Cultural Base

Social Platform
on Cultural Heritage
and European Identities

Valuing Heritage as Learning and Entertaining Resources

Vision Document
(cultural memory axis)

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Abstract

Carrying forward the idea that the process of transmission of knowledge (about the past) represents the core of heritage concept, the first part of the document tends to differentiate discourses that are influencing the aforementioned transmission – educational system, popular culture and media, as well as various social groups. All of these discourses are using and activating the past in different ways, by creating various interpretations of it. Thus, the second part of the document points out possible outcomes of domination of only one of these discourses. The third part proposes several keys of change, founded on a critical education about the heritagization process, and on a wider scope of education about heritage, having in mind various levels on which the transmission of the past could be influenced.

Introduction

In her book, *The Uses of Heritage*, Laurajane Smith explores "the idea of heritage not so much as a 'thing', but as a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present." (Smith 2006: 2) Furthermore, developing ethnographic approach, she points out that the basis of her study is questioning about how heritage is constituted and utilized in the present. Similar definitions are related to the idea of heritology, or general theory of heritage, developed particularly in Belgrade and in Zagreb, where heritage is perceived as the past that is used, activated, cultivated and nurtured, heritage objects as carriers of mnemonic contents, and heritagization as a process of maintaining the memory. In the aforementioned context, **the process of transmission is perceived as the core of heritage concept. More particularly, how is knowledge about the past being transmitted, and, maybe more importantly, which knowledge? Interpretation and preservation of the past are shaped by different social groups and numerous institutions, whether ethnic, national, European, or by family, generation, etc., and these layers are all influencing each other.** In the realm of this particular context, the questions of education about heritage or its (mis)use by tourism, the media and popular culture should be approached critically.

Current context

Teaching heritage in schools, universities and training of curators

Differences related to heritage education depend certainly on the level of the education system on which heritage is taught (primary, secondary or higher education), and the education about it differs as well from country to country.

As far as **primary and secondary education** is concerned, during the past decades a wide range of guidelines have been written by different institutions and organizations (UNESCO, European Council, museums, to name only a few), in order to provide a proper education for teachers on how to understand and use the concept of heritage in their classes. Therefore, different trainings are organized, experts from the field provided to work with them, and yet, **education about heritage still depends on the individual will of each teacher, who is, consequently, using it to develop other classes somehow related to the past.** In this way heritage is mostly used as helping material to explain other concepts related to history, geography, arts, and even natural sciences. Even when teachers are willing to include practical education about heritage, numerous authorizations need to be obtained in order that pupils can visit museums or heritage sites (to start with safety regulations), even though, in France for example, education *in situ*, on different historical sites and museums, stared during the 1970s.

A particular example, regarding the secondary education, can be found in Fascist Italy in 1923, when the general reform of education was undertaken by a philosopher and Minister Giovanni Gentile. The teaching of art history was made, for the first time in the world, an obligatory part of upper secondary education, namely in the *Liceo classico*. However, much before this reform, a tendency to nurture artistic heritage (and humanities in general), as an important part of national and different local identities existed in Italy, particularly from the end of the 19th century. Still, it was an isolated example. Today, in some high schools, *French technological and general high schools*, for example, more particular knowledge about heritage is in fact provided.

Heritage education exists at the university level as well, but approaches related to heritage studies differ not only from country to country, but also from institution to institution. On one hand, there are institutions more related

to the development of research related to heritage, and on the other, those that are providing more professional knowledge for work in the heritage field. Various disciplines (sociology, history, art history, anthropology, information sciences, etc.) create different methodologies and theories in relation to heritage.

On the other hand, **education and training of curators** influence the transmission of knowledge about the past in the realm of museums and heritage sites. In many European countries the training represents a part of university curricula, however, various approaches are nurtured in different countries, providing expertise to curators, cultural managers, etc. In France, the *École du Louvre* provides an expertise in research related to heritage and museology (art history, archeology, anthropology as well), however, professional programs of education exist as well, for work in the art market, mediation, and other heritage professions. Admission is based on entrance exam for students after their high school. The school provides preparation for open competition of heritage curators as well, that is often required for work in various heritage professional institutions. In other countries, however, different approaches are encouraged: in the United Kingdom, communication is emphasized, and in Italy, during the last two decades, the business component of work in museums.

Information about heritage provided by popular culture and the media

Summing up the seminar organized in 2008 by the Cambridge Heritage Group on the commoditization of heritage, Baillie, Chatzoglou and Taha point out that **"heritage features in movies, on billboards, in computer games, and in advertising"**. **Let us just start to enumerate key areas of uses of heritage in this context – the cultural industry, the heritage industry, tourism. Carrying out the idea of cultural capital, heritage itself became a symbol, a value, and a proper good to be consumed.**

Various programs are created in museums in order to increase their income and the number of visitors: blockbuster exhibitions are organized, gift shops enlarged, questionable narratives created, promoted and disseminated throughout the world. During several past years, the annual number of visitors of the Louvre reached between nine or ten million per year, and 60% of them were foreign visitors. However, heritage becomes perceived as a sustainable cultural resource as well and several studies have been conducted in France in relation to the role of

culture in the economic development, as Xavier Greffe points out. The aforementioned studies problematize as well the relation between the national income provided by foreign tourists and expenses of the French tourists when they go abroad, which increase much faster than the income. Therefore, ways to improve the market and the attractiveness through cultural creativity (and heritage resources) are revised, not only in France.

With the development of new media, learning styles have been transformed as well, not only by introducing the new possibilities into actual museums and heritage sites, 3D models, augmented reality applications, but also through other virtual contents, like video games, which are becoming more and more popular in heritage, history and archaeology learning. However, the question of the content of these programs still remains open.

The increasing use of heritage is seen as the result of numerous causes: of the privatization of museums, collections and heritage sites, and of a tendency of the new owners (in pursuit of a product that pays off, namely, a product that provides revenue through increasing the number of visitors) for content that is straightforward and that does not deal with tough and dark themes. Secondly, as Hewison pointed out in his book *Heritage Industry*, and before him Wright as well, in *On Living in an Old Country*, the transformation of heritage into popular entertainment (in England) was one of the consequences of its instrumentalization by the authorities who wanted to create a kind of utopia and re-imagined past as a counterpoint to the problems of the present. Thus, a critical relation with the past was not something that was being nurtured, to the contrary, people were provided instead with "bread and circuses". And finally, in a tendency to break with an elitist interpretation of the past, and in order to reach a wider group of users, the democratization of heritage went too far and transformed heritage into a form of popular entertainment. However, the obvious point, but one worth repeating, is that even though there are tendencies to homogenize content influenced by globalization, one (heritage) product can not fit all people.

Other influences on education about the past and on transmission of memory

Knowledge and memories related to the past are not transmitted only by the educational system, popular culture, and the media. As numerous studies on the collective and cultural memory (of Maurice Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann,

Pierre Nora, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, to name only a few) have shown, memories are not closed and rigid, to the contrary, personal memories interact and intertwine with other personal memories, and are shaped by the collective (or cultural memories) related to different groups to which a person belongs. Therefore, **knowledge about the past, memories and (heritage) objects that will support them, are influenced by family, generations, other small or big social groups, ethnic, religious, national, local, regional ones, that are all influencing one another.**

On the other hand, groups are using the past to strengthen their identities, and they are often doing it in order to differ from another group. Sometimes they are creating new interpretations of the past, according to their needs, insist on one interpretation or on preservation of specific memories, sometimes they are intentionally or unintentionally forgetting some parts of the past. Some of these groups are influencing even the curricula in schools or media, and popular uses of heritage, or they are transmitting memories through various institutions, ceremonies, rituals, etc.

We could conclude that education about heritage, or, to put it better, transmission of knowledge about the past is happening on various levels. However, the impact on the process of education and the content that is being taught, in the case only one of the aforementioned discourses dominates, should be further scrutinized.

Challenges:

1. ***Nurturing singular perspective interpretations of the past (social, national, local, global, mediatized)***

   In the book *Imagining 'the Turk'*, edited by Slovenian anthropologist Božidar Jezernik, European perceptions of Turks as "others" are closely examined. Their negative image has been nurtured by different media, cultures of memory and political systems. Balkan countries perceived themselves as bastions of Christianity, and Turks, to the contrary, were presented as those who raped, tortured and were responsible for the decline of the cultures of those countries they conquered. Even though numerous studies related to

the Ottoman heritage of Serbia, and of the Balkans in general, showed that this was only the stereotyped image of the Ottoman period in the Balkans, until recently this negative image also existed in several course books for elementary and high schools as well.

The perception this created of Turks had a wider implication on the preservation and destruction of Ottoman heritage. In Belgrade, only a small part of it has been preserved, and pretty often, the monuments that persisted are still destroyed from time to time by different nationalist groups. While in the academic field this theme became popular during the last few decades, this was not the case with public memory. The paradox emerged, related to the entertainment industry and its uses of heritage, when a broadcasting of popular Turkish television series, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, started in several Balkan countries. Suddenly, books about Ottoman culture (which lacked historical authenticity) were being published, Turkish became one of the most taught languages in language schools, and an enormous group of people became interested in the part of Balkan history touched by the Ottoman Empire and its influence on the present. In both cases, interpretations of the Ottoman period were far from being total interpretations of the past.

2. ***Oversimplifying the content in order to provide higher income and more fun***

Examples of popular TV series that raised consciousness about different parts of the past have been numerous throughout Europe. *Terry the Sling* depicted the period of the Hundred Years' War, and was disseminated from France to other European countries (even to Poland). However, all of them have blended fictional and romanticized versions of the past with history. Even though the US TV series *Holocaust* raised consciousness about the Shoah, the image it produced was not based on historical documents, but on fictional representations, and helped establish this theme in popular culture.

Another example of oversimplifying the content can be found in museum institutions as well. During the past few years, one of the most popular programs of the Belgrade City Museum has been *A coffee with Princess*

Ljubica, created as the 'living history' museum animation based on a real character – an actress represents princess Ljubica and her story in the house she once lived in with Prince Miloš Obrenović. This program that is unique among the museums of Belgrade is still very popular, and tickets for it still need to be bought in advance; furthermore, due to its popularity another version of the program has been created in English. A problematic aspect of it is that the interpretation of history provided by the museum in this way is very narrow and focuses on sensationalism – people don't learn much more than that a princess killed one of the prince's mistresses, and that she suffered from his infidelity. However, some of the more important parts of the history of the building and of the history of Belgrade in the first part of the 19th century when Prince Miloš Obrenović ruled Serbia are not mentioned. What is therefore the information about the past that visitors obtain from this program? Is it only an emotion that the museum is selling? Where are museum ethics in providing such superficial aspects of the past to its visitors?

Keys of Change

In order to surpass the issues that different ways of transmitting the knowledge about the past provoke, several ideas can be proposed.

Defining the value(s) of heritage

There are numerous interpretations of the notion of "value". According to anthropologist David Graeber, there are three main streams of thought when we talk about the present term of value. From the *sociological perspective*, value represents things that are considered as the ultimate good and proper in a human life; in the *economic sense,* it is a degree to which objects are desired, particularly measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them; and in the *linguistic sense* it is a meaning, or a 'meaningful difference' that constitutes the value. In exploring the meaning of physical objects, it is what makes some objects different in relation to other objects in the same context. Therefore, the difference resides in its meaning, it is the meaning that represents value. **What is making heritage objects different from other objects is their character to be carriers**

and transmitters of the past, namely, of knowledge and memories deposited in them. For that reason, it is highly important how heritage/memories will be interpreted and transmitted.

1. *Towards a wider scope of education about heritage*

   Heritagization, through which objects from the past are "identified" as heritage, starts when someone "reads" the content deposited in objects from the past and decides to transmit it. Since the guidance about the process of reading, accepting and transmitting the knowledge about the past is not happening only in the realm of schools, universities or of some heritage institutions, an adequate wider education about heritage needs to be created. This is required not only for different school curricular subjects, but also **programs and projects need to be devised, and education and awareness of heritage promoted at the level of various heritage institutions, and within families and different social groups.** Therefore, it is crucial the values that children and youth are learning about within their families and communities are in balance with what they are learning in schools.

2. *Towards an education about critical thinking, with an emphasis on multiperspectivism*

   In 2006 the *Histoire/Geschichte*, the series of Franco-German history course books were first published by a team of German and French historians with an aim to surpass interpretations of the past through the national prism, and to provide a shared interpretation of these two countries regarding European history from Antiquity onwards. However, several years before this initiative, in 1999, the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeastern Europe launched the *Joint History Project* with the aim to change the way history is taught in schools across the Balkans and in order to promote multi-perspective, critical education. Therefore, different perspectives that exist in historical sources were presented through a collaboration of 11 Southeastern European countries. Four course books in eight languages were published as additional material for classes, and from the creation of the project until 2010 nearly 1000 teachers went through training to use the material. Furthermore, the organization developed close

relationships with numerous Ministries of Education and Teacher Associations across the Balkans. One of the workbooks that was created is about the Ottoman Empire, with a completely different perspective about this period than was the case until recently in the school curricula.

Where critical thinking is taught, alongside developing the ability to perceive the past in its totality, and not only particular interpretations of it and particular meanings of heritage objects, we strengthen the potential for diverse heritage and a more understanding society. In this way, each time some discourse insists on only one interpretation, memory or heritage, children and ultimately most citizens will be better prepared to understand that this is just one of the perspectives that exist about the past.

Conclusion and Key Questions – *Teaching and understanding the heritagization processes as a basis of European heritage*

One of the definitions of heritage is that it represents the past which is active and in use. Thus, the past becomes a part of the present, everyday life, and it is always the question about the parts of the past that are considered as valuable for the present. Some of the questions that could be addressed are, why are we choosing some parts of the past, what are the ways we are activating it to enrich the present and the future, and how do we transmit it? All of these questions should be researched empirically as well, focusing on the practice itself by which man decides, accepts, preserves and transmits memories and heritage.

During the workshop in Barcelona, the common characteristics of European identity and heritage were mentioned several times. Defining such characteristics is something Europe has failed to manage so far; furthermore, how to transmit and teach a mutual understanding of a shared past will always be problematic when the content itself is disputed. **Attention may be more usefully focused on teaching and understanding the process of transmission of knowledge about the past – with a tendency to educate people that various discourses are influencing their knowledge about the past, that they are as well responsible for the preservation of it, and to teach them how they could affect the**

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transmission/preservation of the heritage themselves. With the strong collaboration of various heritage institutions, academic or professional, this may help Europe's citizens resist simplifications of the continent's complex pasts, whether such simplifications are found in popular culture, commoditized heritage attractions, or textbooks.

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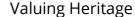Smith, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. New York: Routhledge, 2006.

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