



HERITAGE, DEMOCRACY, AMBIGUITY

All of the state's official inquiries (SOU) between 1922 and 1999 are digitalized and to be found at the National Library of Sweden.

SWEDISH HERITAGE AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

by **Johan Hegardt**

abstract

This essay examines Swedish heritage politics from the 1920s up to the present by studying official inquiries during this period. Through a critical, historical and empirical discussion, it reveals how the meaning of the word *kulturarv* (heritage) has been adjusted to correspond to wider changes in Swedish politics. It shows how a relatively neutral understanding of the word *kulturarv* has been turned into an ambiguity. In this essay I suggest from the material at hand that this trajectory of change results from the development of global capitalism, which turned identity into a commodity. This essay concludes that in a post-heritage future we therefore need a new understanding of identity, an open identity, and that we need to take existential responsibility for our lives.

KEYWORDS: Heritage, identity, nationalism, democracy.

In 2001, David Harvey concluded that we need “to go beyond treating heritage simply as a set of problems to be solved”. Instead, he writes, we should “engage with debates about the production of identity, power and authority throughout society”. There are three keywords here: identity, power and authority. But Harvey also uses a fourth important word that should be in focus as well: “heritagization”.¹

My impression is that Harvey’s text has had a huge impact on heritage politics and heritage studies, though perhaps more implicitly than explicitly. Many of us appear to have followed Harvey’s perspective without knowing where it came from. But there is a conceptual prehistory here too. The questions of identity, power and authority, and the issue of heritagization, had already come into focus in Sweden in the 1970s. This created a huge shift in Swedish heritage politics, opening up space for a discussion on democracy. From there, Swedish heritage politics again turned to heritagization, identity, power and authority, producing total political ambiguity and the collapse of political responsibility in the 21st century. That in turn opened the door for the Swedish neo-nationalistic right-wing party *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats). That is, as I view it, the causal order of Swedish heritage politics.

Harvey does not distinguish between the word "heritage" and what it describes, i.e. the distinction between the signified and the signifier, or between meaning and physical form. From my perspective, though, this distinction is crucial if we want to understand why the political meaning in *kulturarv* changed over the decades.

In 2017, the Swedish government published a heritage proposition called *Proposition 2016/17:116: Kulturarvspolitik* (heritage politics), in a last desperate effort to hinder *Sverigedemokraterna* from appropriating Swedish *kulturarv*. Almost a hundred years earlier, the word *kulturarv* was used officially for the first time in Sweden. By following the historical trajectory between these two events it is possible to define four stages in Swedish heritage politics:

1. Heritage and nation narration. Inquiries between 1920 and 1960.
2. The split, immigration and inquiries in the 1970s.
3. Heritage and democracy. Inquiries in the 1980s and 1990s.
4. The "Heritage Agenda" and the politics of ambiguity.

HERITAGE AND IDENTITY POLITICS are not the future, but rather the cause of today's neo-nationalism, strong-men, closed borders and so on. Why? Because these groups make use of identity politics and heritage in their politics. There is no return to a previous and older understanding of heritage. Instead, we need to approach the future with a new and different understanding of identity if we are to avoid the appropriation of heritage by the extremist right. While I focus here on a close reading on the history of Swedish heritage politics, I think that there are similarities hidden in other archives of the Global North that should be critically explored to illuminate how the conceptualization and associated nomenclature of heritage has evolved in relation to wider socio-political developments.

Counting words

The National Library of Sweden has scanned a series of important inquiries produced for Swedish governments between 1920 and 1999.² From 1999, all inquiries have been published digitally.³ I am referring here to the *Statens Offentliga Utredningar* (SOU) or, in English, Official Reports of the Swedish Government. Before a government suggests some new legislation, for example, a committee investigates the matter. The outcome is published as an SOU. I have found that among many hundreds of SOUs since the 1920s, at least 40 are related to heritage issues.

Curiosity made me look more closely at three words in the inquiries: *kulturarv*, *kulturminne*, and *kulturmiljö*. What I have found is that to begin with the words have a clear definition. Even though *kulturarv* is used in a similar way in Swedish as heritage is in English, it is not an accurate translation. A better translation would be "cultural inheritance".

Kulturminne cannot be translated literally as "cultural memory" because it is not concerned with memory proper. Instead, the word points to old objects and structures whose meaning

no one can remember in the present. The word *kulturminne* is therefore more a question of an appeal or an insistence not to neglect such structures and objects, to remember what is actually not rememberable, and to care for the objects and structures because of this. We must hold in mind that this definition is, in this case, based on late 19th and early 20th century Swedish archaeology, for example expressed by Oscar Montelius in his work *Minnen från vår forntid* (Memories from our past), published 1917.⁴ Montelius is very clear that he is not talking about real memories, but that we should remember to care for objects and structures with a meaning that is not memorable.

The word *kulturmiljö* is based on *kultur* and *miljö*. In everyday Swedish, *miljö* means "environment". But in this case *miljö* has a specific significance. Here it means in the middle, deriving from one connotation of the French word *milieu*. In this case and according to this definition *kulturmiljö* is something that exists in the middle of society. It is the historical essence of the society. Again, we need to remember that this is not my interpretation but an explanation how the word once was defined, in the SOU and by researchers in the early 20th century.

The term *kultur* has an exact definition in all three words. It refers to an old definition understood as "cultivation" or perhaps

even *Bildung*, the German word for personal education, but connected with the historical, intellectual and even transcendent – divine, if you prefer – development of Swedish society.

With this in mind, I counted how many times the three words are used in the SOUs related to heritage and uncovered an interesting statistic. I found that the word *kulturminne* is gradually replaced by the

word *kulturarv*, while the word *kulturmiljö* retains a more stable position in the SOU throughout the decades.

INSPIRED BY THIS finding, I turned to digital documents published by the Swedish Parliament from the 1970s to today. A similar picture arose. I moved my attention to the Danish and Norwegian parliaments and counted digital documents. I only focused on the word *kulturarv* and found a similar picture there too. In the 1980s only a few documents included the word *kulturarv*. During the first decades of the 21st century, documents including the word *kulturarv* existed in the hundreds. Most interesting is that there is a peak in the Danish Parliament in the years around 2004. The reason for this is that the Danish Parliament was discussing a heritage canon at the time.

In the early 20th century there was a connection in the Swedish narrative between the signified and the signifier, that is between *kulturminne* (physical form) and *kulturarv* (meaning). From the 1970s and onwards, a narrative has developed that only focused on *kulturarv* (meaning), with explicit political and democratic problems, which I will explain more closely below, turning into the political situation of total ambiguity that we see today, where the word *kulturminne* has been almost totally replaced by the word *kulturarv*.

**"THERE IS
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When going through the SOUs there is also a correspondence between the shift from *kulturminne* to *kulturarv* and the liberalization and globalization of the Swedish and international economies. The logic here is that liberalization and globalization of the economies is followed by a stronger need for personal identification. This is at least what follows from the SOU. Hence, as we shall see below, there has been a semantic shift in the meaning of the word *kulturarv*. All translations in the following text are mine.

Stage 1. Heritage and nation narration. Inquiries between 1920 and 1960

I have not been able to clarify the etymology of the Swedish word *kulturarv*. A hypothesis is that it has its background in the German word “*kulturelles Erbe*”.

The first SOU was published in 1922. Out of just over fifty inquiries that year, two are about Swedish *kulturminne*.⁵ These two inquiries deal with new legislation regarding *kulturminne*. Swedish heritage legislation is among the oldest in the world, dating back to at least 1666.⁶

The words *kulturarv* and *kulturmiljö* are not used in the first volume.⁷ Instead the Commissioners frequently used the word *kulturminne*. In the second volume, *kulturarv* is used three times and on three different pages. The word *kulturminne* is used 77 times on 45 pages.⁸

When the word *kulturarv* was used in the second volume, it was with the specific purpose of underlining that *kulturarv* is something that belongs to the nation and all its inhabitants. *Kulturarv* also includes the whole range of *kulturminne*. Furthermore, it is concluded that *kulturarv* is something that belongs to civilized nations (*kulturnationer*).

Hence in this case, inheritance is a question of bringing into the future a whole variety of *kulturminne*, and an appeal or an insistence to remember what is not rememberable, to care for these alien items from the past and give them an eternal life. Science, it was stated in the inquiries, is the key issue, because science has the capacity to understand, serve and care for the nation’s historical inheritance.

Even though Sweden has an indigenous population and other minorities, they are not mentioned, but nor are they explicitly excluded. There is nothing in the word *kulturminne* or *kulturarv* in the SOU from this time that suggests any form of exclusion or inclusion. Instead, *kulturarv* belongs to all inhabitants of the nation, or rather all future generations, regardless of who they might be.

The Commissioners even wrote that Swedish *kulturarv* is a part of all civilized countries’ heritage, indicating that there was no intention to exclude or include at a nation-to-nation level either. Plainly, the Commissioners were in search of a “neutral” perspective on the past that would help citizens to remember what is not rememberable and to care for these objects and structures.

Eight years later we again come across an SOU that deals with *kulturarv*.⁹ This time the word *kulturarv* is used nine times on seven pages, but *kulturminne* is still in the majority. It was once more a question of the nation and its inhabitants. But something important had happened. The nation had changed. In 1928,



Fig 1. SOU 1922.

the leader of the Social Democratic Party and later the Swedish Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson (1885–1946), gave a famous speech to the nation, the *folkhemstalet* (people’s-home speech). His point was that Sweden should become a social and economic welfare society. One would think that an older definition of *kulturarv* with its focus on the nation would have then shifted to a more socialistic approach to the country’s heritage, but this was not the case. Instead, we find the same focus on the nation and its heritage as we found in the SOU from 1922. The Commissioners did however use the word *allmoge* (country folk). From a Social Democratic point of view, *allmoge* means country people or families with few if any resources.

THE COMMISSIONERS WROTE that there was a risk that rural districts might lose the *allmoge kulturarv* owing to a radical modernization of society. The industrialization and modernization of Swedish society began in the late 19th century and in the 1930s more and more people were moving to the industries in the cities.¹⁰

Despite this, *kulturarv* was defined in a similar way to the two earlier SOUs, namely as a national “we”. This is not strange because it is in line with the rhetoric of the *folkhem* politics of the time, declaring one nation, one people, one religion, one history and even sometimes one race, and of course one heritage.¹¹

Hansson argued for a homogenous society with a place for everyone. What this suggests is that the Commissioners and the politicians in the 1930s used an older definition of *kulturarv* in a new political setting, *underlining its nationalistic importance instead of its national importance*. Having national importance is

KULTURARV

KULTURMINNE

KULTURMILJÖ | ÖLJIMJUTJUK

KULTURARV

KULTURMINNE

KULTURMINNE

understood by the Commissioners as objective scientific importance for the nation. Having nationalistic importance is instead a question of political importance, rather than objective scientific importance. Today we would not draw that sort of line, but that was the argument earlier. What we also find here is a focus on a specific form of *kulturarv* (i.e. *allmoge*), which we did not find in the two previous inquiries. Thus, there was a small but important change in how *kulturarv* was understood between the first two inquiries and the one from the 1930s.

In 1956, an inquiry dealing with historical buildings was published in two volumes.¹² *Kulturarv* is only mentioned once and it is stated that buildings with traces of past construction techniques, or related to specific historical events, or to persons that are important for Swedish history, belong to the nation's *kulturarv*.¹³ In 1956, *kulturarv* was thus still understood as a "neutral" national inheritance from the past.

The next SOU to deal with *kulturarv* was published in the mid-1960s.¹⁴ The Swedish welfare society was just emerging. The economy was strong, and many social reforms were delivered. There was also an influx of migrant workers.

The word *kulturminne* is not mentioned at all in the first of the two volumes, but *kulturarv* occurs nine times.¹⁵ Most of the time it refers to the nation's *kulturarv*. On one occasion, the Commissioners discuss *Franska kulturarvet* (French heritage) and one another occasion they mention *allmogens kulturarv*.

Between 1922 and 1965, the word *kulturminne* played a central role in Swedish heritage management. The word is, again, an appeal to remember what is not rememberable, and to care for such items. *Kulturarv*, on the other hand, is a form of umbrella concept that includes all *kulturminne*. This inheritance belongs to the nation, its inhabitants, and its future generations, but it is the state's responsibility to care for its *kulturarv* in a neutral, scientific manner. This can be questioned, of course, because what are neutrality and science? It seems to me that the Commissioners understood this and were therefore careful when they use the word *kulturarv*.

Stage 2. The split, immigration and inquiries in the 1970s

As we have seen, the word *kulturarv* was used sparingly in the inquiries discussed so far. The Commissioners used the word *kulturminne* instead. Minorities and indigenous groups were not mentioned, but that does not mean that they were excluded. The only group that is mentioned is the *allmoge*, but not as an exclusive group. The Commissioners suspect that the *allmoge* might disappear owing to changes in the society, which meant that their tools, buildings, landscapes and traditions could vanish.

In the 1960s, Sweden was in need of workers for its expanding industries. People from Finland and Italy, but also from Greece and Turkey arrived.¹⁶ In 1972, an inquiry with the title *New Cultural Politics* was published,¹⁷ it concerned the question of rethinking cultural politics, but no shift in the use of the three words is evident. *Kulturminne* is still more common than *kulturarv*. The issue instead was: "The *Immigrant inquiry* (from 1969) investigates immigrants' problems with adaptation and so forth. The inquiry shall address the degree to which society should provide immigrants with the possibility to keep their traditions and other heritage".¹⁸

The Commissioners stressed that *Centerpartiet* and *Moderata samlingspartiet*, two center or center-right parties, underlined the need to emphasize heritage from older times, but also Christian values.¹⁹ The question of immigration and the intervention from the two political parties are perspectives not seen in earlier SOUs. If all the previous SOUs were free from conflicts of interest, this one was not. The issue is that if immigrants were to be allowed to nourish their heritage, then there was a need to promote Swedish heritage, traditions and religion too.

According to the inquiry, immigrants do not carry with them any *kulturminne*. Only Sweden has such items. Immigrants carry with them *kulturarv*, things, or rather traditions, that are movable, which *kulturminne* obviously are not. This does not suggest

that immigrants cannot respond to the appeal, or the insistence, to remember what is not rememberable in Swedish *kulturminne*, but it is not a part of them when they arrive in Sweden, nor of course is Swedish *kulturarv*, because, the thinking went, if immigrants were to keep their own heritage, they could not at the same time turn to Swedish heritage, something clearly underscored in the quotation: "... The inquiry shall address the degree to which the society should provide immigrants with the possibility to keep their traditions and other heritage".²⁰

It was, in other words, possible for immigrants to remember what is not rememberable and at the same time keep their heritage, but it was not possible for them to have two heritages. Nor was this possible for Swedes. That's the issue, according to the Commissioners.

IN THE CASE OF the immigrants, *kulturarv* is separated from *kulturminne*. *Kulturminne* became a historical entity, which *kulturarv* is not. *Kulturarv* was turned into an ahistorical social phenomenon and immigrants' *kulturminne* was stuck in the country they had left behind. Immigrants thus became ahistorical. The difference between heritage and history, and the ahistorical dimension of heritage, has been discussed by David Lowenthal, who concludes that heritage has nothing to do with history. Heritage, according to Lowenthal, is not a historical investigation but a tribute to the past, not a wish to understand anything about the past, but a profession with a deep trust and belief in the past, however redefined for present purposes.²¹ As Lowenthal underlines, heritage is an ahistorical project with political and economic ambitions.²² Lowenthal concludes: "...confining possession to some while excluding others is the *raison d'être* of heritage".²³

Lowenthal's discussion is crucial for what I'm trying to capture in this essay and for our understanding of why heritage is such a problematic issue today. This is underscored in the inquiry under discussion, because strangely, and only after some time, immigrants' ahistorical and social *kulturarv* slowly took on *kulturminne*, because as we have seen, *kulturarv* cannot exist without historical entities. Immigrant *kulturarv* slowly filled with *kulturminne*, but it was a new form of *kulturminne*, a *kulturminne* that can be translated into cultural memory, because it is remembered rather than actually present in the same place and time as those doing the remembering. What we have here is a new definition of *kulturminne* adapted to a new situation.

What we are tracing here is the beginning of a discourse that will become more ambiguous during the following decades. In 1972, the Commissioners were aware for the first time that *kulturarv* is not an easy issue, but they believed in its possibilities in a multicultural Swedish society.

Encouraged by this possibility, a new SOU was published only three years later with the title *The Sami in Sweden: Support for language and culture*.²⁴ The Sami, an indigenous population,

were not mentioned in earlier enquiries. I must again stress that this is not a consequence of explicit exclusion, but because of broad older definitions of *kulturarv* and *kulturminne*.

That the Sami came into explicit focus in the 1970s is a consequence of a new definition of *kulturarv* and to some extent *kulturminne*. The Commissioners wrote: "Immigrants' and the linguistic minorities' capacity to bring with them their own cultural traditions has in many cases been limited. This is a pity because the preservation of their heritage has proved important for their self-identification." A prospective policy on minority and immigrant issues should be based on this conclusion, the Commissioners argued.²⁵

I have translated "*föra de egna kulturtraditionerna vidare*" as "bring with them their own cultural traditions". This "bringing with" is important because that is what an inheritance is about. But "bringing with" is not an easy issue. It can be extremely problematic. To "bring with" is to conserve. An inheritance ceases to be an inheritance if we do not bring it with us and hand it on to future generations.

The older definition of *kulturarv* included what needed to be remembered as something that was not rememberable. In this meaning, *kulturarv* was not something static, but a part of a developing and changing society. In the new definition it instead became conservative, which this "bringing with" underscores. It even excludes history because it has nothing to do with history. Instead "bringing with" is to bring the whole inheritance that is important for self-identification in the present.

THE SAMI, AND OTHER minorities and immigrants, are deprived of their history by this new definition and turned into an ahistorical and eternal anachronism. The temporality of their history was smashed into a static cube with no doors to let life in. Eric Wolf famously described those condemned to this condition as being "people without history", not because such communities literally had no histories, but because Eurocentric views characterized them in this disparaging way.²⁶

However, what these authors and other critics of Western discourse have missed is that not having an explicitly defined history and an historical discourse can have its advantages.

If, for example, minorities and indigenous groups are given a history they are also historicized. History is something that has been but is no longer. If indigenous groups and minorities have a history, they are historical and thus changeable over time like society in general. As we have seen Lowenthal conclude, the whole point with heritage is that it is static and deals with the political and economic present. It would therefore be a catastrophe for minorities and indigenous groups if they are historicized, because they would be able to change, adapt and be integrated like society in general, and not static with their present heritage. Instead, their heritage would be historicized and place within the

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Fig 2. SOU 1972.



Fig 3. SOU 1978.

walls of a museum in a similar way as mainstream society deals with its history. This would contradict recent decades of liberal heritage politics favoring the heritage of indigenous groups, minorities and immigrants.

At the same time and in this definition of *kulturarv*, there is an overwhelming risk of social, political and legal suffocation, penalization, and disadvantage. Another crucial issue is that “self-identification” and the aspect of “bringing with” turns inwards and is defined against other identities, i.e. identity is static and locked up inside itself, creating a risk of polarization and conflict between immigrant groups, minorities and a national majority. Interestingly, the Commissioners understood this, but could not find ways to transcend their own discourse. As an example, the Commissioners wrote that it could be very difficult to be a Sami among the Samis themselves, because *kulturarvet* risked locking people up inside a more or less static community.²⁷

In 1978, the inquiry *Culture and information across borders. Swedish cultural and information exchange abroad* was published.²⁸ The purpose was to explore Sweden’s international contacts in culture, science and information and Sweden’s impact on the international community, and to understand how Sweden was viewed abroad.

The Commissioners wrote: “In their endeavor to free themselves from a colonial inheritance, countries in the Third World have in recent years focused on the preservation of their own cultural heritage and the strengthening of national identity through different cultural political measures.”²⁹ After concluding this, the Commissioners underscored that it was a perspective that had been expressed at different international and regional minister conferences organized by UNESCO during the 1970s. Culture, they stressed, was also a part of the United Nation’s basic needs strategy that was signed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) at the World Employment Conference in 1976, as a part of a new economic world order.

They also questioned how such issues were understood during the 1960s. Back then, support for cultural projects was mostly directed towards the conservation of large historical monuments. They mention UNESCO’s campaign to save the Abu Simbel temple in Egypt as one example. In the 1970s, developments were characterized by educational and scientific efforts aimed at strengthening national identity. International organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNESCO and ILO developed projects to aid developing countries in their efforts to preserve and develop their own cultures.³⁰

The state-funded Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency was engaged, and its 1976–77 budget included economic support of cultural issues for the first time, with the purpose of strengthening and developing a national character in postcolonial “Third World” nations. The Commissioners wrote: “National identity is the fundament for a dialog between other nations, something that has been advocated by representatives from different developing countries.”³¹

But the Commissioners also addressed Swedish issues such as repatriation and emphasized that ethnographic museums in Sweden must allow researchers from Africa, Asian and the Pacific to work with *their own* heritage stored in Swedish museums.³² The Commissioners also repeated what was stated in earlier SOUs about immigrants keeping their identity by defending and developing their own heritage.

IN SOUS FROM THE 1920S and onwards, the Commissioners argued that Swedish *kulturarv* is a part of a broader set of heritage including all civilized nations (*kulturnationer*). *Kulturarv* was understood as something neutral that belongs to everyone and at the same time to no one. Scientists, state bureaucrats, museum staff and other authorities handled it. *Kulturarv* could not be split up amongst different interest groups. Throughout the 1970s, *kulturarv* gradually became an issue for immigrants and different ethnic groups in Swedish society.

If we view the SOU from 1978 more closely, we find a contradiction in the definition of the word *kulturarv*. If *kulturarv* was a question of self-identification in Sweden during the 1970s and therefore important for minorities and immigrants, it was not so for the postcolonial nations with which Sweden then engaged. Instead *kulturarv* in this case was seen as important for postcolonial countries’ *national* self-identification.

What this implies is that Sweden did not want to encourage a heritage split in this case, in the same manner as had been done in Sweden. Instead, it was argued that such postcolonial nation states needed educational and scientific efforts to strengthen their national identity. This was in line with the definition used in Sweden from the 1920s and until the 1960s when it was argued that *kulturarv* was important for the nation and all its inhabitants and future citizens. What we view now is another form of heritage definition only applicable for Sweden’s engagement with the postcolonial Global South. In other words, it is important to promote national and even nationalistic heritage politics in postcolonial countries, but at the same time to oppose such perspectives in Sweden. Here heritage – *kulturarv* – is, on the contrary, a

question of plurality, multi-ethnicity, immigrants, minorities and indigenous groups.

Swedish engagement in the postcolonial Global South might not be imperialistic, which might be a too strong word, but there is a clear difference between how *kulturarv* is evaluated and used in the Swedish context and how Swedish Commissioners and politicians want it to be used in a postcolonial context.

The argument is, according to the SOU, that these nations have not advanced to the level where they could accept a diversity of *kulturarv*. Instead they needed scientific knowledge and education to be able to deal with the country's national *kulturarv* and to shape a national identity. Such notions were in line with UNESCO's politics at the time, and indeed still are.³³

It seems to me that the Commissioners returned to Swedish *folkhem* politics, trying to create a social, economic and equal welfare society characterized, as I noted earlier, by one nation, one people, one religion, one history and sometimes even one race, and of course one heritage.³⁴

THIS APPROACH WAS of course doomed to fail. Instead, it can be hypothesized that Swedish heritage politics have implicitly and probably also explicitly helped to create some of the problems that we have today, with heritage polarization and conflicts, heritage destruction, terrorism and so on, but with such a slow shift that it is almost impossible to trace it back to Sweden's international engagement decades ago. During the 1970s Sweden was deeply influential in India, for example, and today a Hindu nationalistic party governs India with a strong focus on Hindu heritage. Yet Sweden alone is not to blame. The Western world shares the blame. We can see this today with hindsight, but of course, that was not possible in the 1970s. They thought that a nationalistic heritage politics was a splendid idea. Today we know that the "state nationalism" that was advocated was not a good idea, and, as we shall see below, it was already questioned in inquiries from the 1980s and 1990s, because Sweden then began to emphasize democratic issues, domestically and abroad. *Kulturarv* had become a democratic problem.

Stage 3. Heritage and democracy. Inquiries in the 1980s and 1990s

As far as I have been able to determine, the word democracy was used for the first time in an inquiry from 1956. There it was stated that a democratic society must care for its *kulturarv*.³⁵ The second time the word was used was in an inquiry from 1972. By then the situation had changed and access to the nation's *kulturarv* was seen as a universal democratic right.³⁶

In SOU 1983:57, *Different origin – Community in Sweden. Education for linguistic plurality*, the word 'democracy' was given a more prominent position. The word was used 32 times on 16

pages. Something had happened, otherwise why would the Commissioners discuss democracy so many times?

In this inquiry the word *kulturarv* was mentioned 60 times on 49 pages. *Kulturminne* was not mentioned. The discourse had completely shifted from *kulturminne* to *kulturarv*.

The Commissioners wrote that it was complicated to use '*kulturarv*' in education when pupils at the same time should be included in *our fundamental democratic principles*. The Commissioners thought this was difficult enough to achieve in a school with only Swedish pupils. In a school with different nationalities, they wrote, it becomes problematic to distinguish between what might be ordinary conflicts between people and conflicts that are a consequence of some children belonging to a minority ethnic group or who are immigrants.³⁷

The issue is *our fundamental democratic principles* ("*våra viktigaste demokratiska traditioner*"). It is even a question of fostering (*fostran*) democracy, which gives everyone a possibility to influence society, but only through democratic means.³⁸

The Commissioners stressed that principles and opinions can always be reconsidered. At the same time, it is clear that they believed our democracy should rank some principles above others. Such principles must always, they underlined, be taken into consideration when personal and cultural freedom is discussed.³⁹

Underlining *the fundamental principles of Swedish democracy*

is something not seen before in the inquiries. What the Commissioners underscored was that *kulturarv* might have its advantages in a multicultural society, but it should never be allowed to challenge the fundamentals of Swedish democracy.

Immigrants, according to the Commissioners, bring with them principles and traditions that are not consistent with the Swedish principles and traditions inherent in Swedish democracy.⁴⁰ *Kulturarv* not consistent with these

principles is thus not real *kulturarv*, but something else that cannot be accepted in the Swedish context. They did not point to any examples, but this is irrelevant because what we see here is the underlying belief that *kulturarv* must always be evaluated in relationship to the principles of democracy.

This realization completely shatters the old idea that *kulturarv* was important for self-identification. In this later definition it is the principles of democracy that must furnish the fundamentals for self-identification. The point that the Commissioners underscore here is that *kulturarv* no longer can be the fundamental fort self-identification because some, not least immigrant *kulturarv*, the Commissioners argue, holds perspectives and traditions that are not consistent with Swedish principles and traditions inherent in Swedish democracy.

YET THIS IS NOT the end of the discussion. Eight years later in 1991 the issue was emphasized again in an SOU called *Different but similar. Immigrant children in multi-cultural Sweden*.⁴¹ There

“THROUGHOUT THE 1970S, KULTURARV GRADUALLY BECAME AN ISSUE FOR IMMIGRANTS AND DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS IN SWEDISH SOCIETY.”

it was stated that free choice (*valfrihet*) comes with respect for the integrity of the other and the possibility to make use of one's own *kulturarv* within the framework of Swedish society's basic norms for social coexistence.⁴² According to Ian Lilley, an Australian professor in archaeology who has been working with heritage issues for decades, Canada and Australia had similar politics at the time.⁴³ This is not irrelevant because Sweden, Canada and Australia have had very similar liberal and social democratic politics for decades.

No one – Swede or immigrant – has a totally free choice. Instead the Commissioners declared that it was important that a nuanced discussion take place, to make Sweden a more generous multicultural society with a new understanding of cultural pluralism.⁴⁴ It is not clear, however, what the Commissioners meant by a new understanding of cultural pluralism.

IN 1991, THE NATIONALISTIC and anti-immigrant party *Ny demokrati* (New Democracy) entered the Swedish parliament. In response to a new proposition for primary schooling (*grundskolan*) brought forward by the Social Democratic government,⁴⁵ the nationalistic party wrote that there were conflicting objectives in the proposition because on the one hand it welcomed a multicultural society and on the other hand defended Christian ethics and a humanistic Western world heritage. It was important, the party argued, that there should be no ambiguities in national policy documents such as a new plan for primary schooling. Even though UNESCO is not mentioned in the inquiry, the perspective mirrors UNESCO's thoughts about "the right kind of culture", according to Bjarne Nielsen. UNESCO, Nielsen argues, "promotes an all-inclusive culture perspective for 'We the Peoples of the United Nations', but there are limits to tolerance in this culture ideology."⁴⁶

Limits to tolerance are, as we have seen so far, not only an outspoken demand from *Ny demokrati*, but the main discourse throughout the inquiries from the "Heritage split" in the 1970s, discussed above. The right kind of heritage culture was democratic. However, the dilemma will worsen.

In the inquiries discussed so far, words such as "anti-democratic" or "racism" were not mentioned. However, exactly those two words were used in an inquiry from 1995. The Commissioners wrote that technology should be used to tackle the information and knowledge gap in the society. But if such technology were used to spread racist and anti-democratic tendencies, it had to be addressed.⁴⁷

Even though *Ny demokrati* evaporated in the 1994 election, the party had changed the political map. From that time onwards, right-wing groups and parties became aware that *kulturarv* was important for self-identification and therefore could be positively used in nationalistic politics and national ethnic identity.⁴⁸

Stage 4. The "Heritage Agenda" and the politics of ambiguity

In 1998, David Lowenthal wrote that "confining possession to some while excluding others is the *raison d'être* of heritage".⁴⁹ In the same year, Edward Said claimed that "Identity as such is as boring a subject as one can imagine. Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism, and so on". But in the same sentence he also underscored that "We have to defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior, but that is very different from aggrandizing a past invented for present reasons".⁵⁰

There is an important word in the Said citation that is repeated in another quotation from Lowenthal: "Rival claimants seem hell-bent on aggrandizing their own heritage goods and virtues, to the exclusion or detriment of all others".⁵¹ The word "aggrandizing" means to increase the power, status, wealth or reputation of someone or something. Our world is obsessed by aggrandizing and identity politics; cultural pride and drum-beating nationalism lie at the core of social expression. Why? Because of heritage. Heritage is the only word that has the international power, at every level from governmental to individual, to activate this political situation. We find this polarized conflict everywhere around the globe.

Swedish inquiries during the 1980s and the early 1990s touched on this problem but did not have the intellectual insight to develop a more comprehensive critique of the looming situation, or maybe they felt a need to be politically correct, which is probably more true. Nevertheless they turned in another direction, which started a new orientation in Swedish heritage politics.

IN 2004, A GOVERNMENT-FUNDED three-year project came to an end. The project was labelled "Agenda kulturarv" (The Heritage Agenda). Its purpose was to increase the democratic impact of state-governed heritage management by collaborating with wider society.⁵²

Agenda kulturarv describes a peak in a discourse that was introduced during the 1970s. Since then, heritage has been connected with Swedish democracy in one way or another. The point of *Agenda kulturarv* was to take people rather than objects as its starting point. This strategy related to the questions of whose history it was that was exposed. A central word was "participation" (*delaktighet*). Another important word was "diversity" (*mångfald*). It was politically declared that people employed in the heritage sector must understand that there is a plurality of heritage representing something fundamental for many different groups and that heritage is a question of diversity and heterogeneity.

"IT WAS POLITICALLY DECLARED THAT PEOPLE EMPLOYED IN THE HERITAGE SECTOR MUST UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS A PLURALITY OF HERITAGE."

The outcome of the project was: “When young people are asked to point at something that they themselves want to save for the future, they point at local places that are charged with personal meaning, for example the bench where they received their first kiss or the best local sledding hill”.⁵³ For the four Commissioners, this should have been understood as an eye-opener, emphasizing that knowledge of important heritage places can only be received through a dialog with those who use such places.

The Commissioners were on a naive and dangerous path when they promoted a bench or local sledding hill. Did they really mean that a place where we received our first kiss or a place where we played as kids should be turned into something that is exclusively mine and only mine for all coming generations? Nevertheless, the four Commissioners behind the report received high positions in the state-funded heritage sector for their efforts, which is not without importance, because they would hereby implement the outcome of *Agenda Kulturarv*, to begin with at least.

IF WE RETURN TO the inquiries from the 1970s onward, there is one central word that is explicitly or implicitly repeated throughout the decades, and that is “self-identification”. Another repeated term is “democracy”. But combining self-identification with democracy has proven complicated. There is a fundamental risk that self-identification leads to the “narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism”, to repeat the earlier quote from Said. Please note that there exists a huge discourse on the relationship between nationalism and identity,⁵⁴ but my point here is to underline what Edward Said has expressed, because of his intellectual importance for such issues.⁵⁵

This is not to say that a “self-identification” based on heritage is anti-democratic *per se*, but it holds a very forceful seed that can develop into anti-democratic perspectives, and that is what the Commissioners in the 1980s and 1990s were starting to understand. It seems to me to be impossible to combine “heritage as self-identification” with democracy. It leads to the paradox where the Commissioners needed to balance between the two: on the one hand heritage as self-identification and on the other hand the principles of democracy. In other words, heritage as self-identification, and as it is defined in the SOU inquiries, cannot be combined with democracy because heritage as self-identification holds the risk of many non-democratic perspectives, whether in immigrant culture or in a relationship between heritage and new right-wing groups or neo-nationalistic politics. This is what the Commissioners were starting to understand. Here again we find an idea of the right sort of culture or the right sort of heritage.

As we have seen, in 1995 the Commissioners wrote that technology should be used to tackle information and knowledge gaps in society. But they clarified that if such technology were used to spread racist and anti-democratic tendencies, this must be addressed.⁵⁶ But there was no suggestion as to how such “drum-beating nationalism” should be dealt with.

In 2017, the Swedish government published a heritage proposition called Proposition 2016/17:116, “*Kulturarvspolitik*” (heritage politics), in a last desperate effort to tackle a growing right-wing movement that had expanded well beyond the Sweden Democrats.

THE FIRST SOU dealing with *kulturarv* was published in 1922 and in two volumes.

The inquiry filled 677 pages. The word *kulturminne* was used 131 times and the word *kulturarv* just three times. Almost 100 years later, the picture was the opposite. The 2017 proposition comprised 240 pages. The word *kulturminne* was used 28 times, but the word *kulturarv* was used more than 800 times! This means that on average, the word *kulturarv* was repeated three times on every page. On one page it was repeated 21 times.⁵⁷

This tells us that the 2017 Commissioners were very anxious, and it is almost impossible to understand what they actually wanted to express. The whole proposition is based on ambiguity. I would describe it as a text that moves continually from one hand to the other. If they have concluded something, they shortly thereafter conclude if not the total opposite, then something not far from it. *Kulturarv* can be almost anything – something very dynamic, democratic, individualistic, collectivistic, negotiable, ahistorical, yet at the same time something solid, scientific, undemocratic, not negotiable, historical and so on.

Said wrote, “We have to defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior.” But the question is, what were the Commissioners behind the 2017 proposition defending? Perhaps it is nothing more than a certain political rhetoric that is becoming more and more common, that is to say the politics of ambiguity. It is in this maelstrom of vague information and disinformation that we find today’s “drum-beating nationalism” and other forms of “identity politics”, with its own disinformation and ambiguity and vagueness.

With all our fine thoughts on heritage, we have together, myself included, played right into the hands of the extreme right, as the 2017 proposition so unfortunately shows, because there is no clear line between multi-ethnic heritage politics and the extreme right, neo-nationalistic heritage politics. Neo-nationalists can argue for nationalistic heritage politics on exactly the same grounds as any other can in the course of identity politics and political polarization. That’s where we are in 2020.

Identity in a post-heritage future

I began this essay by quoting David Harvey and his focus on heritagization and the production of identity, power and authority. What we have seen so far is that these factors have become stronger and stronger in Sweden over the decades, culminating in total ambiguity in the 2017 Proposition. That inquiry confused identity, power, authority and heritagization, and so became a mishmash of everything and nothing. Still, as we have seen, the complicated term identity, or self-identification, is the most crucial of these three pivotal words. “Identity” is far more problematic than power or authority, because when identity is

connected with power and authority we risk getting a politically extremely dangerous identity politics and with that drum-beating nationalism, because drum-beating nationalism is based on exactly the same arguments as any other self-identification in a time polarized by identity-politics.

It was also mentioned at the beginning of the essay that there is parallel history between the shift in the meaning of the word *kulturarv* between the 1920s and today, the neo-liberalization and globalization of the economy, and the advance of right-wing politics. I need to give a definition of neo-liberalism. According to my computer's New Oxford American Dictionary, neo-liberalism is: "a political approach that favors free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending."

One of many reasons for this is that heritage is a question for the present and in our global economization of everything, heritage has become an economic resource to exploit, but heritage is also politicized and, as we have seen, important in self-identification (both economical and as identity), and it is in this context that right-wing politics have advanced. For them, heritage is an ethnic and national marker for national self-identification. Bolsonaro and Trump, both with close ties neo-nationalistic politics, are fixated with free-market capitalism and at the same time with national ethnic heritage. Neo-nationalist, right-wing groups and other extreme right groups are propagating for deregulation and reduction of the government and government spending. They are also against the self-identification of minorities, immigrants and indigenous populations.

During the 1990s, Swedish Commissioners saw it coming and Edward Said and David Lowenthal warned us, but the siren song of heritage has blinded us and so today we are stuck with a situation from which we cannot readily free ourselves: heritage underpins the identity politics of drum-beating nationalism, a huge threat to classical liberal democracy, owing to the *raison d'être* of heritage.

IF THIS IS THE CASE, which is my argument, we need to re-think.⁵⁸

Neo-liberal politics of ambiguity has a tendency to turn everything into a commodity and level everything into something ahistorical.⁵⁹ This is not only true for contemporary politics, but also in the heritage sector. I have discussed Sweden, but for a broader discussion on the commodification of heritage, see Britt Baillie et al. and for a discussion regarding transnational cultural commodities, see Belén Martín-Lucas and Andrea Ruthven.⁶⁰

An inheritance proper is always related to some sort of possession. But when we talk about *kulturarv* (and heritage) we are talking about a quasi-inheritance. *Kulturarv* lacks a testament, a narrative, a memory and especially a person-to-person transfer. Instead *kulturarv* becomes a political issue and a question of bureaucratic administration, as we have seen. The reason for this

is that an inheritance without a testament is an inheritance without an owner, i.e. an ownerless property, a *boni vacanti*.

Kulturarv is not an inheritance proper but is used as if it were such an inheritance, something to carry with us into the future, like a lifeline to hold on to when the world becomes more and more incomprehensible. It is here that the question of self-identification asserts itself. But the question of self-identification does not mitigate the incomprehensibility of the world. Instead, it makes the world even more polarized, fragmented and therefore, one might argue, almost uninhabitable.

The problem sharpens when we ask what identity might be. This "who" – identity – cannot be defined in advance, because

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identity is a question with an open dynamic. The question of an open identity transgresses our understanding of identity. When we talk about identity, we usually refer to complex processes of identification, but we have a tendency to freeze this open dynamic into images and figures (*kulturarv*). We have problems tackling the insecurity inherent in an open identity, because such an identity always questions our self-image. But we are never a finished "us". Instead we are continually in a process of becoming this "us". This can however imply that we are continually living with only a partial

identity. Such a partial identity is a constitutive cause of our need for an unambiguous identification process.

THESE QUESTIONS cannot be discussed in more detail if we do not include globalization and its existential consequences. Neo-liberalism and global capitalism's commodification of everything brings with it ideological and socio-political consequences that are important for our understanding of today's political situation.

Today we are not only negotiating who should be the owner of a specific heritage, we are also negotiating images strong enough to define an "I", who can claim ownership over a specific cultural identity, in any situation, i.e. indigenous, minority, immigrant, ethnic, race, majority, nationalistic, etc., which today shapes and is shaped by the politics of ambiguity, vagueness, which is in turn, I would like to argue, a consequence of the neo-liberal economization of everything, its deregulation, and even the reduction in government spending.

What we need therefore are new forms of co-existence that go beyond identity-politics and *kulturarv*, which should make it possible for us to exist as an open identity with existential responsibility for our own lives, i.e. the insight that we are never finished with our becoming and that we cannot allow our identity to be locked up inside itself, inside any *kulturarv*. If we do so, as we have seen, we risk becoming an exotic, nostalgic and anachronistic commodity on the global market of images, signs and logos. Or, perhaps even worse, we might end up believing in an unachievable stability defined by drum-beating nationalists.

Conclusion

Almost 100 hundred years of Swedish heritage politics not only mirror the development of global neo-liberal capitalism and its focus on identity as a commodity, a political issue and a question of emancipation, they also mirror national and international heritage politics, both as something “defending peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior” and at the same time, something “hell-bent on aggrandizing their own heritage goods and virtues, to the exclusion or detriment of all others”. This is the paradox that *kulturarv* creates in our world today. There is no return. The “neutral” tone in the early SOU’s is not a way forward. Rather, a way forward might be to take as our point of departure a post-heritage future with open identities and existential responsibilities for our own lives in coexistence with others, and with the fundamental principles of classical Western liberal democracy.⁶¹

What I also have found is that democracy has fundamental problems with *kulturarv*, because *kulturarv* always focuses on a stable and inherent, but ahistorical, identity, which makes the world polarized, fragmented and in the end almost uninhabitable. It is not only far-right nationalists who are responsible for this polarization but all of us, including myself, inspired as we are by a wide and lively – sometimes critical – discourse that has been going on for some time now, emphasizing the importance of heritage.

But if we look back through the 100 years of Swedish heritage politics we may ask when it was ever motivated to talk about *kulturarv*, even in its most “neutral” meaning. *Kulturminne* and even *kulturmiljö* I can understand. *Kulturminne* is a poetic word and *kulturmiljö* has, for instance, an important legal meaning, but *kulturarv* – heritage – cannot, as I see it and against my discussion above, be motivated beyond a narcissistic aggrandizing self-identity, be it a person, a nation, the European Union, a community, a group of people, a continent, or the whole world. We need, I would like to suggest, to move away from self-identification and identity-politics generated by heritage politics into a post-heritage future with an open, dynamic and democratic understanding of identity.⁶² ✖

Johan Hegardt is Associate Professor in Archaeology, Uppsala University, works in the fields of art history, archaeology, museums and heritage studies, and cultural studies. Currently, Hegardt is associated with Philosophy, Department of Culture and Learning, Södertörn University, Sweden.

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