Validation, Resistance, and Exclusion: Neo-nationalist Cultural Heritage in a Globalized World

Neil A. Silberman, University of Massachusetts - Amherst
Consider these examples of heritage violence and destruction and linked to political conflict: the demolition of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya in India by Hindu rioters [1992]; the Croatian shelling of the Mostar Bridge in Sarajevo [1993]; the Taliban destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan [2001]; the ransacking of the Baghdad Museum [2003]; the gun battles for control Preah Vihear Temple on the Cambodian-Thai Border [2008-2010]; the burning of the Kasubi tombs in Uganda [2010]; and the continuing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians for control of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. These are of course only a handful of the most dramatic and violent recent examples; we will hear of other cases of nationalist or ideological entanglements with material heritage during the seminar today.

The purpose of this paper is my attempt to give the separate incidents a common context—and identify what I believe to be some common characteristics of “Neo-Nationalist” heritage in the globalizing world. While the destruction of antiquities sites in the times of military conflict are the subjects of Geneva and United Nations’ Conventions, the situation today goes far beyond the battlefield.

Today we are witnessing a period when the cultural heritage is seen as a potent economic and ideological resource in peacetime, when possession and commemoration of a famous site can bring worldwide prestige and attention; when a “scientific” conclusion that a certain ruin belongs to a group’s ancestral culture can serve as justification for modern political sovereignty over the territory it occupies.
The reverse is also true: when a nation-state or other group feels threatened by its rivals’ heritage assertions, a destructive wave of historical “cleansing” is often the result. And no less important than nation-states in conflict are the internal struggles of minorities, ethnic communities, immigrant enclaves, and indigenous peoples claiming their rights or contesting the claims of others through the symbolism of heritage.

There is nothing new about human communities of various types and sizes zealously guarding their particular visions of history. Every human collectivity in history has placed itself in space and time through stories (Niles 2010). And as Hayden White (e.g. 1990) and Keith Jenkins (e.g. 2003) have repeatedly pointed out, even the modern scientifically based studies of history take the form of a teleological narrative—a narrative that explains how contemporary perceptions and power relations are the natural or even inevitable culmination of a long history. The ideological power of history and heritage therefore far transcends mere antiquarian aims. It has become almost a cliché for researchers focusing on the relationship between political power and cultural heritage administration to quote the famous Party slogan from George Orwell’s classic dystopic novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949): “He who controls the past, controls the future... and he who controls the present controls the past.”

Orwell’s nightmarish vision of the world of Big Brother overestimated how effectively governments could actually control the formulation of “official” histories. But succeed or not, they have always kept trying. And the recognition that even academically-based history and heritage are subject to political manipulation has been intensively discussed in the scholarly literature, at least since Bernard Lewis’s History — Remembered, Recovered, Invented (1975); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s Invention of Tradition (1983); and Bruce Trigger’s “Alternative Archaeologies: Nationalist, Colonialist, and Imperialist” (1984). David Lowenthal’s classic The Past is a Foreign Country (1985) and Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1991) further developed the discussion by demonstrating that political or ideological bias was not merely a curable intellectual disease, but the inevitable outcome and
even perhaps purpose of contemporary public reflection on history and heritage. Thus our task in examining the relationship between resurgent nationalism and cultural heritage thus lies not merely in comparing “nationalist” narratives on the one hand and “objective history” on the other, but rather in trying to understand the roots and impacts of heritage practices throughout the entire globalized world.

To begin with, I would like to suggest that we reframe the question. And I want to suggest that what we are facing is not a “resurgence” of nationalism, with the assumption that “nationalism” is a coherent and stable concept that periodically gains and loses popularity. I believe that the phenomenon in which we are interested is the “Neo-nationalist” manipulation of heritage, where “neo-nationalist” is meant to describe aggrieved, besieged, or exploited political collectivities that claim for themselves the legal rights of nationhood—not only locally, but on an increasingly global stage. Where pristine early nationalism may have created “imagined communities,” neo-nationalism seeks to tear existing (multicultural) communities apart. The weapon of cultural heritage, used so effectively in the first great age of nationalism—and indeed in the independence wave of initial decolonization—to bridge regional peculiarities and to create a shared patriotic identities, has now become a tool of communities within or across national boundaries with special minority claims. Those claims can vary widely, from the contention that the “true” nation is being overrun by foreigners; that a particular minority group deserves apology and autonomy from the majority society and/or former colonizers-oppressors; or that indigenous peoples deserve as reparations for their physical dispossession and now largely destroyed ancient traditions, an enhancement of their contemporary political and economic rights. While earlier nationalism used heritage to create a citizen’s consciousness, neo-nationalism uses heritage to write counter-histories of resistance and to contest contemporary power relationships.

To many this is a surprising turn of events, especially in an increasingly globalized era of “world Heritage.” The madness of World War I and the enormous destruction of material heritage that occurred during World War II convinced the international community (first the League of Nations and
subsequently the United Nations and its specialized body UNESCO) to adopt a truly global vision of heritage, as a narrative of all humanity. In the wake of the 1954 Geneva Conventions and the 1964 Charter of Venice, the 1972 United Nations World Heritage Convention was ratified and established an accepted international process for the nomination of important heritage sites in the territory of signatory states-parties on the basis of their “Outstanding Universal Value.” The 2003 United Nations Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage brought the world of ideas, skills, and performances under the global umbrella as well. It seemed, at least theoretically, that parochial chauvinism and narrow nationalism were giving way to a broader view of the human past.

Indeed the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989—and the end of East-West global rivalry, along with the entry of China into the globalized market system gave rise to hopes that dangerous national economic and military rivalries would themselves soon fade away (e.g. Fukuyama 1989). As we now know, that expectation was premature, even though the virulent nationalism that arose came largely in opposition to, rather than from among rival nation-states. Whether it was the battle for control of Ayer’s Rock/Uluburu in Australia, First Nation claims in the US and Canada, or renewed calls for the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles by Greece or the bust of Nefertiti by Egypt, these conflicts and the ideologies that energized them were not, strictly speaking a “resurgence” of traditional nationalism, but a unique phenomenon of reactive tribalism in a globalized age.

The Machinery of Industrial Memory

My contention is that we must recognize that beneath the familiar trappings of flags, patriotism, and religious and national symbols lies a pernicious paradox: on the one hand, neo-nationalist representations of the past emphasize exclusiveness, sharp boundaries, and ethnic purity. On the other hand, they serve as unwitting agents of the very same globalization they fight. As Waleed Hazbun
(2008) suggests, the cultural phenomena of neo-nationalist heritage that we see today is symptomatic of the changing strategies of political elites (be they national, religious, ethnic, or indigenous) to be players in an international game. The “nationalism” in question can either appeal to the outside world as an externalizing phenomenon of “branding the country” for tourists, or to contest the global entanglements of other elites by demanding historical “purity.” The pendulum swing has been memorably described by Benjamin Barber as “Jihad vs. McWorld.”

In the first great age of nation states, in which crystallizing nations saw their claim to sovereignty not in the authority of the Church or the Crown, but rather in the “genius” of the nation, a single narrative template (Silberman 1995) was used to formalize each nation’s heritage canon and establish its ministry of culture and department of antiquities. As part of the exercise of citizenship from the Enlightenment onwards, it was everywhere the same and different, with the bearers of each particular heritage being school books, statutes, postage stamps, tourist posters, and authorized historical sites. The major global distinction was therefore not between industrialized countries, but between those nation-states that had a full heritage apparatus and those indigenous, tribal, and non-European peoples whom the anthropologist Eric Wolf famously called “the people without history” (1982). It was not that the non-European peoples didn’t have a sense of their past, of course, it was rather that it remained collective memory rather than bureaucratized heritage. And without the hegemonic narrative form and the physical trappings, the cultures of those peoples appeared to be timeless, and often intellectually inferior. And that made these peoples both subject to exploitation and exhibition in World’s Fairs and nature museums as members of the animal kingdom and the natural environment.

So what happened in the post-colonial period, when new nation-states were born from these so-called “people without history”? The European heritage system was quite uncritically implemented as a means of training the citizens of the new states. Even as they sought to industrialize and market their resources in the global economy, those new states dispensed (at least officially) with the traditional,
intangible, culturally based approach to culture. The new nations represented themselves by a system of bureaucratized commemoration that neatly meshed with the industrial order of sovereign nations that they had joined. The creation of antiquities services, ministries of culture, and national UNESCO Commissions formalistically put all nation-states on an equal footing to nominate their sites of Outstanding Universal Value to the World Heritage list. Yet inevitably this created new stresses not only among the competing heritage states-parties, but even more significantly for the problem we are discussing, between centralizing, national bureaucracies and their own internal minorities and other dissenting “peoples without history.”

And those minorities, in turn, striving for political validation on a globalized world stage energized by instantaneous mass communication and the power of public opinion, began to adopt the centralizing structures of official heritage themselves (Ashworth et. al. 2007). Although the intention of academics and sympathetic administrators was to engage alternative narratives to the “official” national history, the effect was to being the groups into official heritage’s consciousness. For in this process, new communities exchanged their many traditional forms of collective memory for politically potent “cultural heritage.” To suggest that today’s heritage nationalism (or neo-nationalism, as I have termed it) is in some way corrupting a more objective appreciation of cultural heritage is to misunderstand the structural character of what is actually going on. The globalized methods of heritage representations validate the membership of certain elites and their followers in the current world system. Yet it is a kind of incorporation that homogenizes cultures as much as it distinguishes them. The real struggle I suggest—and the one that has occasioned the most discord and violence—is the refusal of certain groups to accept the established heritage narrative of their particular nation and to attack the symbols and structures of the official heritage they oppose. Thus we find not only the dynamiting and arson of monuments of the despised culture—but also a concerted attempt to take traditional icons out of globalized circulation by demanding repatriation, closing access to sacred places to outsiders, and
selectively weaving new narratives. And it is to the unexpectedly paradoxical characteristics of neo-nationalist heritage resistance and exclusion that I would like to turn next.

**National Distinctiveness or Globalized Homogenization?**

The early nationalist project of “inventing” a nation was, I would argue quite different from what we are witnessing today. Early nationalism was directed by a political class that sought to challenge traditional royal sources of sovereignty by binding together formerly distinct regional cultures and economic classes into a unified citizenry—unified at least in the belief that they shared a common history and common destiny (e.g. the enlightening case of France, Robb 2008). The project therefore involved the construction of an Andersonian imagined community, and was carried out with creation of a standard language, the homogenization of a bouquet of regional traits into a national culture, and of course the marking of the landscape with a network of heritage sites that embodied the new nation’s heritage narrative. In almost every respect, the behavior of neo-nationalism reverses the former nation-building trends. Instead of creating a homogeneous people, all united by a common nature unfolded in a common narrative, the neo-nationalist approach has attempted detach specific communities from an imposed or hegemonic collectivity. In that sense its focus is on resistance to the mainstream, either an increasingly multicultural mainstream that no longer manifests the cultural traits stressed during an earlier period of statehood (as, for example, the far right heritage movements in Europe and North America and the Islamic fundamentalist attitudes), or, alternatively, to claim a privileged place outside of the mainstream, as indigenous peoples within formerly colonized regions insist.

Unfortunately the power of this new kind of nationalism is more often focused on contemporary political discourse about rights and status that to assist the community in effectively maintaining a healthy collective memory. The political goals are more important than reliable representation of the
past. Exaggerated purity and single source origins are the hallmarks of the new narratives. Whether it is demeaning immigrants and ethnic minorities by emphasizing the lost glories of the “original” people, or whether it is minorities and indigenous peoples asserting their claims to cultural (and also political autonomy), cultural heritage has become a kind of magical talisman whose possessors have the right to consider themselves a legitimate political community.

In both cases, the leaders of these new memory communities establish an authorized narrative and authorized modes of discourse, in which an imposed orthodoxy prevails. But this orthodoxy is aimed at separation no less complete than the previous homogenization had been. Languages on the verge of extinction are resurrected and taught with effective modern learning technologies; whether Gaelic, Yiddish, or Zapotec, they become the signs of political autonomy. This creates its own separatist mentality, but the self-exclusion from the trans-national corporate culture may be simply a mirage. The irony of neo-nationalist representation is that only within a globalized world in which representations can be read as hieroglyphs of current political currents, that heritage serves to draw all emerging memory communities into the global system, even as they sporadically fight among themselves. The dynamiting of the Buddhas of Bamiyan has been an iconic media image; the riots at Ayodhya were documented on Youtube, and Native American peoples (among others) establish sophisticated websites and GPS databases to document their tangible and intangible heritage. Each nation-state and indeed every politically self-conscious memory community has only three alternative tools to wage a public battle for recognition: marketing for tourism; contesting heritage claimed by others; or “purifying” the historical landscape of a certain territory.

The touristic alternative has subtle but far-reaching consequences: transforming sacred sites into commercialized leisure time venues and intangible traditions into carefully staged spectacles. The contestation of “mainstream” heritage likewise requires participation in “mainstream” heritage techniques of archaeological excavation, historic preservation, and public presentation that are
independent of the specific content. And finally, the purification of the historical landscape is not only an act of political and cultural violence, it initiates a new cycle of elite hegemony within the new memory community with the acceptance of the heritage orthodoxy becoming a matter of faith. It reproduces the hegemony of former colonial powers and often marks the start of a process that will result in the creation of a new nation-state.

All these processes do not spring from internal cultural dynamics, but are constrained responses to globalization and are at least partially directed to the outside world. And if we recognize that the current wave of neo-nationalism is, in fact, a response to the forces of globalization, we will further see how distinctive its connection to Cultural heritage is. In the earlier eras of state-building, the national heritage served as the basis school curricula, for language standardization, and the establishment of a sanctioned landscape of monuments and ruins that created an imagined community. Today the process has become reversed in two distinct ways: it is now imagined communities—often bearing hostility or expressing resistance to the “mainstream” culture—that invent a material historical landscape to justify in stone, brick, and flint that justified their imaginings. And no less important is the changed relationship between cultural heritage and political power. Formalized, bureaucratized cultural heritage has long been seen as a prerogative of sovereign power; increasingly we see sovereign power (or the claims to it) coming as the result of convincingly presented Heritage—that powerfully resonates throughout the globalized world.

Heritage without Borders?

So what can we conclude from an examination of this process? It is clear that political meaning-making, both today and in earlier eras of formalized cultural heritage administration is an integral part of the activity, and certainly not merely an ideological pathology that can be neatly and effectively cured.
Throughout this paper I have stressed some of the negative factors that distinguish what I call “neo-nationalist” heritage from the other kinds of nationalist heritage that have gone before. The main characteristics are 1.) a quest for global validation through presentation to a new narrative, 2.) resistance to others’ hegemonic narratives through political critique, and 3.) the exclusion of outsiders from participation in communal heritage by an “ethnicizing” of heritage significance. That is not to say that these focused political assertions are not accompanied by an enhancement of self-confident and dignity of formerly overlooked groups, which is the goal of all types of collective memory—but it is to argue that we must see this “resurgence” of nationalism as an aspect of globalization, not its opposite.

But there is something significant that both traditional nationalism and neo-nationalism share: the unquestioned connection between cultural heritage, political rights, a homogeneous people, and defined territory. The linkage between place, identity, and self-determination lies at the heart of global heritage practice. It is the basis for national/communal authority to determine what belongs in the canon (and what does not) and it underlies the system of states-parties nominating only sites within their sovereign territory for nomination to the World Heritage List. Yet in a globalized world with its dramatic flows of capital and migrants, linked by instantaneous communication, cyberspace has become as important as place. And with this dramatic transformation in the locus of cultural discourse, the exclusively territorial/ethnic claims have become dysfunctional.

Is a Vietnamese immigrant to Belgium Belgian? Is an Algerian in Marseilles French? Is the Jewish heritage of Egypt Egyptian? Do Ethiopian immigrants to the United States have some right to determine the form of Ethiopia’s heritage? In a world of an unprecedented scale of demographic movement and complex webs of transnational connections, local communities are not always the only communities concerned. Often a motivation for heritage assertions and funding is what I might call “Diasporic Nostalgia,” whose effects are as potentially transformatory as those of in situ governments or political movements. It is frequently the displaced populations, cut off from their homelands by a
combination of industrial transformations, immigration, and new cultural contexts that look back on the homeland and its history as an essentially unchanging, timeless Promised Land. Thus heritage refashioning is now also funded and supported from webs of diasporic connections. In a weird inversion of Orwell’s modernist vision, he who controls the future (by economic connections to centers of global capital) controls the past (or at least the representations of the past) in the lands they have left behind. These imaginings of the past seek to cancel out the uncertainty and loss of clear identity that are central challenges today. These are the imaginings that make contemporary fundamentalist religious movements (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, among others) seem timeless, and make increasingly multicultural European and American societies seem suddenly sullied by impurity. This Diasporic Nostalgia is a refutation and denial of the present global reality.

I would argue that the ultimate challenge of neo-nationalist heritage lies not in condemning the political subtexts of particular narratives, but rather understanding how heritage can play a constructive or at least useful role in contemporary international and intercultural discourse. Cultural identities must be seen as being in the process of becoming rather than merely relying on essentialized images from the past. Heritage sites are hieroglyphs and symbols in the never-ending global discourse of internet communications, no longer just a physical landscape or spots on a map. The Dome of the Rock, the Buddhas of Bamiyan, the Kasubi Tombs, and the Temples of Angkor Wat are all symbols both on the ground and in the mind. The challenge is thus the creation of new heritage frameworks that offer opportunities for multivocal interpretation—so that collective memory can once again become a dynamic, ongoing process of reflection within and among cultures and peoples, rather than continuing to serve as the battle banners of ethnic, religious, and political conflict in our simultaneously globalized and tribalized world.
References


