness of the social context is needed and a stakeholder and participatory approach is the most natural option for heritage management in this context.

Moreover, the concepts of “civil society” and “community” are on the rise in the field of cultural heritage (studies) in general (e.g. 2005 FARO Convention of the Council of Europe). In the particular field of cultural property protection during armed conflict, civil society seems to be well established: Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) as well as actors who are not organizations strictu sensu are engaged. However, critical analyses of the meaning of these concepts in practice, in the particular field of cultural heritage during armed conflict, is absent. Therefore, this paper will analyze the role of civil society in the field of cultural heritage protection during armed conflict. It questions whether civil society in this field is valuable and how its practice can be improved. Moreover, the paper points to the fact that during contemporary conflict, the concepts ‘civil society’ and ‘heritage communities’ are rather problematic, since these actors could become the perpetrators of cultural property destruction. Although this may sound controversial to some, we also count rebel groups and insurgents as members of civil society. They are non-state actors interacting with other actors in order to change the current state order (or they are at least established under the guise of this aim). As illustrated during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, in contemporary armed conflicts a politics of identity has started to emerge. Elites are willing to fill the power vacuum. Therefore, they have to mobilize at the grassroots level. This mobilization process is reinforced by identity politics in which cultural heritage is used as mirror of that identity. “Heritage communities” are thus formed. Any claims on the territory by ‘others’ have to be erased. Hence, cultural heritage symbolizing “other” identities or communities is often destroyed by these actors. This process of ‘territorialisation’ (Smith 2009) is part of ethnic cleansing operations (Van der Auwera 2012). We must therefore also consider how to overcome this dissonance.

In order to do so, an inventory of known civil society actions in the field of cultural property protection during armed conflict will be composed. These activities are then critically analyzed and compared with theoretical approaches to civil society in the field of cultural heritage and civil society, in the specific context of armed conflict. This is achieved by analyzing primary and secondary literature and by conducting open expert interviews. The experts include academics as well as representatives from civil
society. This analysis will result in a civil society stakeholder model as regards the destruction of cultural property during armed conflict.

Literature (in brief)