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Heritage Futures, Prefiguration and World Heritage

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Heritage futures are about the roles of heritage in managing the relations between present and future societies, e.g. through anticipation and planning. This topic has only rarely been addressed in the heritage sector and its literature (Högberg et al. 2017), although this is now changing (see especially Harrison et al. forthcoming; Holtorf and Högberg forthcoming a). It is surprising that critical heritage studies and heritage management are only now beginning to take seriously the consequences for the future of temporal variation in interpreting and using heritage. By now it has become widely accepted that key concepts of heritage management and interpretation such as ownership, authenticity, use and value are culturally specific and variable in space. But it has not yet been fully understood that they are also variable over time, with important consequences for the possible impacts of heritage on future societies and thus how we might best manage heritage today for the benefit of future generations (Holtorf and Kono 2015).

Recently, the archaeological anthropologist Lewis Borck (2018) presented a very interesting discussion of heritage practices as future-making, addressing exactly these questions. From his perspective, archaeology is political practice and should always acknowledge its political nature. Studying patterns in the selection of World Heritage sites in North America and the Caribbean as a case-study, Borck argues that “archaeologists use the past in the present to construct a history for the production of the future” (2018: 232). He links his discussion not only to current work on the politics of collective memory in relation to history, archaeology and heritage but also to a body of social theory including George W. Wallis’ sociological notion of chronopolitics and Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s concept of chronotopes, originally developed in literary theory (Borck 2018: 234-235). Borck is particularly interested in discussing patterns of constructing future history.

Addressing the future holds generally many challenges, not the least in relation to its inherent uncertainty. The circumstance that the future is uncertain does not, however, mean that we need to be clairvoyants or prophets in order to engage with heritage futures. As Holtorf and May argue elsewhere (Harrison et al forthcoming: ch. 22), the uncertainty of the future allows for freedom and creativity and for broad participation and engagement. The lack of complete predetermination of what is going to happen next provides people with the opportunity to exploit favourable circumstances, while also demanding responsibility and inviting affection, love, and care for living beings as core values in making decisions.

There are various established ways of managing the uncertain future in the present. Among the most common ones are anticipation and planning. Planning is about making decisions that help to create conditions for achieving certain goals for the future. For example, urban planners develop cities so that they create favourable conditions for future communities of people to live and work in sustainable societies. Planning involves anticipation. Anticipation is about what we expect to happen that informs our decisions and actions in the present. Anticipatory behaviour thus “uses” the future in the process of deciding on specific action. For example, watching a weather forecast may make us decide to take gloves and a warm jacket when we go out (Poli 2017). Both planning and anticipation require us to imagine future conditions and take present-day decisions in relation to specific conditions we expect (but do not predict) to happen.

In a heritage context, this may mean that we plan directly and make decisions about listing or other forms of management and preservation today in the light of what we expect to occur in the future. For example, we may ask how heritage can benefit societies 30-50 years ahead which to some extent might be shaped by long-term mega-trends that are discernible today and relate to demographic patterns, climate change, the globalised economy, socio-cultural divisions or technological progress (Holtorf and Högberg 2014: 349-353). An alternative is to plan indirectly and create norms and practices that we expect to lead to favourable results irrespective of what exactly the future holds in store for us. This may mean that we stipulate that certain decisions are to be reviewed in regular intervals or that we insist on particular stakeholders’ participation in future management processes and decision-making (Holtorf and Högberg forthcoming b).

It is clear that the future depends to some extent on our own choices, and this is exactly why Lewis Borck’s discussion (2018) is significant. He asks how we are creating future history by making choices today and introduces the concept of prefiguration to the repertoire of tools for future-making in heritage management. Drawing among others on the work of Carl Boggs and on anarchist thinking, Borck explains that prefiguration assumes that the outcome of particular actions is prefigured in the practice that frames these actions. In other words, prefiguration asserts “that the means are *necessarily* reproduced into the ends” (2018: 232, original emphasis). Prefiguration is

a significant concept in political activism and political theory. According to the sociologist Darcy Leach (2013),

“The term prefigurative politics refers to a political orientation based on the premise that the ends a social movement achieves are fundamentally shaped by the means it employs, and that movements should therefore do their best to choose means that embody or ‘prefigure’ the kind of society they want to bring about.”

In the context of heritage, prefiguration means that ways of decision-making and other practices of heritage management contribute to shaping its future outcomes. Consequently, in terms of creating heritage futures, it does not only matter *what* we decide today in relation to heritage but also *how* we reach these decisions. As Borck (2018: 232) argues, we need to pose the question, “what are current archaeological preservation practices prefiguring?” For example, one might say that by empowering specific groups of people to take responsibility for heritage or by adopting democratic principles in managing heritage today we prefigure particular future decision-making practices involving the same groups and principles. We can thus contribute to strengthening these groups’ positions and principles in future societies.

As an empirical case study, Borck applies these important ideas to the selection of cultural heritage sites for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. His main argument is that the decisions and underlying criteria (or indeed the lack of appropriate criteria) for preservation in this context will prefigure a particular shared future history. According to the data he presents and discusses, an unduly large proportion of 55 among the 61 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in North America and the Caribbean represent sites linked to vertically-organised societies associated with Western and colonial societies. According to Borck, in the future this is going to create a “hierarchical history” that will limit “our ability to imagine [...] alternative ways to organize collectively outside of top-down power structures”. Naturalizing “the hierarchical state delegitimizes horizontal power structures”, as they were practiced commonly in pre-colonial and indigenous societies, and thus “construct[s] a future history that underrepresents societies like these” (Borck 2018: 232-235). At face value, this is a valuable point to be made and a timely discussion to be had. Although it is important to consider the significance of prefiguration, I will argue in the following that regarding Borck’s case study more differentiation will be needed in order to prevent incomplete reasoning in the present from prefiguring future argumentation.

Borck is certainly correct about the frequencies of different kinds of societies associated with sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, but the fact is that the list does not aim to create a list of sites that is representative of all varieties of human societies or indeed of the totality of human history. The World Heritage Convention stipulates instead that there is a need to preserve those properties of the cultural and natural heritage that are considered to have “outstanding universal value” (UNESCO 1972). Each proposed site is evaluated on a case by case basis on its own merits and against a set of established criteria for outstanding universal value, not in relation to human history in its entirety or to other sites already on the list.

Moreover, I am not at all sure to what extent existing patterns among World Heritage Sites are actually going to influence very much how future generations will interpret their past, thus prefiguring future histories. There are many other and possibly more significant inspirations and sources for constructing future histories, ranging from educational curricula and mass media coverage to thriving intangible traditions and the reasoning of influencers or professional experts. The ability to imagine alternative ways of organizing societies, is much better advanced in other ways than by listed cultural sites that reveal their underlying social structures only through a fair amount of studying. It is far more effective for the imagination to become directly immersed and gain a sense of presence of alternatively structured societies. That is primarily not the realm of World Heritage Sites but of social experiences among living people and of simulated or virtual realities in the present as they are prevalent in time travel experiences, for example in gaming (see also Petersson and Holtorf 2017). In a recent topical study, although conducted in a very different field (van Gelder et al. 2019), it was found that “experiencing a scenario in VR can trigger stronger feelings of presence in the situation compared to its written equivalent, and also elicit more intense emotional experiences, resulting in a better approximation of real-world decision-making.” No doubt, immersive virtual experiences have a particularly strong potential of prefiguring social structures in which horizontal forms of power are adequately represented, going far beyond the significance in this context of a few designated heritage sites.

There is possibly another important point to be made. Borck comments (2018: 235) that a significant misrepresentation in world heritage and a consequent delegitimation of horizontal power structures naturalises the state while

necessarily marginalizing or erasing egalitarian, non-state, pre-colonial and thus in particular the many creative forms of Indigenous management of power. Making this argument, he evokes themes of the politics of representation and possibly of contemporary identity politics. Indeed, representing more frequently the social structures of indigenous societies may prefigure a world of strengthened decolonialisation and with a higher appreciation of cultural diversity. But at the same time there is also a risk that the idea of world heritage (and indeed of heritage more generally) is reduced to primarily representing ancient social and political systems. When the fact that a society was “horizontally organised” subsumes most other historical and political significance of its heritage and by extension may even become the main characteristic of living indigenous communities, some additional issues are at stake. Essentialising aspects of social and cultural communities risks promoting varieties of tribalism that may advance the idea of shared cultural distinction and group-specific values at the expense of civil liberties connected to universal human rights, including the notion of human equality irrespective of any collective affiliation. As the author Amin Maalouf (2012: 101-102) pointed out in a discussion of the need to belong and the resulting violence that is conducted in the name of identity, “we are all infinitely closer to our contemporaries than to our ancestors.” In other words, even if some regions’ histories feature many examples of horizontally organized societies with strong egalitarian principles, the living descendants of these societies live lives that in many ways are much closer to other present-day communities than to specific ancestral ways of life, including their social and political systems. The wider implications of this argument are still somewhat unclear. The risk of essentialising archaeological sites and heritage in relation to particular present-day societies (and possible consequences to be expected in the light of prefiguration) will, clearly, require much more discussion in the future. This applies in particular to the question to what extent new approaches to archaeological interpretation and archaeological heritage management will be able to provide viable alternatives to how they operate today in contemporary society and, if so, what this may mean for future archaeological practice (see also Holtorf 2017; Maran 2019).

Finally, although the World Heritage Convention has run into a number of challenging problems that include consequences of a history of Eurocentrism, it is important to consider that the Convention is nevertheless often referred to as the “flagship” of UNESCO (Rudolf and Buckley 2016). The World Heritage Convention is in fact the most successful among all UNESCO Conventions. The World Heritage List is enthusiastically appreciated by very many people in all parts of the world, and the sites it contains enjoy widespread global interest and enormous media attention. Arguably, this Convention has come the furthest in addressing the purpose of the organization “to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture” and in the spirit of human rights (UNESCO 1945: Article 1(1)). The World Heritage Convention has been signed and ratified by a current total of 193 states, which is more than the equivalent number for any other UNESCO Convention. Decisions about selection for inclusion in the World Heritage List are made during well attended annual meetings of the World Heritage Committee which consists of 21 elected representatives of the Convention’s many States Parties (UNESCO 1972). In other words, the practices of the Convention are to a very high degree, and on a global scale, accessible, inclusive, and democratic, collectively fostering peace and security in the world. If practices such as those associated with the World Heritage Convention can prefigure future co-existence of people and nations, we have every reason for being hopeful for the future development of humanity.

The World Heritage Convention and the World Heritage List face considerable and widely known challenges. At the same time, their currency underlines the global significance of heritage in managing the relations between present and future societies. There is a clear need for the heritage sector and critical heritage studies to address heritage futures more frequently and more thoroughly – whether in relation to the work of UNESCO or indeed beyond. My views of the significance of the case study recently presented by Lewis Borck are different from his. But I fully agree that the notion of prefiguration, of which he reminds us, will make an important contribution to these future debates.

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