Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage

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Introduction: why cultural memory and heritage?
Veysel Apaydin

The last several decades have witnessed a marked increase in research in relation to cultural heritage, memory and change, and to transformation and destruction within the field of heritage studies. This increase in the number of studies has exposed how cultural heritage and the memory it embodies is vital for individuals, groups and communities in forming collective identities. Such an exposure has also highlighted how the elimination of individual and group memory is an important underlying cause of cultural heritage destruction. The destruction of cultural memory through destruction of the material culture of the past and present has been used to oppress individuals, groups and communities in order to maintain power. This has been a common tool in many undemocratic nation-states that aim to establish hegemony over minority groups; it is frequently seen during conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, during genocides, sectarian conflict and in wartime. In many parts of the world, cultural heritage has also been destroyed or transformed through large-scale construction projects such as dams, railways, etc., in order to develop resources and create profit. In the post capitalist-era heritage, and therefore memory, has become a selling point and nostalgia something to be consumed, which further contributes to vanishing heritage and memory.

Scholars have widely discussed the importance of cultural heritage for individuals, groups and communities. It has been considered in relation to cultural heritage, memory and ethnic wars (Bevan 2016; Herscher 2010; Walasek 2015); cultural heritage, war and terrorism (Stone 2011; Holtorf 2006; Stone and Bajjaly 2008); the interlinkage between cultural heritage and memory (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Smith 2006; Erll and Nunning 2008; Berliner 2005; Benton 2010; Butler 2006, 2007; Winter 2004); cultural heritage and local and Indigenous groups (Atalay
Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage

2012; Nicholas and Bannister 2004; Smith and Jackson 2008; Apaydin 2018; Smith et al. 2018); cultural heritage and capitalism (Hamilakis and Duke 2007; Meskell 2015; Resco 2016). These research programmes and publications (and many more besides) have analysed and exposed the destruction of memory through the destruction of cultural heritage, as well as the complex interactions between heritage, memory and community formation.

In recent years several scholars in heritage studies (for example, Holtorf 2015, 2018; Harrison 2013; DeSilvey 2017) have developed new, provocative but helpful discussion about heritage process from a different perspective. They have argued that destruction and transformation of heritage are also a part of the heritage process that is necessary and can even be a positive change, developing new heritage and memories. However, as this is a very new discussion within heritage studies, there is still a lack of attention paid to the ethical side of destruction and transformation of heritage.

This book exposes the relationship between heritage and memory, discourses and the impact of construction, transformation or destruction of heritage; it emphasises the significance of such processes for groups and communities. Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage also brings new insights to the discussion of destruction and transformation from an ethical perspective by focusing on the question: how can this process be ethical? It further argues that even if destruction and transformation of heritage is necessary and inevitable, this process should be led at grassroots level by those communities and groups who develop and attach values and meanings to heritage and memory.

Heritage, memory and destruction

Heritage is a vehicle of communication, a means of transmission of ideas, values and knowledge, which includes the tangibles and intangibles of both cultural and natural heritage (Ashworth 2007). These ‘ideas, values and knowledge’ have been constructed through the relationships of individuals and groups. The ideas and values of local, ethnic, religious or other communities, and their knowledge, have been ascribed or developed over time, although these meanings and values may – and do – change (Hall 1997, 61). Specific aspects of cultural heritage can become insignificant (Harrison 2013) through the process by which heritage is shaped and managed in the present and used as a resource in the future (Ashworth et al. 2007): through memories developed and transferred
from one generation to another. Cultural heritage generally keeps its importance, however – particularly tangible heritage, because it provides both grounds and resources for constructing collective identity.

The definition of memory is a very complex concept as it has been interpreted from different perspectives. While many scholars have associated memory with past material culture, and have argued that it develops out of the active engagement of individuals’ and groups’ experiences in the past (Ricoeur 1999; 2004), it has also been emphasised that memory is a performance and involves active engagement with the present (Nora 1989). The concept of memory is often used in a very ambiguous and vague way in social sciences. In contrast, the interlinkage of memory with cultural heritage is not so abstract: tangible heritage (such as monuments, sites, objects and museums) provides strong representations of the knowledge and experience of people in the past and present. This relationship is plural and developed over multiple social experiences. These experiences can keep group collective identity alive through commemorative events or memories. Cultural memory and heritage are strongly linked to one another, as heritage is itself a cultural production that further develops values and meanings for individuals and groups.

Because of this cultural production, the meanings and values ascribed to heritage and the memories that are developed from it become a significant symbol for collective identity; they can thus serve to keep groups and communities together. The destruction of this important component through war, terror, sectarian conflict and top-down economic policies also means the destruction of memory and identity for individuals, groups and communities. The material culture of the past and present has a significant value for the future of groups and communities – which is why it is frequently targeted by powers interested in controlling land, resources and social or political relations.

As outlined above, the concept of heritage and memory, together with its importance for groups and communities, results in plural meanings. Yet these two concepts are integral resources for people who are connected to each other through them. These are groups of people who share similar values and develop tangible and intangible heritage and associated memory; ascribing meanings and values to cultural heritage helps them to come together and create a sense of belonging. This in turn provides a critical resource for survival in a complex world.

Heritage and memory are significant for people who are searching for descriptions of themselves (Crooke 2007) and for terms that represent their identity. The destruction of cultural memory and heritage can therefore be painful for people whose collective identity is attached
(Ricoeur 1999). It is necessary to identify, discuss and analyse examples of memory and heritage destruction through war, terror, sectarian conflict, capitalism, natural disasters and economic downturns in those spheres that affect the preservation of cultural heritage – namely in academia, in public and in everyday life. Bringing these aspects of cultural heritage together is essential to a cogent discussion.

This volume focuses on the interlinkage and importance of heritage and memory for group and community identity, and for the construction of a sense of belonging. Additionally, this volume aims to expose embedded motives and discourses in the destruction of memory and heritage. It argues that it is necessary to identify, discuss and analyse these to understand the causes of destruction of heritage and memory: a highly significant issue at the level of the individual, the group and wider society. Destruction of, and violence towards, heritage (and therefore memory) is common during war, terror, conflict, natural disasters and under capitalist policies. These polices also underlie climatic changes that impact on natural and cultural heritage.

It is in these affected spheres of cultural heritage that groups and communities ascribe values, develop memories and shape their collective identity. To illustrate this point, this volume offers a range of case studies that analyse and reveal the importance of cultural heritage and memory for people. It examines the destructive and violent actions that can impact heritage and memory through a variety of different approaches and methods on a uniquely global scale, in order to answer the following questions: what is the interlinkage between cultural memory and heritage? To what extent are cultural heritage and memory significant for group and community identity? What are the embedded discourses for destruction of heritage and therefore memory through war, terror, conflict, development and natural disasters? What are the ethical ways in which heritage and memory can be transformed? What should be the role of heritage studies as a discipline within the paradox of destruction, change and transformation?

In his epilogue to this volume, Cornelius Holtorf emphasises that as professionals of heritage studies we need to be careful about ‘overt political motivation’. The thrust of this volume is in total agreement with his point that undertaking critical research, and the practice of being a critical academic, does not mean rejecting every instance of heritage destruction and every decision to change or transform heritage. Social circumstances are never black and white: they have many dynamics in both cause and consequence. We need to take a constructivist approach to respond to those social and political paradoxes. However, as critical
Heritage scholars, we should also remember the fact that heritage studies is integrally linked to actual people; most of our data is collected in the field, from human participants in different natural and cultural settings. The link between people and heritage is itself very political and encompasses many aspects, for example, values, meanings, a sense of belonging and identity, as well as social and economic issues. Therefore critical heritage studies cannot avoid interacting with the social, economic and political structures and settings in which people live. To give an example, when we research the links between climate change and heritage, how is it possible to avoid investigating the political and economic decisions that lead to climate change? In affirming these points, Holtorf emphasises that any form of sectarianism must be avoided within the discipline, even while heritage studies should be as inclusive – and give voice to as many people – as possible.

Chapters in this volume answer the questions posed from different perspectives and contexts. For this reason, the chapters are arranged under certain themes in six different parts. In Part I of the book, I attempt to expose the relationship between cultural memory and heritage. I concentrate on their importance for collective identity and the construction of a sense of belonging for groups and communities, and the consequences of these significant components of heritage. I deal with different case studies to demonstrate this fact, embedding discourses of heritage and memory destruction alongside the ethical issues of heritage destruction and transformation. I argue that transformation of heritage can be very beneficial for producing new heritage, while maintaining that the ethical side of this process must be that it is led and decided upon at grassroots level, by communities who are in interaction with the cultural heritage.

Part II of the book focuses on the effect of urban development and large infrastructure on heritage. In particular, this section deals with the issues of regeneration and large development projects. These have a huge impact on heritage and communities, as well as an additional role encompassing archaeology, archaeologists, heritage specialists and management of these affected cultural assets. Part II considers case studies from several different parts of the world to demonstrate and discuss the impact of urban development on heritage, heritage change and transformation, and the ethics involved in this process. In this section King focuses on the effect of large developments in sub-Saharan Africa from a different perspective. She explores the African literature to reveal how ‘slow violence’ through large developments impacts on heritage, landscape and the environment as a whole. Gardner brings a case study of a
‘mega event’, in this instance the construction of the site for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games; he considers its effect on heritage resources including archaeological materials, historic buildings and the impact on communities who interacted with the site in their daily and social lives. Sterling deals with the issue of urban development leading to the erasure of heritage, as well as issues around changing and transforming heritage by focusing on London. In my own contribution I concentrate on issues of changing, transforming and eliminating public space/heritage through top-down decisions, and the significance for collective identity and the sense of belonging of communities in a case study of Gezi Park in Istanbul. Grima deals with a similar case study, but one that encompasses the whole of Malta. He discusses issues around urban development that bring consequences for the historic environment and explores the ways in which these issues are managed at policy level. Almansa-Sánchez and Corpas-Cívicos focus on issues around managing archaeological assets during urban development in Madrid.

Part III of this book deals with issues of destruction of Indigenous heritage. It includes case studies on Indigenous communities and heritage, ranging from Australia to North and South America. Nicholas and Smith deal with the issue of an Indigenous heritage that has been neglected, ‘denigrated’ and destroyed. They point out the importance of tangible and intangible heritage for those Indigenous peoples whose identity and values are attached. They also flag up the issue of exclusion of Indigenous people from their own heritage by discussing the articles of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Kearney takes Indigenous Australian cultural heritage as a case study. She examines the engagement of Australian Indigenous peoples with heritage, acknowledging its vital significance for them. While exploring the significance of heritage from an Indigenous perspective with case studies, she also discusses colonial attitudes to Indigenous heritage. Montgomery Ramírez focuses on Central America to discuss issues around Indigenous heritage, placed under threat by environmental and development-led destruction processes that also endanger the Indigenous population. Rocha brings another interesting case study from the Brazilian Amazon, where large dams have been built on the lands of Indigenous people. She points out the impact that construction has had when implemented with no consultation of Indigenous people. Rocha also discusses the ethical aspects of conducting archaeological rescue excavations alongside the destructive process of dam building that destroys forests, landscapes and people.

Part IV of the book exposes the destruction of heritage in relation to erasing memory that occurs during sectarian violence, conflict and war.
Such events are the most destructive processes in which heritage and memory are involved; they impact painfully on communities and their effects last for generations. Over the last several decades the world has witnessed some very violent destruction of heritage, including archaeological assets, historic and religious buildings, homes and landscapes. This has included destruction during ethnic and religious conflicts, civil wars and sectarian attacks on heritage and communities. Loosley Leeming brings the case study of the destruction of a monastery in Syria, a country where civil war and unrest has been going on for several years. While she focuses on the importance of heritage that has great significance for communities who are emotionally attached, she also discusses narratives that lead to the development of memories through her case study. The Bosnian War of the 1990s cost many lives and led to considerable population displacement. During the conflict, deliberate destruction of cultural property was very visible. Walasek focuses on this and discusses the importance of cultural heritage and identity for communities. She further explores the process of post-conflict restoration and reconstruction in Bosnia in the years immediately after the war. Pollard explores the accidental bombing of Pompeii in 1943 by Allied forces. He achieves this through archival research, particularly focusing on the media coverage of the time and on the memoirs of individuals involved.

Part V of the book focuses on the impact of decision- and policy-making on cultural heritage assets, which is closely interlinked to the collective identity and memory of groups and communities. Linn-Tynen focuses on the lack of representation in African American heritage, and discusses how this leads to the erasure of identity in relation to heritage. She deals with the issues of ‘authorized heritage discourse’ in the United States and explores how decisions at policy level have created inequality, particularly for African American and non-white communities. Zorzin concentrates on Taiwanese identity in relation to heritage in terms of construction, annihilation and reconfiguration through the analysis of different powers acting in Taiwan over different periods. While Zorzin analyses heritage legislation in Taiwan over time, he also exposes the impact of the ‘neoliberal paradigm’ on the heritage and identity of Taiwanese people. In the last paper of this section Dries and Schreurs focus on heritage management policy and practice in in the Netherlands. They deal with the issue of the decision-making process on what to preserve, and the ways in which these decisions were made, which have a significant influence on memory and identity.

Part VI of the book is allocated to an epilogue by Cornelius Holtorf, an archaeologist and Chair of Heritage Futures at UNESCO. Drawing
upon his long history of research and publication of substantial papers on the subject, Holtorf reflects broadly on the issues of destruction, change and transformation of heritage. In so doing he combines an analysis and interpretation of the chapters in this volume with his own perspective on this subject.

References


