**heritage/遗产(Yí Chǎn)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| European Perspective | Aleida Assmann | 07 Jun 2022 |

**The recent return of heritage as a topic and concern.**

The term ‘heritage’ was absent during the cold war. This was due a consequence of the ideologies of capitalism and communism that prevailed at the time. Both ideologies did not value the past and expected everything from a glorious future. I call it ‘the time regime of modernity’. When it eroded in the 1980s, the effect was described in a famous essay by Fukuyama as ‘the end of history’, a statement that has often been repeated and refuted since. The Fall of the Iron Curtain was certainly not the end of history. On the contrary, it was the return of history and ‘the beginning of memory’. Until then, memory had been part of individual psychology. In order to gain a more inclusive idea of its relevance and possibilities, it had to be reconceptualized as a new relevant concept for cultural studies. Our own concept of ‘cultural memory’ was an attempt to launch a broader and more interdisciplinary approach to the concepts of tradition and transmission in the 1980s and 90s. It was also the time when the term ‘heritage’ became a field of scholarship and academic research and ‘heritage’ appeared as a new denomination of university chairs in the academe. The term was controversial from the start because it developed in two directions with different approaches and goals: an affirmative one and a critical one, the first supporting a right-wing and conservative, the latter a leftist and progressive orientation. Terms like ‘memory’ and ‘heritage’ were fiercely attacked by leftists who saw the dangers and pitfalls nationalist rhetoric and exclusionary identity politics. An effect of this controversy was that some of the University departments changed their names to ‘critical heritage studies’.

**The rise of the concept of ‘heritage’ as a new kind of historical knowledge**

Let me start with an important semantic distinction. We must not conflate the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’. The term ‘tradition’ is applied to the longer or shorter history of cultural texts and discourses in the realm of religion and philosophy, music, art or literature. It dates back to antiquity and is used retrospectively for any age and culture. Heritage differs from tradition in that the concept has a clear origin in history and dates back to the period of enlightenment and the French Revolution. I want to argue in my presentation that heritage is part and parcel of a new form of historical knowledge that started around 1800 with the French Revolution.

This new form of knowledge emerged in a paradoxical co-evolution of destruction and preservation. The French Revolution destroyed the validity and authority of various cultural institutions such as monarchy, aristocracy and the church. But this violent break with central norms did not lead to a full-fledged iconoclasm that destroyed all material remains. On the contrary, it also led to valuing materials that no longer carried any normative force. This new type of affirmation can be termed ‘historical value’. There is one author in particular who created and enshrined this new value. I am referring Abbé Gregoire who shaped the concept and invented a new term that helped to lay the foundation to the new concept of heritage. His term is ‘vandalism’. It can be defined as the destruction of any one’s material culture with the intention to erase knowledge about the past. Abbé Gregoire is the inventor of the protection of cultural heritage. He is not the protector of traditions which were violently broken and shattered by the French Revolution, but he was the advocate and protector of the material remains of what had been discontinued, discarded and de-valorized during the revolution. He was one of those who ushered in a brand-new project: the preservation of the past as a universalist project of historical knowledge. What had lost its relevance for the present and future should not disappear, he argued, but find a new home in archives and museums where it could be studied henceforth by professional historians. Abbé Gregoire therefore should be considered the patron of the humanities or historical Geisteswissenschaften which preserve, value and interpret the remains of the past, irrespective of their value for a changing present. His name is virtually unknown in the humanities, because the historical studies are slow to acknowledge and study their own history.

It is interesting to note that in Abbé Gregoire’s mental universe, there is no marked difference between the frame of the nation and that of mankind. He helped to establish norms and rules for preserving material remnants and dealing with the cultural past that transcend the interests of the individual nations. He opened a universal perspective to extend this idea to mankind as a responsible agent of the preservation of material history.

The Western concept of heritage developed in different directions:

* in the arts which generated a distinct Romantic imagination of the past
* in politics where heritage became a mobilizing project in the context of nation-building
* in universities and museums as an academic project that eventually led to the institution of the UNESCO.

**The arts and the romantic imagination of the past**

In the European history of cultural heritage, academic research and the visual arts went hand in hand. This conjunction is embodied in a new type of scholar who arose in the period of enlightenment in the middle of the 18th century. He combined a strong interest in the texts of classical antiquity with a Romantic passion for the sublime quality of picturesque ruins. One of them was Robert Wood who traveled to historical sites of the ancient Mediterranean world, delighted to experience viscerally the ‘genius loci’, the spirit of a historic place. He was accompanied by an artist who painted his vision of the ruins on the site. Reproducing and circulating such images stimulated a new visual imagination that broke out of the confined universe of texts and libraries and discovered historic places in geographical space as repositories of palpable material traces. The Romantic fascination with ruins was fueled by the idea that what was far away in time could be rediscovered and accessed here and now in space. This veneration of antiquity created a new aesthetic canon that included also local and vernacular elements and was propelled by both scholarship and measures for public education such as museum presentations. It soon spilled over and reached a growing public through popular novels, local commissions, exhibitions, historical courses and excursions.

The cult of antiquities, the value of heritage and the high esteem for extinct cultures became incorporated into modern Western civilization as a newly formed complex of aesthetics, art and historical consciousness that acquired attraction as a new secular religion. Libraries, theatres and museums became the modern temples of this religion, archaeologists, art historians and literary scholars became its priests, and the touristic sites of historic relicts and ruins became the sacred places of modern pilgrimages.

**The rise of the concept of ‘national heritage’**

The concept of ‘cultural heritage’ gained political traction in the European process of nation-building process throughout of the long 19th century. The idea that individual nations had a history and heritage became extremely powerful after the French Revolution. One nation after another copied this model and created its respective institutions, including a specialized field of academic research relating to one’s own history, museums where this history and art are exhibited, archives in which its relevant documents are preserved, specific text books and artworks that are circulated in the society, and commemoration dates on which the community confirms, shapes and celebrates its collective self-image in performative events and rituals.

In civil and democratic nations, these particularist developments were not automatically abused as a political tool for hatred, warfare and aggression but compatible with a universal vision that preservation of national heritage in general was a sign of civilized governance. National heritage, in other words, could also be seen in the framework of a common world heritage, owned, valued and protected by ‘mankind’. Thus patriotism and internationalism were linked in the creation and promotion of this new concept, in which the respect for history and the past became a new universal religion, promoting, as it was hoped, “peace and goodwill among the nations”. This slogan had been coined for the Great World Exhibition of 1851 and was repeated for the preservation of national cultural heritage.

The new historical consciousness and the secular interest in heritage is reflected in the growth of national ideologies. In this context, the concept of heritage became a growing occupation, involving official administrative efforts from above as well as civic movements from below engaging in art, landscape, local traditions and folklore. But the concept of heritage is broad and remains complex. It ranges from modern endeavors valuing ‘authenticity’ and guarding the monuments of the past, to simple retro-fictions and popular mythical fantasies that can be exploited in the media, in consumerist capitalism and in politics.

**The future of heritage as a transnational concern**

Only “barbarians and slaves”, Grégoire had written, “hate the sciences and destroy the monuments of art. Free men love them and conserve them.” (Swenson, 34). The act of vandalism was understood as a lapse from the newly shared and internationally ratified principle of the sanctity of cultural heritage. Violent seizures of monuments and works of art had been condemned as ‘crimes against humanity’ as early as 1800. (Swenson, 39) To consciously act against these standards meant a serious breach in the ‘common bond of civilized nations’ (‘Kulturstaaten’). The concept of heritage was not only built on values and sentiments, but also on an evolving process of international legislation. In parallel with rules protecting civilians and wounded soldiers in times of war (The Geneva Conventions), rules were drafted for safeguarding cultural property in armed conflict (The Hague Conventions). New atrocities were answered after the Second World War by further statutes involving new legal measures, values and standards. Notwithstanding these legal efforts and standards, the period of European history known as the ‘Scramble for Africa’ was marked by brutal forms of colonization including invasion, annexation, warfare, enslavement and the looting of indigenous art. These dark years of a ‘New Imperialism’ between 1881 and 1914 have returned with a vengeance in the present and are currently a shameful and difficult legacy to be worked through.

There are various challenges currently facing Western heritage culture:

* indifference and neglect within a culture of radical modernization
* erosion through pollution and climate change
* exposure to the violence of wars, accidents and terrorism.

We have sadly learned in two World Wars, and are experiencing it again today in the Russian war levelled again Ukraine, how difficult it is to delimit war through humanitarian laws. Ukrainian museums have been destroyed that preserve Ukrainian cultural heritage. After 100 days of war, President Selensky complained that more than 100 churches have been damaged. He demanded that Russia as a “terror state” be excluded from the UNESCO and added: "The UNESCO is no place for barbarians.”

What European nations are defining as ‘civil’, military leaders like Putin prefer to define as ‘degenerate’. In a book on the Dynamic of Destruction, Alan Kramer has already shown how difficult it is to qualify acts of violence in a common and transcultural language. He himself replaced the word ‘barbaric violence’ by ‘modern violence in the context of radicalized industrial warfare’. And he also pointed to the relativity of the labels ‘barbaric’ and ‘civil’ by adding that not all nations aspire to be civil. In other words: This might not (yet?) be a standard with a universal appeal.

It is therefore of vital importance for historians to enter the stage, to discuss these episodes and tell these stories. It is also high time for cultural historians to join them and translate our basic concepts from one language and culture into another. Every translation is a transformation, marking similarities and differences, which can lead to an uncovering of varying ideas, values and cultural practices. A pressing question for the future is whether there will be a possibility to elevate the term heritage into a concept that allows to deal with such issues on a global level from different cultural perspectives. This could be an important step to establish mutual respect and, on this foundation, to create shared projects to value and safeguard cultures and practices around the world, be they material or immaterial, tangible or intangible.

**Bibliography**

Betts, Paul, Corey Ross, eds., Heritage in the Modern World:  Historical Preservation in International Perspective, Past & Present Supplement 10, Oxford: University Press, 2015.

Kramer, Alan, Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War, Oxford: UP, 2007.

Schulin, Ernst, "Absage an und Wiederherstellung von Vergangenheit", in: Moritz Csáky, Peter Stachel, Hgg.), Speicher des Gedächtnisses: Bibliotheken, Museen, Archive, Teil 1: Absage an und Wiederherstellung von Vergangenheit, Kompensation von Geschichtsverlust, Wien: Passagen 2000, 23-39.

Swenson, Astrid, The Rise of Heritage. Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789-1946. Cambridge: University Press, 2013.