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Zitiervorschlag

Trinidad Rico. 2020. Heritage Time, the Next Zeitgeist. A Response to Cornelius Holtorf's "Heritage Futures, Prefiguration and World Heritage". Forum Kritische Archäologie 9:6–8.

URI http://www.kritisearchaeologie.de/repositorium/fka/2020_9_2_Rico.pdf

DOI 10.6105/journal.fka.2020.9.2 ; <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-42620>

ISSN 2194-346X



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Heritage Time, the Next Zeitgeist. A Response to Cornelius Holtorf's “Heritage Futures, Prefiguration and World Heritage”

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Keywords

Heritage ethics, Time, Governance

Schlagwörter

Ethik des Kulturerbes, Zeit, Governance

Cornelius Holtorf raises an important issue that lingers unresolved in the study of heritage and preservation – the lack of examination of temporal variation that is mobilized in heritage discourse and practice and, in particular, a neglect of future-oriented projections. But the examination of temporality and its variations has been extensively featured in the academic literature that supports the growth of heritage studies. Time has been discussed as a formative element of heritage discourse (e.g., Lowenthal 1975; Harvey 2001), recognized as underpinning various rhetorical devices in the lexicon for heritage preservation (see essays in Lafrenz-Samuels and Rico 2015), and acknowledged as a factor affecting styles of conservation (e.g., Price 2000). Moreover, the study of temporalities has been critical to anthropological training in heritage studies: for example, Gavin Lucas argues in support of a study of practices of temporalizing, such as the examination of preservation strategies that take heritage resources “out of the flow of time” (2005, 130), while Andreas Huyssen (1995) and Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) place temporal framing center-stage for the study of heritage as a practice of past mastering. However, the study of temporalities in heritage preservation debates and practices confronts the seemingly unreconcilable tension between a past-looking discourse and various forward-looking practices: conservation standards to manage future change; policy that anticipates the effects of natural and human-made disasters; and other safeguarding traditions that focus on the betterment of future society, such as *waqf* endowments (Sabri 2015). Therefore, I agree that a formal and critical study of ‘heritage time’ in the context of futurity, as it has already begun (Zetterstrom-Sharp 2015; Stainforth and Graham 2017), is an exciting chapter in the growth of heritage studies.

What I am less optimistic about, however, is the ability of contemporary heritage preservation instruments and institutional approaches to address the needs of an ethical and socially just approach that challenges existing heritage temporalities. Here, I would like to challenge the idea that uncertainty offers the possibility of empowerment. First, we need to problematize the dichotomy between a *certain* heritage past/present and an *uncertain* heritage future that is used to draw the contours of that opportunity. On the one hand, to use a past or present heritage value to anchor certainty is to de-politicize processes of heritage-making that authorized such a value; to assume that heritage and preservation experts have found a way to redress practices of marginalization and (re)ascribe heritage value; or both. On the other hand, methodologically, there has not been a convincing way for the field to de-privilege the expert voice in favor of marginalized ones. Summoning the stakeholder/local/marginal voice in an uncertain future confronts the very same obstacles and expert channels as it does in the present. While uncertainty has provided, at times, a small window for redirection of heritage value for the purposes of re-drawing narratives and authorities (for example, Zimmerman 2007; Rico 2016), we have to recognize that this action does not unfold on a blank canvas and must navigate pre-existing values and hierarchies. I look forward to learning what a heritage futures oriented or derived framework proposes to do about this challenge.

Holtorf examines the possibilities of this framework in the sphere of World Heritage, which, incidentally, contains and replicates much of the perennial problem of examining time as a problematic component in global heritage governance. I would argue that the obscuring of temporal frameworks of heritage value is precisely the mechanism through which this form of governance discourages – not allows – creativity, broad participation, and engagement. It does this in two ways: one, it mobilizes the idea of ‘uniqueness’ as a way to hierarchize heritage sites in accordance with its ordering practices. For example, criteria iii for the assessment of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in the Operational Guidelines (UNESCO 2019) imposes an assessment of OUV against the assemblage of already-nominated sites. The use of past inscriptions as a constituent part of new assessments of value establishes rigid scales that leave little room for alternative engagements. The second, but related, way in which value is dissociated from its temporal framework may appear to be more superficial, yet has profound implications for the limited flexibility that can be brought to the World Heritage List: other than being stamped with a start-date in the year of nomination and inscription into the List, heritage value appears to be perpetual after its inscription, unable to be re-examined or challenged except for extreme and rare cases of de-commissioning. These prefigurative practices of preservation that Borck warns about (Borck 2018: 232–235, referenced in Holtorf’s piece), leave no mechanism for recognizing significant shifts in ideas of heritage value, processes of assessment, and agencies that have marked the field of heritage studies in the last few decades.

There are certainly vast challenges for the productive implementation of prefiguration in heritage debates, some of which Holtorf and I agree on. But a heritage futures framework has to align with contemporary heritage ethics debates if it is to advance the study of heritage and the politics of time.

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