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Cultural heritage: Connecting people?

Katja Mäkinen

February 2020

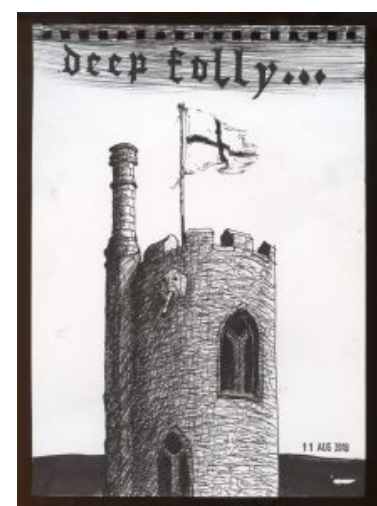
In response to the crises of recent years, the European Union has sought to foster the ideas of unity and diversity, and promote symbolic and actual integration between Member States. In this project of throwing light on the human dimension of integration, culture and heritage serve as important tools.^[2] The EU is not alone in this recourse to cultural heritage, however. Individual states, and political movements within them, are also using culture and cultural heritage to strengthen national identity and legitimacy. After all, there is no fixed definition of heritage; elements of the past are selected to design scenarios for the future based on the concerns of the present.^[3] Heritage has, therefore, become a point of conflict, a lightning rod for the tensions between the search for European unity and national individuality. Who gets to decide what constitutes our shared cultural heritage? What about, for example, the dark past of colonialism in Europe's capital cities, exemplified in the Africa museum in Brussels? Or the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, with a recent proposal to change the street names of Liverpool in the UK to mark its history? Does cultural heritage serve to include, or exclude, communities? And who is responsible for these decisions?

European Heritage Label and the idea of European cultural heritage

These big questions have been thrown into sharp relief by the European Heritage Label, one of the EU's initiatives advancing the idea of a shared European cultural heritage. Since 2014, the European Commission has awarded the label for 38 heritage sites. These sites vary from well-known tourist attractions to lesser-known and smaller sites, including sites from Neanderthal times to recent decades. A number of the labelled sites deal with war and peace, such as a cemetery from the first World War (Poland), a hospital from the second World War (Slovenia), the Hague Peace Palace (The Netherlands), Mundaneum (Belgium) or the sites of the peace of Westphalia (Germany). Many sites refer to the individuals and symbols of the European Union, such as the home museums of the founding figures of the integration process, the places of making the treaties of Maastricht and Schengen or the district in Strasbourg where several institutions of the EU and the Council of Europe are located.

The objectives is to strengthen "European citizens' sense of belonging to the Union, in particular that of young people, based on shared values and elements of European history and cultural heritage, as well as an appreciation of national and regional diversity" and "strengthening intercultural dialogue".^[4] Consequently, heritage label sites are expected to "highlight[...] their European significance [and] rais[e] European citizens' awareness of their common cultural heritage".^[5] This "European significance" is the central criterion for awarding the label: the sites "must have a symbolic European value and must have played a significant role in the history and culture of Europe and/or the building of the Union".^[6]

According to the Commission, "European significance" refers to a plurality of territories and population groups, intellectual history, values, political systems, institutions and principles as well as crossing borders.^[7] These are presented as the political, social and intellectual roots of the European integration, and



example, sites linked to universities and archives have received the label. Furthermore, sites presenting the development of democracy and parliamentary system as well as values and human rights have been labelled, such as the Pan-European Picnic Memorial Park (Hungary), the Constitution of May 3 1791 (Poland), or the Charter of Law of Abolition of the Death Penalty in 1867 (Portugal). However, Europe and Europeanness are concepts open for contradictory interpretations, which no actor can own. This complexity is not extensively discussed in public by those behind the EU heritage project. The narrow conception of cultural heritage as an instrument of building European belonging and legitimising the EU does not open space for competing notions of Europe or cultural heritage.

Participation reveals diverse uses of the past

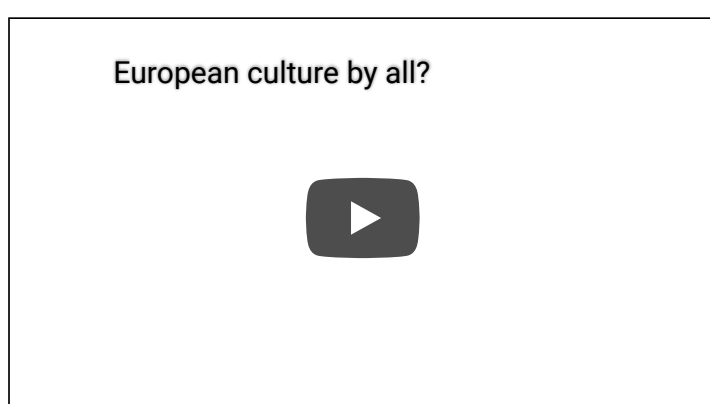
For more diverse interpretations of the past to emerge, more voices need to be heard in the public debate about cultural heritage. For some decades, research on heritage has emphasized that citizens should have a chance to participate in decision-making and knowledge-production on cultural heritage to influence what kind of stories are told at heritage sites and in memory organizations. Participatory practices related to cultural heritage can contribute to creating a public sphere accessible for different age groups, classes, ethnic backgrounds and cultural groups addressing a wide range of topics related to the past, present and future. Debates in this public sphere can emphasize dissensus over consensus on the definitions and uses of cultural heritage.

Participation in cultural heritage includes a wide range of practices from access to decision making on defining, selecting, preserving, interpreting and presenting cultural heritage. Residents, local businesses, public administrators and elected representatives may have competing interests and ideas about the use, protection, and dismantling of cultural heritage.

Furthermore, various population groups and authorities at different territorial levels can claim that something is local, regional, national, European or global cultural heritage.

Does equal participation in public debates about cultural heritage mean that all voices need to be listened to? Can anyone speak in the name of cultural heritage and claim ownership over it? Today even nationalist groups appeal to notions of European values or European past.^[8] For example, the notion of ‘European civilization’ as a combination of Christianity, liberalism, secularity, and gender equality has been used by the national populists in both Northern, Western and East Central Europe in their arguments seeking to ‘defend Europe’ against ‘external threats’ such as migrants or Islam.^[9] According to the European Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society of 2005^[10], “every person has a right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice, while respecting the rights and freedoms of others”. The convention stresses citizens’ participation and the respect for diversity of interpretations. Acknowledging that interpretations of heritage can cause controversies between actors, it suggests establishing “processes for conciliation to deal equitably with situations where contradictory values are placed on the same cultural heritage by different communities”.^[11] Can an inclusive public sphere bring together voices from different bubbles and help us hear also those who do not shout the loudest?

Cultural heritage as an arena for today’s debates



Heritage “requires regular revision and review to see if it continues to meet the needs of contemporary society”.^[12] The EHL could provide an arena for this kind of reflection, in which citizens and other actors could, ideally, negotiate what cultural heritage and its European dimension could mean. For example, our broad ethnographic research^[13] indicated that visitors can produce knowledge for the EHL sites by sharing their own photos and stories, preparing brochures or videos, and organizing events at the sites.

Moreover, sites and activities related to cultural heritage offer arenas for debating contemporary issues. Cultural heritage has the ability to sensitize the public to a variety of current issues, such as climate change or migration. If cultural heritage is used, understood and presented in a way that allows forming and critically reviewing links between the past and the present, it helps to scrutinise contemporary realities. For example, the visitors to Camp Westerbork, a memorial in the Netherlands commemorating over 100,000 people, mainly Jews, who were deported to Nazi concentration camps, created a link between the past and the present, according to our fieldwork. Practices encouraging participation by various audiences play a crucial role in supporting this. Several EHL sites organize activities both for the immigrants and regarding the current migration.

When reflecting upon contemporary issues in the light of the past, we must confront the “dark”^[14], “difficult”^[15] or “undesirable”^[16] heritages. In the EU as well as in several countries in Europe, the first and second world wars and the Holocaust have been commonly integrated into joint practices of remembrance. Oppressive Soviet rule is also increasingly included in the processes of remembrance in Europe.^[17] Some of the EHL sites, such as the Dohány Street synagogue (Hungary), Former Natzweiler concentration camp (France), the Historic Gdańsk Shipyard (Poland), and the Sighet Memorial (Romania) address Holocaust and the resistance against the totalitarian communist system.



the current Eurocentrism and racism that emanate from it. For example, an activist group called Decolonize the Museum has protested against the ways in which colonial history is presented in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. [19] Cultural heritage can be used to raise awareness of historical injustices and their ongoing effects on contemporary societies. When connections between the past and the present are addressed, cultural heritage can contribute to solving problems concerning both historical and contemporary injustices.

Nevertheless, cultural heritage in general and difficult heritage in particular can create divisions and exclusions. For example, omission of the heritage related to the colonial histories of many states contributes to the exclusion of post-migrant population from the societies in Europe. In a similar vein, if the historical Muslim influences in several European countries are not discussed, contemporary Muslim communities in Europe can face exclusion. A travelling exhibition [20] in 2017-2018 covering 12 centuries of Muslim history in Europe sought to show that the Muslim presence in Europe is not a modern entrant. However, it also addressed the contemporary migration and refugee questions, and the public activities attached to the exhibition discussed experiences of Muslim youth in modern Europe, growing old as Muslim in Europe, and interfaith couples.

Creating inclusion through cultural heritage

As cultural heritage can be used for finding connections between cultures, it enables a transcultural perspective on interpreting both past and present beyond the national perspective of individual states. As far as dialogue and collaborative meaning-making are encouraged, cultural heritage can act as a platform to question nationalist views and interpretations that have been dominant since the 19th century when the idea of the nation state was supported with the idea of a national cultural heritage. [21]

Indeed, the Heritage Label as an EU-level initiative directs attention beyond states, offering an arena to understand heritage in more diverse ways. This shift from a nation-state perspective has the potential to develop a more nuanced and heterogeneous view of the past and thus bring forth the cultural diversity in Europe. For example, national narratives often fail to include migrant and minority communities, but the ability to see heritage in Europe as inclusive, rather than as exclusive and assimilationist, could help to include them in heritage narratives and, consequently, accommodate 'newcomers' in today's societies.

However, this potential will only be realised if the Heritage Label adopts participatory mechanisms in its heritage governance and the activities at its sites. The practitioners working in the field of cultural heritage have a powerful position to interpret and present the past. Regarding the Heritage Label, the European Commission also has this authority. Based on our fieldwork, Heritage Label sites encourage visitors to voice their own interpretations to varying degrees, but it remains unclear whether the visitors' interpretations are incorporated into the exhibitions and other activities at the sites and whether the engaged public are aware that they have a voice in shaping cultural heritage. Citizens' participation in decision-making concerning cultural heritage in local, national, EHL, or any other context was not discussed by the practitioners and visitors to the selected sites or the officials dealing with cultural heritage in the European Commission.

Both in the EU and the individual states and other collectivities, equal participation of various groups and individuals is a core element of cultural heritage, understood as a building block of a public sphere. This kind of participatory arena of cultural heritage can be used for moving away from Eurocentric ideas of cultural heritage towards a plural, inclusive understanding. Moreover, it can act as a forum for practicing and promoting democracy within the sphere of cultural heritage and beyond. If diverse influences and entanglements are openly discussed in this arena, it is perhaps not so easy to use cultural heritage for drawing boundaries but rather for connecting people and for looking for shared memories and joint visions for the future.

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[3] e.g. Turnbridge, J.E., and G.J. Ashworth. 1996. *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*. Chichester: Wiley; Graham, B., G.J. Ashworth, and J.E. Turnbridge. 2000. *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge; Smith, L. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. New York: Routledge; Graham, B., and P. Howard. 2008. "Heritage and Identity" in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, 1–18. Burlington: Ashgate; Harrison, R. 2013. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

[4] European Parliament and the Council. 2011. Decision No. 1194/2011/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 Establishing a European Union Action for the European Heritage Label. *Official Journal of the European Union* 303: 3.

[5] *ibid.*

[6] *ibid.*, 4



Berghahn. p. 36-49.

[8] e.g. Triandafyllidou, A. and Gropas, R. 2015. *What is Europe?* London: Palgrave, 130-131.

[9] Brubaker, R. 2017 "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: the European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(8): 1191-1226.

[10] Council of Europe. 2005. Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. Faro, 27.10.2005. *Council of Europe Treaty Series* – No. 199, 1. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680083746>

[11] *ibid.*, 3–4

[12] Harrison, R. 2013. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, 198. New York: Routledge.

[13] Lähdesmäki, T, Čeginskas, V., Kaasik-Krogerus, S., Mäkinen, K. and Turunen, J. (forthcoming) *Creating and Governing Cultural Heritage in the European Union: The European Heritage Label*. London: Routledge. (in production)

[14] Clarke, D., A. Cento Bull, and M. Deganutti. 2017. "Soft Power and Dark Heritage: Multiple Potentialities", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23 (6): 660–674.

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[16] Macdonald, S. 2006. "Undesirable Heritage: Fascist Material Culture and Historical Consciousness in Nuremberg." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12 (1): 9–28.

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[20] "Islam, it's also our history! Europe and its Muslim legacies" http://islamitsourhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ICANH-BROCHURE_EN_20180205.pdf

[21] e.g. Graham, B., G.J. Ashworth, and J.E. Turnbridge. 2000. *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.