

Cultural heritage under scrutiny. As a concept, a political tool and a contemporary discourse

**Kulturarv: en
begrepps-
politik**

[Cultural
Heritage: the
politics of the
concept],
Johan Hegardt
and Marcia Sá
Cavalcante
Schuback,
(Södertörn
philosophical
studies, 2022),
124 pages.

That is why in the place of “cultural heritage”, we should probably put “history”, but not occupied, essentialized and therefore manipulated history, not the history of historians, the history of bureaucrats or pedagogical history, but “sublime” and “hybrid” history, the history that we jointly carry and which may lie in the ground of the survival of criticism or, why not? – survival through criticism – what does it mean to inherit life and death? (page 24, translation – AK)

The effort to formulate the ideas contained in *Kulturarv: en begreppspolitik*, the title of which can be translated as *Cultural Heritage: the politics of the concept*, started before and ends after the research project that the book became a part of. This project, titled “Transnational Art and Heritage Transfer and the Formation of Value: Objects, Agents, and Institutions”, was led by Prof. Irina Sandomirskaya and was dedicated to a variety of paradoxes of the cultural heritage concept and practice. Hegardt and Schuback came into the project with their own set of paradoxes relating to the cultural heritage concept, which they set out to analyze in the book.

Quite short, but intense in its quality of analysis, this book can lead discussions in different directions. Hegardt and Schuback make a sketch out of themes that have been left unnoticed in cultural heritage discourse and discourse analysis. They also put the concept of cultural heritage in its historical perspective with a rather pessimistic conclusion about the concept’s role in contemporary Western society. Their book gives Sweden the role of representing the Western discourse, as both authors live and work in this country and chose to analyze first of all Swedish official documents and policy papers as a case study for their research.

Hegardt and Schuback observe that the official cultural heritage discourse is one of the oldest in Sweden. The country got its cultural heritage law as early as 1666 “Placat och Påbudh, Om Gamble Monumenter och Antiquiteter”. Initially, cultural heritage was about protecting valuable objects which no longer belonged to anyone and thus had no legitimate protectors. These were the objects whose cultural context had disappeared for good. What was left was

material evidence of the disappeared world, which subsequent generations felt obliged to preserve in the remaining objects, more as a hint, the last survivor, material evidence of the bygone past. Schuback used a Latin legal term for this: *bona vacantia* (ownerless property), underlining that cultural heritage is something that no one inherited. It became cultural heritage just when the lawful owner could no longer be identified (at some points of history, not freely, as was the case with post-revolutionary expropriations of private property in the USSR). This heritage without heirs leads to different political powers trying to use cultural heritage for their own needs. It becomes the origin of different twists, which Hegardt and Schuback describe in their book.

They claim that the time has come to question the value of the notion of *cultural heritage*, as the quotation at the beginning of this review defines it – through “sublime” history and criticism. The book reminds us that the development of the cultural heritage discourse intensified during the period of industrialization and globalization, when the attachment to the place one originated from and its history weakened. Thus cultural heritage started to be connected with the feeling of nostalgia and of missing something one has not even owned oneself but belonged to: the search for the assurance of the meaning of one’s own existence via the collective memory and heritage. This is when cultural heritage becomes more than just a valuable *antiquity*, the collector’s pleasure, and becomes a social mechanism less dependent on the material object and more on the feelings of attachment and alienation.

ACCORDING TO THE BOOK, the use of the cultural heritage concept peaked in the 2000s and is now dwindling. In the chapter “Arvets förvaltning” (The management of heritage) and “Arvets politisering” (The politization of heritage) the authors analyze the history of the concept of cultural heritage in Swedish official papers, for example how it was used in different SOUs (official government investigations), bills and reports, which the Swedish government used as an inspiration and preparatory work for possible changes to Swedish law.

Through critical theory and analysis of the official cultural heritage discourse, the book raises the more and more topical question on the status of immigrants’ belonging to the society they live in and their connection to the officially defined cultural heritage. The authors demonstrate the inbuilt inequality and exclusion in the very concept of cultural heritage. As the book defines: “The exile’s longing turns existence into what it always already is, a vulnerability before all other existences [...] it’s not just about not being allowed to live at home in the familiar, but also about becoming a stranger both at home and in the foreign” (page 38). The policy of cultural heritage prescribes the kind of heritage to which one has to experience a personal feeling of belonging. For example, it is said that an immigrant to Sweden cannot own the feeling of belonging to the Swedish heritage. It is prescribed that she should miss only her culture from her homeland, even



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

if she escaped it and has no plans to return. At the same time she will always be an “immigrant”, “fremmande”, “stranger”, and to quote the book: “As a stranger for others, one becomes a stranger for oneself” (page 43). Someone else on the level of cultural policy defines what kind of nostalgia we are to have and for what kind of culture. It always has to be a national culture of a certain kind, and cannot be transnational or global culture. The book claims that cultural heritage preservation policy has changed and, unnoticed, is gradually becoming an identity policy, or even “identifikationspolitik” (the politics of identification) (page 44). According to Hegardt and Schuback, in this framework everyone has to become their own *image*-producer: they have to clone, imitate, play their heritage identity. We see the confirmation of this claim in all types of different media – from official to amateur. The imaginary becomes a property, a source of conflict, and leads to the struggle for appropriation. Cultural heritage practice nowadays is less the attempt to know more about the forgotten past and to strive for the preservation of heritage objects, and more a field of positioning in the media world. The book follows in detail the transformation of the concept in official Swedish discourse, tracing this transformation using the Swedish example. The finding of this analysis is that the official discourse, which from the 1970s tried to emphasize the importance of minorities’ cultural heritage, gave a tool to neoneationalists to highlight the Swedish cultural heritage as valuable

on the same grounds as other heritages (page 81). The discourse on cultural heritage during recent decades, although formulated with good intentions, led to the focus on the purification of a description of separate cultures, instead of demonstrating their mutual influences, which gave neoneationalists an argument to state the importance of preserving pure Swedish culture.

THE BOOK MAKES a strong claim that cultural heritage policy, which became identity policy, paved the ground for neoneationalism, ethnocentrism and racism. These policies in different countries searched for and found a powerful suggestive imaginary of the past, which helped people with their self-definition and provided the comforting feeling of certainty in themselves. As a result, this imaginary can become a replacement for thorough historical study. One can conclude after reading the book that a parasite ideology, which addresses us with the comfortable language of cultural heritage identity, replaces cultural heritage preservation discourse as it was formulated in the second

Continued. Cultural heritage under scrutiny

part of the 19th – early 20th century; and as the authors claim, Swedish authorities have gradually lost control over the message they themselves prioritized and developed.

Hegardt and Schuback reveal the tendency in contemporary society towards the need to identify oneself with some kind of a stable image: a nationality, or a powerful group. Even more – the need to highlight one’s own cultural heritage at the expense of others; that is, the concept of cultural heritage is exclusionary. In this claim they refer to *The Heritage Crusade* by David Lowenthal, which as they point out was ignored among cultural heritage researchers, probably because it questions the status of the concept of cultural heritage. All who remain undefined face the challenge to be questioned, not only on the theoretical level, but also on the level of their existence. In this the authors of the book see the similarities of our time with the world as it was in the 1930s. They claim that globalism that prizes flexibility and mobility leads to people losing their historical identities. What replaces those identities are new constructed identities based on the appropriation of images and narratives, coined among other things by the discourses of cultural heritage. Without identity one feels oneself to be an outsider, but the identities offered for one to choose from are myths. The difference to the 1930s, according to Hegardt and Schuback, is that between First and Second World Wars one was to identify oneself with the party, country or a ruler. Nowadays one chooses to identify with an image of

oneself. What one does is constantly to form oneself according to the picture that one consumes in media.

It is interesting that the book turns the pleasure of self-identification into a trap. The question is: where we can go to resist the need to constantly create our identity? Even if one succeeds in resisting, how will one tell others about it, without creating a new image and a new suggestive identity? Are we forever destined to go around in the traps of multiple attractive but dangerous images of ourselves?

The book gives a little glimpse of the way out of this situation. It comes to the conclusion, or one can say sees hope in finding a new form of coexistence which can survive without the need of identification, an “open identity” which develops in the process of searching, not finding. It prizes the feeling of *missing* as a continuity that does not seek to be filled or satisfied. To agree or not with this is a task for a reader of the book. The question is formulated, and now it is the readers’ duty to think it further.

THE DISCUSSION of the traps of identity policies and practices is becoming more and more topical and the book is a substantial contribution in this subject. The question that remains is whether the concept of *cultural policy* will survive and gain a new meaning or is destined to lose its importance and become marginalized or even disappear. If so, we, as humanities scholars, might not need to be sad about it. As Lowenthal, and following him Hegardt and Schuback, emphasize, cultural heritage should not be mixed with history. It is not really a study of the past but the prizing of the past, coined to suit contemporary needs. ✖

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