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‘Cultural heritage is concerned with the future’: a critical epilogue

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After decades of research and debate in the field that today is known as heritage studies, it has become clear that cultural heritage is best understood as a set of social practices and processes, valued in specific circumstances for their implications and outcomes. In other words, the discussion has come a long way from earlier ways of understanding cultural heritage in terms of monuments or traditions that have survived from the past and carry intrinsic values that ought to be preserved as such for the benefit of future generations. As a result, the most important question in studying cultural heritage is now not what it is, but what it does. In cultural heritage management and preservation – the sector in which many students graduating in our field find employment – we no longer consider cultural heritage in terms of what it was, but rather of what it could become. Consequently, the focus of those who understand and develop cultural heritage has shifted somewhat, from highlighting issues of conservation to highlighting issues of change.

This is the academic and societal context of the present volume that offers critical global perspectives on cultural memory, heritage and destruction. I note in particular, and with some intellectual satisfaction, that a number of authors do not demonise the destruction of cultural heritage, but consider the impact of destruction and even the possible benefits of loss – which is something I have argued for over many years. Among the important other topics addressed throughout the chapters are the values of cultural heritage, the relation of cultural heritage to collective identities and contestations of dominant perspectives of cultural heritage. This is as it should be.
Adopting a critical attitude myself, in this epilogue I would like to take the opportunity to throw light on a couple of problems associated with some recent debates on these issues in our field. To some extent, I have been inspired in my thinking by reading the contributions in the present volume. However, the argument is much larger, and my discussion should not be interpreted as specifically directed at any one author or any specific chapter.

In promoting critical perspectives for understanding cultural heritage, I strongly believe that we should also see the need to adopt a similarly critical perspective towards our own strategies and practices. It is understandable, on one level, that many of us sometimes disagree with political decisions and economic practices in which cultural heritage is implicated. We may therefore, from time to time, wish to oppose and resist the powers that are in control. However, in some quarters of the field of heritage studies it has almost become a mantra to engage in every possible context in crusades against capitalism, neoliberalism and multinational corporations, occasionally evoking some kind of moral duty to join this movement.

As critical as academic research and good management always have to be, there is a slippery slope along which overtly politically motivated work risks taking the discussion down to the level of sectarian campaigns. If this occurs, joint flag-waving may replace open-minded analysis, and the commitment to a narrow political struggle threatens to overshadow academic originality and intellectual thoughtfulness. It is important to maintain the professionalism of those who participate in studying and managing cultural heritage. Their intellectual capacities are best used in advancing our understanding of the issues at hand, rather than seeking to undermine the political system and authorities in democratic states which we need to keep our complex societies together.

It is sometimes assumed – including in the present volume – that cultural heritage, as a symbol of collective identities, can contribute to uniting and thus strengthening cultural groups and communities. That value can motivate claims for the conservation of specific cultural heritage in the interest of associated groups or communities. It is often insufficiently considered, however, that one of the outcomes of enhancing collective identities through cultural heritage is that the common society in which many groups and communities co-exist is increasingly torn apart and bereft of social cohesion. A significant risk of the widespread current appetite for letting identity politics inform the answers to surprisingly many social and cultural questions is that the glue that binds all groups and communities together in a common state loses its adhesive power. Cultural heritage is often part of the processes that make us divide
people into different tribes, separating ‘us’ from ‘them’. Indeed, narratives about cultural heritage make such divisions running right through the population even seem natural and inevitable, with no real alternative; they are effectively essentialising differences rather than fostering commonalities.

In reality, all societies are complex conglomerates in which people are part of multiple groups and communities. These in turn are divided across all sorts of permeable lines related to age, occupation, gender, place of residence, social background, genetic dispositions, individual preferences, habits, values and so on. By the same token, cultural monuments and traditions represent heterogenous mixtures of all kinds of inventions and influences of diverse origin that have accumulated over long periods of time. Even though few would deny the existence of these complex, socio-cultural blends in which we all find ourselves, their implications are commonly ignored by those supporting the dominant view of why cultural heritage is important in society. It is nothing short of astonishing that a large number of those studying and managing cultural heritage do their best to enforce strict, largely artificial divisions in the name of ‘cultural diversity’ or ‘social justice’ that threaten to rip the fragile joint assemblages of our societies apart.

If we are increasingly concerned with what cultural heritage and its management in present society do, and what they could become in a framework of change, we are effectively more concerned in our work with the future than with the past. That is why the concept of heritage futures is so timely and important. Heritage futures are concerned with the roles of heritage in managing the relations between present and future societies, for example through anticipation or planning. This is the context in which I worry about the best way in which our professional expertise and notions of cultural heritage in society can contribute to social development. There is a risk that certain ways of discussing, conceptualising and indeed managing cultural heritage could ultimately cause more harm than benefit for future societies. For that reason it is paramount to think carefully and critically about how what we are doing today could have significant impact on the future.

I expect that some of my comments will be seen as controversial and thus attract critique and indeed criticism. I welcome future discussion, and can see that the authors in the present volume will have much to contribute themselves. I have done my best – although I may possibly not have entirely succeeded (for which I apologise in advance) – to focus on specific issues while refraining from labelling; my aim is to avoid the impression of representing some kind of ‘thought police’. I hope that the critics in this important intellectual debate that was stimulated by the many interesting contributions to the present volume will aspire to do the same.