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CULTURAL HERITAGE

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In the modern sense of this term, cultural heritage is a relatively young construct that has evolved over the last few decades.

We can assume that the key point in this process was an attempt to establish the definition of cultural heritage in the year 1972, when the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage was adopted at the 17th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris. This document contained, for example, the following provision:

For the purpose of this Convention, the following shall be considered as 'cultural heritage':

- monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of history, art or science;*
- groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of history, art or science;*
- sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of Outstanding Universal Value from historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological points of view.¹*

¹ Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted by the General Conference at its seventeenth session Paris, 16 november 1972, article 1, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/> (access: 11.03.2024).

It soon turned out that this document, along with its accompanying list of the most important world heritage sites of outstanding universal value, did not actually exhaust by any means the need to define cultural heritage, as it focused only on material heritage, or more specifically, monuments or works of art. The cited convention reflects the conviction that focusing on heritage is based primarily on its preservation in the original form, the conservation of material traces of the past and the concern for the prevention of any changes to its frozen form.

Another critical point was the year 1987, with the publication of the report *Our Common Future* (also known as the *Brundtland Report*) signed by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Although it focused on various aspects of prudent, or rational and economical disposal of the Earth's natural resources, the term 'sustainability' described there as a part of the doctrine of political economy was significant for the approach to cultural heritage. The basic message of this document was that modern civilisation cannot develop in a way that prevents future generations from satisfying their needs. If we treat cultural heritage as a resource like, for example, mineral deposits, we will understand that its use cannot come down to the satisfaction of current needs, but must be associated with the aspirations, needs and dreams of those who will live after us.

Finally, the third turning point was the year 2003. At the 32nd UNESCO General Conference, a convention on the protection of intangible cultural heritage was adopted. Article 2 of this document states that:

*'Intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.*²

Attempting to remain optimistic, we could say that in this way, the definitional catalogue of cultural heritage was closed, allowing us to make efficient use of its complete record. Nothing could be more wrong.

Firstly, both documents are based on the belief that the catalogue of tangible and intangible signs of heritage can be built by presenting its forms that are representative of a given area or group. These should serve as the basis for building identity attitudes that help to define their relation with the modern world. In fact,

² Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, article 2, point 1, Paris 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (access: 11.03.2024).

this approach is not about understanding heritage in the context of changes over time (its reception, deconstruction, interpretation, reinterpretation processes, etc.), and consequently, the actual meaning of this heritage for the community of 'inheritors'. This perspective is rather aimed at building a simplified message upholding an official picture of a certain social, ethnic or national group. The way this kind of narrative is constructed is aptly defined by Laurajane Smith, who states that heritage from this perspective is an experience involving both active memorisation and active forgetting.³

At first glance, it can be seen that the definitions included in both UNESCO Conventions are not complementary, and sometimes contradict each other. Referring to tangible heritage in the catalogue of listed items, it is stated that they include monumental sculptures and paintings. For example, this could be the picture of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn. However, according to the second convention, the same picture is a part of intangible heritage because it is undoubtedly an artefact or object associated with the practices, beliefs and messages of a given community. In fact, this vague provision in the Convention confirms the author's conviction on the groundlessness of any attempts to differentiate between tangible and intangible heritage. In the context of these reflections, its importance lies also in showing clearly that further attempts to overwrite existing definitions and to extend them with further fields actually make the definition of heritage even more difficult to compile. Moreover, the provisions of the conventions expressly refer to the need to ignore certain areas of heritage, or result in a superficial approach to critical areas of sites or intangible heritage. This approach not only prevents a more profound reflection on the phenomenon of heritage, but also extinguishes the need to reflect upon the authenticity of the experiences of a given community.

In this context, it is worth noting the provision on the need to give consideration solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments and, which makes this issue even more complicated, 'with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals'. The problem is that although from an idealistic perspective heritage reflects the most glorious, humanitarian and community ideas, it is often a sign of separateness or a unique 'brand' of a given community or group that is frequently based on the will to emphasise individuality and distinctness from others. The above-described requirement seems to be simpler in the case of monuments (I deliberately refrain from using the term 'tangible heritage'), although it turns out that this may be very difficult in their case also. One of the symbols of the historical districts of Istanbul inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List is the Hagia Sophia. Originally built as the Church of Holy Wisdom, it was the most important shrine of the Byzantine Empire. When the Ottomans took control of Constantinople in 1453, they turned this Christian church into a mosque by adding four signature minarets. The fragile balance regarding the 'neutrality' of heritage

3 L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, London – New York 2006, pp. 11–43.

was preserved in the years 1934–2020, when the building was a museum open to the public. In 2020, as a result of political changes, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed a decree under which the building was handed over to the Directorate for Religion and converted into an active mosque. This caused international indignation, which was most fully expressed by the Greek Minister of Culture Lina Mendoni, who stated that ‘Today’s decision, which came as a result of the political will of President Erdogan, is an open provocation to the civilized world, which recognizes the unique value and ecumenical nature of the monument’.⁴ However, the world’s reaction and widespread outrage proved of no avail. As Gregory J. Ashworth wrote: ‘There is no point in asking if heritage can be used as a political tool, because it is unquestionably used as such by various institutions subject to authorities with smaller or larger powers.’⁵

Consequently, it becomes impossible to negotiate common positions towards crucial nexuses of heritage even on the level of official national heritage, which is largely declarative. Therefore, in the long term, it is very unlikely that an agreement will be reached between Poland and Ukraine on the massacre in Volhynia, and between Turkey and Armenia on the Armenian genocide in 1915 (this example shows that even the language used in the context of heritage may cause us to become, consciously or not, interpreters of heritage choosing one or another version; the term ‘genocide’ used here is not accepted by the Turkish side).

Both UNESCO conventions were fully consistent with standards of protection, the schema of action of conservation circles, traditional museology, the assumptions of heritage education, etc. When referring to heritage, they disregarded its dynamic character, the continuous process of change, or the fact of experiencing heritage. They failed to address the heritage of ‘weak communities’ or reflect upon the intermingling of heritages of modern multicultural societies, and finally, within the scope of the classical approach to heritage, they did not have the research concepts and tools that would allow for a critical analysis or deconstruction of heritage, or make it possible to discover the dark side of the established forms of heritage, or to analyse the experience of heritage in terms of border experiences (the heritage of dissonance, the heritage of trauma). In other words, the homogeneous, clear and optimistic picture of heritage cracked and became dull or sometimes fully destroyed. This simplified and essentially naive approach to heritage led to the emergence of the trend of critical studies on heritage in the first years of the 21st century. Monika Stobiecka characterises this relatively young research field as follows:

Critical studies on heritage are a research stream in the study of historic sites, monuments, memorial sites, customs and traditions resulting from the urgent need to reconstruct and

⁴ M. Mikrut-Majeranek, *Hagia Sophia: zamiast muzeum będzie meczet*, Histmag.org, July 11th, 2020, <https://histmag.org/Hagia-Sophia-zamiast-muzeum-bedzie-meczet-20940> (access: 5.09.2023).

⁵ G.J. Ashworth, ‘Sfragmentaryzowane dziedzictwo: sfragmentaryzowany instrument sfragmentaryzowanej polityki’, in: *Dziedzictwo kulturowe w XXI wieku. Szanse i wyzwania*, eds. M.A. Murzyn, J. Purchla, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2007, p. 29.

redefine heritage, which should be based on the «merciless criticism of everything that exists», within the meaning of current theories and practices burdened with nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, cultural elitism, eurocentrism and social exclusions because of race or descent, and, finally, the fetishisation of expert knowledge that still has an impact on how heritage is defined, utilised or managed.⁶

Laurajane Smith and Rodney Harrison are commonly recognised as pioneers of a new approach to heritage. Smith created the concept of the sanctioned discourse of authorised heritage discourse (AHD), indicating that this approach focuses on 'aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations «must» care for, protect and revere so that they may be passed to nebulous future generations for their «education», and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past'⁷. Such an approach to heritage makes it impossible to take note of the heritage of marginalised communities and groups or to introduce new values into the interpretation of heritage. It also wipes out all that is inconvenient and does not allow us to perceive heritage as a living process or an act of negotiation of cultural and social meanings and values. Here, the key thing is to adopt the perspective of intangible heritage as an 'intangible event'.⁸ This opens the way to formulating the thesis that heritage is primarily a social construct – a cultural process with unusual dynamics that not only shapes modernity, but also plays a key role in forming the future.

Criticism of the traditional institutional approach to heritage was also a starting point for Rodney Harrison, who rejected the system of standardisation in the valuation of heritage, and protested against the evaluative attitude to heritage. He criticised heritage management practice by rejecting the division into cultural and natural heritage and not accepting the increasing wave of granting the status of monuments to objects or artefacts. He pointed out that this in no way translates into a greater level of monument protection or an increase in social responsibility and consciousness. As in the case of the majority of modern researchers of heritage, he perceived it as a process, taking particular interest in the heritage creation mechanism.⁹

At the same time the above-described academic papers were published, perhaps the most important document dealing with the issue of cultural heritage was released: the *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* adopted in Faro on 27th October 2005. It differs significantly from the UNESCO conventions quoted earlier. The most important provisions of this document are most certainly those that attempt to define cultural heritage:

6 M. Stobiecka, 'Wprowadzenie. Krytyczne studia nad dziedzictwem: między teorią a praktyką', in: *Krytyczne studia nad dziedzictwem. Pojęcia, metody, teorie i perspektywy*, ed. M. Stobiecka, Wydawnictwa UW, Warszawa 2023, p. 14.

7 L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, op. cit., p. 29.

8 N. Akagawa, L. Smith, *Intangible Heritage*, Routledge, London 2009.

9 R. Harrison, C. DeSilvey, C. Holtorf et al., *Heritage Futures. Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage*, UCL Press, London 2020.

For the purposes of this Convention,

a) cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time;

b) a heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations.¹⁰

Equally important is the provision referring to the individual right of every human being to benefit from cultural heritage and to contribute towards its enrichment (Article 4). The Convention broke with the objective attitude to heritage and focused on its subjective nature. It is also worth pointing out that the problem of asymmetry in the evaluation of heritage from the perspective of various groups was also recognised. The entire wording of Article 7 was devoted to the issue of dialogue with regard to heritage, specifying, e.g., the need to 'establish processes for conciliation to deal equitably with situations where contradictory values are placed on the same cultural heritage by different communities'.

It might seem that the changes that occurred in the research approach and heritage management practice at the beginning of the 21st century have definitively solved the above-defined problems. However, the truth is that although we can present a chronological evolution of the attitude to heritage, both the oldest and contemporary models function simultaneously both in practical and theoretical terms. Gregory Ashworth called this phenomenon an incomplete paradigm shift.¹¹ This situation may be influenced by the fact that the very concept of heritage was born from a combination of experiences from various areas and fields of science and practice. The concept of heritage was built of elements taken from the history of art, anthropology, ethnography, archaeology, history (and its auxiliary sciences), architecture (including landscape architecture), monument science and the practice of conservation in their broad sense (this list is not exhaustive). Due to the heterogeneous character of the construct of heritage, it has been defined in a relatively varied number of ways, usually for provisional needs depending on the approach (dominant thought). However, a concept combining all these interpretations and built on top of the aforementioned areas has not been elaborated. We can risk the statement that the emerging (more or less elaborate) definitions of heritage depend largely on the descent of their authors.

Is it possible to indicate the rudimentary features of cultural heritage in view of everything that has been written above? Irrespective of the trend or method of description, examination and interpretation of heritage we are dealing with, we can say that it is not possible to create a catalogue of objective criteria that would

¹⁰ Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, article 2, Faro 2005, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=199> (access: 11.03.2024).

¹¹ G.J. Ashworth, 'Preservation, Conservation and Heritage: Approaches to the Past in Present through the Built Environment', *Asian Anthropology* 1(10), 2011.

allow a given artefact to be recognised as a part of heritage. It is not subject to 'objectification' processes because it develops as a result of a purely emotional and subjective process. The same dimension of heritage was defined perfectly by Peter Howard, who wrote: 'Heritage has been described as «anything you want»'.¹² For this reason, it is impossible to control the resource of heritage by means of any regulations. Metaphorically speaking, you can force a group of people to enter a church, but you cannot spark authentic religiousness in them by force. A consequence of this is the statement that heritage is always a matter of autonomous choice. However, even if we totally reject or negate our own heritage, we will not become free of it. Heritage is like DNA – it determines, conditions and shapes us. It envelops us from our birth, or maybe we become a part of heritage with our birth. It is both the basic building block of our internal universe, as well as a binding element creating a sense of community (ethnic group, local community or nation). Heritage determines us both internally and externally, invariably arousing admiration, affirmation, pride, lamentation, or sometimes hatred...

We can clearly assume that certain heritage choices may be modelled by various sorts of action (social education in the long term), but ultimately the construct of heritage is a favourable choice from the perspective of the interests of a given group. It is hard to disagree with Laurajane Smith, who writes about the sanctioned discourse of heritage, but this picture very often results not from arbitrary decisions of experts or politicians, but from the most basic emotion of the owners of heritage – egoism. This is hardly surprising, anyway, as we do this at every step. If we have a pickpocket and a heart surgeon in our family, which one of them will we talk to our friends about? Which one will become the basis for our family stories? We 'consciously remember' and 'consciously forget' every day.

Moreover, because of the continuous formation of heritage, the negotiation of its meanings and its constant reinterpretation, heritage forms an indeterminate resource – an open set that never solidifies in an ultimate form. A monument becomes petrified and stiffens in an unchanged form, while heritage constantly boils over in the process of change. This phenomenon can become easier to capture using the metaphor of a lake: it evaporates in the heat of summer and freezes in winter. Heritage is characterised by a constant change of 'states of concentration'; however, even the temporary achievement of the solid state does not put an end to the processes of deconstruction and reinterpretation. We can only indicate temporary centres of crystallisation (which last longer or shorter), but we should not become attached to them because they may become only a part of the shapeless water mass.

Heritage can be understood as a subjective political negotiation of identity, place and memory; that it is a 'moment' or a process of re/constructing and negotiating cultural and social values and meanings. It is a process, or a performance, in which we identify the values, memories and cultural and social meanings that help us make sense of the present, our

¹² P. Howard, *Heritage. Management, Interpretation, Identity*, Continuum, London – New York 2003, p. 6.

*identities and sense of physical and social place. Heritage is a process of negotiating historical and cultural meanings and values that occur around the decisions we make to preserve, or not, certain physical places or objects or intangible events, and the way these are then managed, exhibited or performed.*¹³

As written above, the division into tangible and intangible heritage does not make sense at all. They actually form one thing that forms the full picture of heritage. However, it is important to add that heritage is always associated with a specific place, with mental space playing a more crucial role than geographical space. Therefore, considering heritage in the context of the area must acknowledge the primacy of a given group experiencing heritage. It is because of this process of experiencing heritage that the heritage of a given area, though seeming to be a cohesive construct, is actually a completely different experience for the various groups experiencing it. An example would be the heritage of Upper Silesia dominated by the experience of industrialisation. It may seem homogeneous, but in fact it is totally different for miners (and their descendants) living in *familok* houses and for coal mine owners living in palaces and villas. Because of this dominance of experience with regard to the heritage of a given area, we can come across identical heritage in areas that are geographically more distant from each other (e.g. the heritage of the inhabitants of mountain areas). This homogeneity results from an experience of heritage that is determined by specific living conditions common for these areas.

In the context of what has been written above, it seems reasonable to distinguish one kind of heritage that breaks out of this description. I call it the 'heritage of marked places'. This is a specific nature of heritage whose main heirs and messengers are not indigenous groups but varied communities that have a very strong emotional relationship with a given place, sometimes for a very short time. Examples of such places are the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, the Monte Cassino hill or the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl. In all of these cases, the only group of inheritors is not the local population, although they may feel this heritage with equal intensity, something that is described as the heritage of dissonance or trauma in modern discourse.¹⁴ The most important inheritors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau heritage are former prisoners and their families (the inheritance of this experience by the families of former torturers is a separate, rarely discussed issue). The most important group of inheritors in the case of Monte Cassino are not the inhabitants of the surrounding towns but soldiers of the 2nd Polish Corps, the French Expeditionary Corps and the British 78th Infantry Division in their capture of a strongly fortified hill in bloody battles. The question about the heritage of German soldiers defending the hill may be considered the violation of a taboo, but both they and their descendants carry the experience of this place in them. In the case of Chernobyl, which is known worldwide due to the nuclear

¹³ L. Smith, '«Zwierciadło dziedzictwa»: narcystyczna iluzja czy zwielokrotnione odbicie?', *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 6(9), 2016, p. 30.

¹⁴ M. Banaszekiewicz, *Tourism and Heritage in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone*, Routledge, London – New York 2023.

disaster in 1986, the former inhabitants of the town of Pripyat and Chernobyl are undoubtedly inheritors of this heritage. However, an equally important group of inheritors is the community of 'liquidators' (soldiers, firefighters and rescuers) working in the nuclear power plant and its surrounding area after the disaster. Although the experience of these places was limited to a relatively short time, it became a very intensive building block of heritage that was carried even into the most distant places by the aforementioned groups.

The last feature of heritage that can be indicated as permanent is the capacity of its internal structure. It is naive to think that 'pure' heritage could be described (apart from entirely isolated groups, of which there are relatively few in the modern world). There are still crazy people who try to do it from time to time, but this always ends in a tragedy on a smaller or bigger scale. Streams which feed heritage can come from various traditions, areas or time, and heritage as such is often a non-orthodox phenomenon open to the assimilation, domestication and interpretation of 'other' elements and, finally, their adaptation as its own. In fact, heritage is a sort of cultural palimpsest and patchwork at the same time. Thus, what can be regarded as a weakness is actually its strength – the constant readiness to absorb new content. One example is the traditional Highland Robber ['Zbójnicki'] dance in the Podhale region. Its story was described by Antoni Kroh:

It was the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald [in 1910 – Ł.G.] Parades, festivals and demonstrations took place throughout Galicia... The biggest ceremony, the Grunwald Rally, was convened in Kraków; Poles from the three partitions and the diaspora wanted to demonstrate their unity and will to fight for independence. Ignacy Paderewski founded a monument, Sokół members in green czamary and amaranth shirts practised the parade step, and the whole country held its breath in emotion. Scout Leader [Szczęsny] Połomski prepared a special attraction on that occasion. He gave it the name Hatchet exercises with a Tatra highlanders' dance. These were gymnastic performances in a slightly folk fashion, with the use of highlanders' axes instead of clubs, ribbons and jumping ropes popular at that time. Połomski's invention was, therefore, a contradiction of spontaneity; it was planned as a sword fighting show, a pyramid, or a 'living image'. It was supposed to be a display of fitness and discipline. Drawn and elaborated in the smallest details and then published in print, the hatchet exercises aroused admiration; even Sokół members from Silesia decided to follow this example and arranged a miner's dance with pickaxes – however, it did not catch on. On the contrary, the Highland Robber dance according to Scout Leader Połomski's arrangement was such a great success in Kraków that highlanders acknowledged it as their own (with some modifications, e.g. by removing the girls and reducing the number of circles to one). Today, everybody knows that the Neo-Highland Robber dance has been danced in Podhale for ages.¹⁵

The story described above points to the key feature of heritage: freedom. Freedom in acknowledging something as one's own, freedom in rejection, freedom in

15 A. Kroh, *Sklep potrzeb kulturalnych po remoncie*, Wydawnictwo MG, Warszawa 2013, p. 134.

enriching heritage with new content. Nobody can force through anything as heritage against the wish of its inheritors. And nobody can prohibit anything as a part of heritage, either. One can even risk the statement that the limit of heritage is the full freedom of choice.

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ABSTRACT: Cultural heritage is inseparably connected with the functioning of individuals, social and ethnic groups, and the community of a region, state or nation. It has accompanied and formed us since our youngest years, it influences our identity and our relations with the environment, as well as our views and attitudes. We can accept it without criticism, verify and analyse it critically or reject it totally – however, each of these attitudes mean immersion in our own heritage. Even a gesture of

rejection does not release us from cultural heritage and does not erase the impact it has made on us. While heritage on the individual or family level does not cause major disruptions, the heritage of the community, region or state may have serious internal or external consequences. Any attempts to impose or remove heritage, or the will to discover 'pure' heritage free of 'external' influence, always ends tragically to a lesser or greater extent. It is therefore vital to maintain basic values in the discourse on heritage: tolerance, the right to choose and the preservation of diversity.

KEY WORDS: cultural heritage, paradigm of heritage, cultural heritage – critical approach, identity

