

Cultural Heritage as a relational concept: some thoughts

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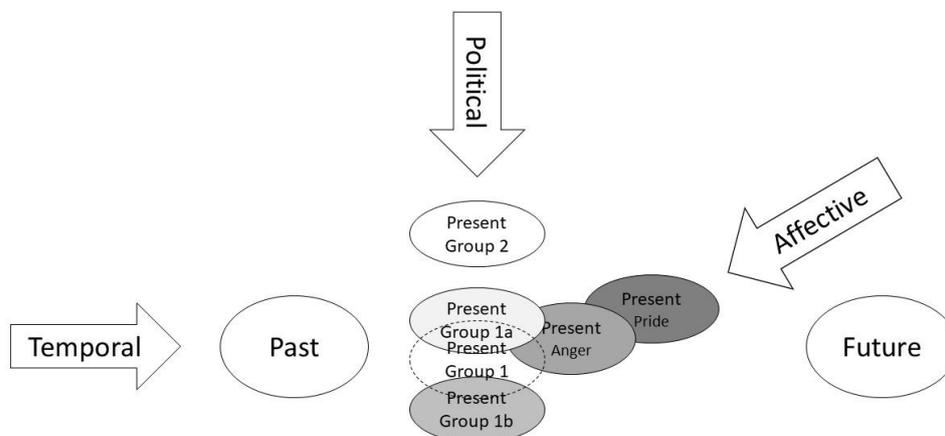
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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage may be understood as the legacy of tangible artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society inherited from past generations or a related group. More generally, however, cultural heritage may be deemed a relational quality implying a nexus between different temporal imaginations of a group (temporal relationality), between different imaginations of that group (political relationality) and between emotional dispositions towards imaginations of a group (affective relationality).

As an analytical concept, the term does not imply a fixed or substantive relationship between the presence and the past, between one group and another or positive or negative dispositions. Thus, a relational conceptualization differs substantially from informal or colloquial uses, such as cultural heritage as something static, attributional or positive. But the relational conceptualization of the term also differs from more dichotomous understandings in the pertinent literature, such as material/immaterial heritage, centre/periphery, traditional vs. modern, etc. Whereas the former imply that tangible artifacts exude meaning without cultural attribution, the latter conceptualizations are concerned with stable ascriptions of temporal, emotional or political patterns in a group, thereby neglecting the dynamic, the transformative aspect of a relational conceptualization of cultural heritage.

Figure 1: Cultural heritage: a relational conceptualization



2. The three-relational conceptualization: benefits and pitfalls

Cultural heritage has been widely understood as constitutive for the identities of social actors, such as nation states, cultural groups etc. (Mattes 2018). It is argued here that it is this constitutive condition of cultural heritage along the three relational dimension that accommodates the significant analytical and practical potential of the prefix „transforming“. A conceptualisation of the transformation of cultural heritage(s) along three relational dimensions may adress the limitations of existing pertinent literature: a) the temporal relational conceptualization allows us to foreground the elucidation or eclipse of cultural heritage, i.e. a certain conceptualization of a groups past which is (always) related to the relative position of that individual/group in or vis-à-vis a society in the present or its prospect for the future; b) the political relationality enables us to focus on the politicization of cultural heritage, i.e. the discursive and practical usage of cultural artefacts to establish social hierarchies in groups through respective inclusions and exclusions (as foregrounded in critical and dark heritage studies); c) And finally it brings into view the affective consequences of cultural heritage, i.e. the impact of heritage making on fear, anger, pride, humiliation and their effects on emotions, feelings and moods and thus the „ontological security“ of an actor (Innes 2018).

As a social practice, transforming cultural heritage may be interpreted proactively, that is as a call to try to consciously change the temporal, power- or affect-related dimensions of a certain cultural heritage of an individual, a group or society. This may be done through various means, among others an open-ended dialogue, through educating people to recognise a certain cultural heritage as their own or through excluding a certain group, marginalizing their significance or gaslighting them when defining a particular cultural heritage.

As a discursive practice, transforming cultural heritage may also be interpreted proactively, e.g. participatory in the sense that societal actors, such as academics, may deliberately engage in cultural heritage making or unmaking. But it may also be taken as a discursive practice that engages with cultural heritage (only or primarily) as an object of investigation, claiming to establish „factual connections“ (Sachzusammenhänge) between different temporal imginations of a group in a linear causal pathway. In turn, the discursive practice may also foreground (the) multiple meanings of cultural heritage within a network of subjective associations (Sinnzusammenhänge).

Arguably, a strict dichotomous understanding of distinct practical and analytical meanings of the term cultural heritage does not hold much water. As the conceptualization above suggests, any analytical or practice-oriented treatment of cultural heritage involves its reification or

transformation through academic and/or public discourse and practice. In this sense, this conceptualization directly draws from conceptual history, which roots its conception of time and history on the assumption of inseparability between the object (cultural heritage) and subject (the academic, citizen, politician etc as a potential cultural heritage maker) (Koselleck 2014; Röttgers 1977). While the temporal and political dimension of the presented conceptualization point towards objective notion of cultural heritage (e.g. the epoche as a linear understanding of time), the affective (and political) dimensions cover the subjective notion of cultural heritage (the reflexion as a subjective understanding of time).

What is more, the dichotomous distinction (discourse and practice) allows for different specifications along the three relational dimensions and inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation: The temporal notion of relationality situates the notion of „cultural heritage“ into the broader debate about a modern or postmodern time regime. In doing so, we may ask whether and how the paradigms of „social acceleration“ (Rosa 2013, Virilio 1977), measured in increase in quantities per time unit, e.g. in markets, communication and transportation, or „expanding present“, in which a convergence between the past and future collapses into an expanding present (Assmann 2013; Gumbrecht 2014), relate to different notions of cultural heritage. In concrete terms, how does universalization of capitalism (Fisher 2009), the greater perseverance of the past due to lasting collective traumata, their legal codification and new technological storage technologies (Hartog 2015: 114-125) as well as the emergence of existential threats to humanity (and other species), with nuclear weapons, climate change and pandemics as potential cut-off points in the future (Graf/Herzog 2016), interact with different notions of cultural heritage

The political relationality, the (hierarchical) positioning of groups defining a cultural heritage vis-à-vis themselves as well as „others“ focuses on the conflictual or consensual nature of the process of re-producing cultural heritage and the respective subjectivity of a group or society towards the external environment. From a historical perspective, one may ask whether the increase, diversification and relation to forms of violent conflict is tied to changes in the subjectivity of the actors involved, i.e. the socio-psychological need for self-determination, self-assertion and self-assurance in time through different notions of cultural heritage (Burkhardt 2000; see also Rae 2002).

The third relational dimension, the notion of affective relationality, opens up a conceptual space. It allows for the integration of (behavioral) economists, sociologists and symbolic interactionists when asking how actor's identities (subjective legacies) and social norms

(objective legacies) about the appropriate experience and expression of affect shape the actor's or group's emotions. Given that norms (structures) and identities (actors) are bound to vary over time, personal responses to cultural heritage need to be investigated inductively. As Arlie Hochschild has argued, identities, and thus different imaginations of cultural heritage, influence emotions through processes of recognition and misrecognition. Hochschild suggests that norms establish „feeling rules“, which tell people how to experience emotions in a given situation, and „display rule“, which instruct them how to express emotions (Hochschild 2012: 18, 56-59).

3. In lieu of a conclusion

It may well be argued that social science has been better in suggesting the continued importance of cultural heritage than explaining how its purview is changing over time and why the process of heritage making has become so conflictual as of late. This may have to do with science's role as one of the main producers of cultural heritage and its foremost observer. The resulting role conflict may explain to some degree why academic debates over how to examine „cultural heritage“ and/or to promote some distinct concept of it are sometimes so controversial. For some this role conflict is still nonexistent as history is governed by eternal laws, separable from the observer (cf. Haber et al. 1997). But for a growing number of scholars a plurality of histories, including those of historically voiceless individuals and groups, plausibly exists. For this growing group of scholars of epistemic constructivist convictions the smaller the margin between the subject (scientist) and the object (heritage) is, the larger the expected influence/malfluence of (other) scientists on cultural heritage and the understanding of time becomes. While these debate are important, I would submit that they are also somewhat distracting.

A more plausible explanation why science has not been particularly alert to the recent spats about cultural heritage is that it has not been sufficiently aware of the changes pertaining to its roles as a producer and observer of cultural heritage. At least since the end of the Cold War, the economization, globalization and subsequent democratization of science presented scientists with a gamut of potential partners but mostly challengers when trying to make sense of the past for the present or the future of the respective group. Science's role has shifted from a privileged observer to a member of the audience so to speak. Thereby, the democratization of sense making and the digitalization of global markets, most notably through sustained data storage and availability, have also facilitated the growth of self-referential bubbles in polarized media and opinion markets.

In addition, a growing number of risk futures, nuclear weapons, climate change, global pandemics etc. are challenging distinct historic cultural experiences. These challenges are so difficult to address through cultural heritage for at least three reasons: First, they pertain to humanity as such, a reference group without regular and inclusive processes of heritage making thus far. Second, the notion of heritage is difficult to apply to an uncertain future for which there is no historic precedent and for which the plausible effects may differ considerably over time, and between regions and even localities (Beckert 2016). Third, given that various actors should be conceived as *homo emotionalis* too (Flam 1990; Schwinn 2007), and expecting that their respective feeling and display rules vary too, it is plausible to suggest that their emotional responses, fear (flight from uncertainty), anger (fight the uncertainty) etc., may differ considerably, depending on their respective cultural self-understanding, including cultural heritage making.

If some of the deductions above are correct, then some of the recent spats about cultural heritage may be interpreted as *flights from uncertainty* and *fight against uncertainty* as individuals and groups seek both self-assurance (flight to something) and self-assertion (fight for something). I hope that these brief remarks will help to give these conceptual and related questions the attention they deserve.

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