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Entangled Memories and the European Cultural Heritage: challenges & scenarios for research

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Abstract

A possible direction for research on the European cultural heritage is to adopt a transnational approach. Rather than see cultural heritage as primarily expressed in national contexts, it could be seen as primarily transnational and as plural. Such a view would also suggest a conception of national histories as themselves products of transnational encounters. In this view, the European dimension of cultural heritage is not then necessarily something over and above nations, but part of their heritage. Moreover, as fundamentally transnational, the European heritage is not exclusively confined to Europe. Cultural heritage is not something that is fixed or based on an essence; it is produced and re-interpreted by social actors in different but overlapping contexts. This is also an **interpretative approach** that draws attention to the entangled nature of memories and especially the cultural logic by which new conceptions and narratives of heritage emerge from the encounter and entanglement of different memories. Such an interpretative approach offers new opportunities for **comparative research** on the European heritage as an entangled mosaic of histories and memories. It also **a critical approach** in rejecting not only particularistic accounts of heritage, but also universalistic ones, such as Eurocentric alternative accounts. Furthermore it seeks to connect cultural conceptions of heritage with political accounts.

Introduction: Current Context and Scenarios for the Future

The past permeates the present. Interpretations of the past are fundamentally altered when the present changes. This is particularly the case following moments of crisis. Today in Europe the sense of crisis and uncertainty of the present is inevitably projected back on to the past. It is now widely recognised both in academic studies and in public understanding that the European heritage needs to be re-evaluated in light of significant social and political change and in light of new and more critical ideas about the place and role of heritage. This has also been reflected in new museums and innovative exhibitions that seek to reinterpret the past from the perspective of a new understanding of the present. The traditional approaches to the European past have been much questioned in recent times. The older assumptions of a grand narrative of civilisation based on universal values



has lost its conviction and has been challenged by a new emphasis on diversity to a point that it is apparently no longer possible to say of what the European heritage consists other than a multiplicity of national histories and collective memories or possibly the recognition of the past in terms of trauma. **In the absence of a grand narrative, is it possible for the present to relate to the past in a way that can offer a vision for the future?** This is now a major challenge for the memories of nations, but for larger entities, such as Europe itself, it is yet more of a challenge.

Two main developments are evident today: on the one side, there has been considerable attention given to the idea of the European heritage in terms of identity, values, history, and, on the other side, some of the dominant intellectual trends since the 1970s question if not the very possibility of a European order of values at least the capacity of culture to provide enduring points of reference for the present. The notion of a shared European historical heritage is either appealed to as a source of historical legitimation, or as it appears to be increasingly the case, it is rejected as irrelevant for the present. What is left is basically at most a choice of facing up to the dark side of the European past or celebrating the diversity of Europe. **There has not been as yet any comprehensive attempt to reconcile the critique of the European heritage with the apparent need for contemporary Europe to articulate its identity and values in relation to the past in a way that is more inclusive of all European traditions.** This is a major challenge for research on memory and heritage today not least in light of widespread cultural alienation felt by many minorities. Put differently, a key question is whether it is possible to create a conception of heritage that can maintain a critical and reflective stance towards memory and which is more forward looking than backward.

This challenge is important since the question of how the present should relate to the past continues to be posed at national and European levels and very often the answers that are found are based on old-fashioned and discredited notions of history and heritage deriving from group specific memories. The European heritage has been widely appealed to, but almost always inconclusive as regards substantive content. While such questions have long been central to definitions of national identity around memory, mourning, and commemoration, they are now integral to European self-understanding, as in, for example, controversies over



disputed legacies of history, the status of the Christian tradition, whether Islam is part of the European heritage, colonialism, the persecution of minorities, contested definitions of persecutors and perpetrators, the traditions of thought that shaped the rise of fascism, notions of peoplehood and 'European values,' the repatriation of antiquities etc. **Underlying all these controversies is the basic question of what narrative of the past should be privileged, who tells the story and what purpose should it serve.** In light of the resurgence of nationalism and various kinds of populism, as well as new divisions that capitalism has given rise to, this is more urgent than ever if the European past is to be a relevant reference for the present day.

A broad aim, then, is to research re-interpretations of the European heritage today in light of recent developments in the human and social sciences and in view of a mood of crisis in Europe. One of the main insights that might inform such research is that **a transnational perspective of European history** can re-orient the European heritage in a direction that offers a more viable way for contemporary Europe to articulate an inter-cultural and cosmopolitan identity in keeping with the emerging shape of Europe and with its own often acknowledged past. **Whilst a paradigmatic shift to the transnational is taking place in the social and human sciences today, the implications have not been fully considered within the social and human sciences in relation to the European past and present.**

One very concrete way this can be developed is to explore what happens when one memory – or tradition of heritage – confronts another. To follow Rothberg (2009), memories are not self-contained, but interact with other memories. This has been demonstrated with respect to the memory of the holocaust, which in developing a collective memory has become a wider and global memory that has contributed to the articulation of other memories, especially slavery but also the Algerian War of Independence (and has itself changed as a result of the interaction with other memories). This occurs through borrowing, cross-referencing, negotiation. **There is considerable scope for research as well as theoretical development in applying the notion of 'cultural transfer' to memory research along these lines.** This is also the most promising alternative to notions of global memory and a way to see cosmopolitan heritage. In this case, transnationalism is embodied in the inter-section of different histories leading to diverse outcomes.



It is possible to take this further with the thesis that **shifts in memory are more likely to be come from the experience of mobility** – travel, displacement, migration – than from settled modes of existence. This claim, if true, would fundamentally challenge the dominant view of memory that prevails in public understandings of heritage.

Challenges

Challenge 1: Is it possible for European societies - and Europe more generally - to create a transnational form of heritage that reflects transnational and entangled memories and identities? Can there be anything specifically European about such a transnationalised form of heritage?

A major challenge for the present day is to relate transnational conceptions of history to heritage, such that a new and more relevant understanding of the European heritage(s) could reflect Europe's transnational history. This is important in order that includes traditions that are often excluded as non-European. It is now widely recognised that collective identities are multi-layered, porous, and contested. Memories likewise can be seen in such terms, based on forgetting and selective remembering. While there are some examples of memories that cut across European societies – for example the memory of the holocaust and in central and Eastern Europe the memory of Stalinist purges – it is unlikely that there will be a common European memory as such. Instead, a more likely scenario will be that the transnational European component consists of the intersection of different memories. **The most fruitful direction for research would therefore be to focus on such intersections. Such research could offer innovative opportunities for comparative analysis.** In other words, to take the example of the memory of the holocaust, it will be remembered in different ways in different places and, crucially for the argument given, it will also intersect differently in different times and places (for example with the memory of Stalinist purges, with the memory of the Algerian War of Independence, with the memory of slavery). In that sense it is possible to address the notion of a European cultural heritage as such in relation to political heritage. It will also be an interesting way to explore the entanglement of European histories in wider global ones. Any such account will



also have to consider the wider global context of the age of the Anthropocene in which cultural and political notions of heritage are connected to natural heritage.

Challenge 2: What is the price our identities pay - or will pay - if we invent a common memory? How can we avoid new and more inclusive narratives from themselves becoming hegemonic?

It is helpful to distinguish between singular memories and shared ones. The first are the memories of a specific group who had direct experience of an event and possibly also the memories of a given nation. For example, the memory of the Second World War was a common memory for the generation that lived in that time. Until recently British national identity was coded in the memory of the war, but this is now fading and British national identity no longer has uncontested cultural reference points. This, too, is the case with Germany today. Shared memories, on the other hand, are memories that are of a more general nature and no longer rooted in the memory of a particular generation or nation. The memory of the First World War would be an example of a memory that is now an indirect one. Such memories are less likely to be hegemonic and can, as in this example, take a more European wide dimension. Additionally such memories can also intersect with other memories.

The concept of heritage has been rightfully criticized by heritage scholars as 'heritagisation' or the 'heritage industry' or what Hartog (2015) has termed an all pervasive 'presentism'; nonetheless it can be argued that emphasis on a European cultural heritage(s) will significantly transform the cultural memory of Europe, possibly contributing to a cosmopolitan cultural memory that is also part of the European heritage. This should be seen less in universalistic terms than in more contextualised and plural terms. Indeed, the notion of heritage – in particular the notion of the patrimonial as the inheritance of the past– is problematical, given its connotation of a historical essence, and with many different interpretations of it in the fields of archaeology and anthropology, history, sociology and political philosophy. Another way to put the question is whether the task is to articulate a new narrative(s) that might be more inclusive or whether it is to avoid that narratives might be become hegemonic.



Challenge 3: How to reconcile a conception of heritage that expresses the positive legacy of the past as well as the dark side of history? Should one side be given more weight? To what extent can memory be guided by history without loss of identity?

It is now more or less generally accepted that the possibility of a common – in the sense of a singular – understanding of history on a European scale has been more or less definitively refuted. However, this does not mean that the present must be severed from the past and that there are only irreconcilable differences if not divisions. Rather than draw this conclusion, which would appear to be the dominant position today, it is worth exploring if there are other ways in which the present can locate itself in the past, but for which new theoretical approaches are required. Europe cannot abandon questioning its dark side, but it cannot also entirely see this as the only way it can relate to the past. The alternative to celebrate its plurality is more promising, but also does not offer a basis for the present to relate to the past. To identify alternative ways of responding to the past is a challenge that cannot be underestimated and may lead to unexpected results that cannot be entirely foreseen. It may be possible to show that the category of heritage defined in terms of Europe can offer radical and unexpected alternatives and is not, as is also often thought, the unreflective transmission of the past or simply the expression of memories, which are increasingly defined in terms of trauma. In other words, there is something more than the shift from the monument to the memorial at stake in the question of how the past can be appropriated by the present.

To see heritage as transnational is to see it in more complicated and nuanced terms than is often the case. If this is possible, then some of the criticisms of heritage can be overcome by seeing it as a way in which societies articulate a historical self-understanding that reflects the reality of contemporary society. Although it does not necessarily follow, it is possible that a more transnationalised conception of heritage, in keeping with Europe's past, can offer contemporary societies a more cosmopolitan orientation to their identities. This is not to claim that the transnational is superior to the national. Put differently, a challenge is to identify the transnational dimension of the national in the hope that it can open the category of the nation to more cosmopolitan possibilities.



Keys for Change: New Directions for Research

What kind of methodology would follow from a broad theoretical conception of memory as transnational? In more concrete methodological terms, a promising direction for research in the human and social sciences on cultural heritage is to see how memories and the identities that lie behind them frequently take an entangled nature. Consequentially heritage can be seen in such entangled terms.

Such a transnational perspective opens up new opportunities for comparative

research, which is too often rejected as incompatible with conceptions of cultures as entangled (Rothberg unnecessarily dismisses comparative research).

One of the most promising lines of inquiry for comparative cultural research and which would bring comparative analysis onto a new level more generally would be to address the transnational in terms of entanglements rather than in terms of endogenous factors i.e. memories as the products of an internal history. This needs to be done in a way that overcomes one of the major problems with the established comparative approaches, namely the tension between looking at the units in question as separate – as already formed endogenously and thus as separate – or as connected and thus to be explained by exogenous factors. What transnational and global analysis draws attention to is the logic by which spatial and temporal entities are formed. In this view, then, the comparative task is to look at different modes of entanglement. The concept of entanglement itself needs to be developed to show what both precedes it and what is produced as a result of entanglements. There are three dimensions to this:

- First, a **feature of many collective identities is that they intersect with other identities**. Identities and memories are not separate, but interact with each other and as they do so the encounter brings about a change in at least one. This is not only a recent development. Identities always have taken this form. However, there can be little doubt that there has been an increase in cultural pluralisation in recent times.
- Second, **the intersection can lead to the mutual cross-fertilisation of identities and memories, such that it is possible to say that the**



cultures have become entangled. Entangled memories are becoming increasingly prevalent today in the context of transnationalised societies.

- Third, **it is possible that entangled identities and memories will become embroiled in each other to a point that they led to the creation of new hybrid forms.**

Approaching memory in this way can lead to new insights and offer a different perspective to a view of memory as singular. It also offers an alternative to what may be implausible notions of global memory or the now anachronistic hope that that 'new sites of memory' can be recovered within the nation. It remains to be seen – and this is also a possible research outcome – if there are European sites of memory, as opposed to national sites. If there are – examples of times and places would be 1648, 1789, 1914, 1945, 1989 and highly symbolic locations such as Waterloo, Vienna, Verdun, Versailles, Auschwitz, Brussels, Berlin. Such iconic moments in time might best be seen as reference points for memories and traditions of heritage that will have different interpretations in different places and times. A further and related question here is whether these can be reference points can be enlarged to include ones that are more representative of Europe's colonial history.

From the perspective of a transnational theory of history and memories as entangled, the implication for a European conception of heritage – whereby 'European' signifies less a layer of history above the national – is more of the order of a process of Europeanisation, **by which is meant that the 'European' level of signification rather consists of the process through which different memories intersect producing new constructions.** In this case, the way memory is articulated in one country will be influenced by the way it is interpreted in another one. Such a view would suggest a conception of heritage less as fixed – neither in national historical terms nor in an alternative European counter-narrative – than produced by the present with a view to the future.

The notion of cultural heritage must also be challenged in terms of its relationship to political heritage and – as Harrison (2015) argues – in relation to natural heritage in the current age of the anthropocene. Rather than see it as organised into compartmentalised domains, they should be seen as interlinked. This would



require a rethinking of the received notions of heritage as either universalistic or as particular.

Conclusion

It can be proposed, then, that the European heritage is based less on a grand narrative conception of culture than on a plurality of interconnecting narratives and the inclusion of new voices, such as those of post-migration communities, and is being forged in new spaces of critical dialogue. It is possible to speak of the European heritage in ways that do not simply refer to the diversity of national and local memories and heritage or to the alternative of seeing heritage only in terms of trauma. The most promising direction for future research is to see the European cultural heritage as an entangled mosaic of histories and to compare the ways in which different memories intersect with each other and to map such intersections spatially and temporally. This is important because unless Europe's transnational past is given more prominence, Europe will not be able to deal adequately with the many problems it is currently faced with at a time of low growth economies (integration of minorities, unprecedented migration, security etc). It is insufficient to see its transnational past in only European terms – as opposed to national terms. Such a corrective of nation-centric accounts would be simply Eurocentric. This is a potential danger in thinking of the European dimension. Instead, what is required is that European cultural heritage should be seen as an expression of a more global world.

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