CULTURAL HERITAGE AND
THE POLITICS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY*

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Abstract: The representation of cultural heritage as determining the authenticity of identities, associated with the ideology of collective memory, restricts cultural liberties and assists identity politics. The Faro Convention, especially through its emphasis on the participation of everyone to the interpretation of cultural heritage, is an important moment in the reconsideration of the role of the knowledge about the past in a democratic world.

Rezumat: Reprezentarea patrimoniului ca determinant pentru autenticitatea identităților, asociată cu ideologia memoriei colective, limitează libertățile culturale și sprijină politica identităților. Convenția de la Faro, mai ales prin prevederile care se referă la participarea tuturor la interpretarea patrimoniului, este un moment important pentru reconsiderarea rolului cunoașterii trecutului într-o lume democratică.

We are accustomed to ground cultural heritage in ideas about collective identities, especially about national identity, cherished by various institutions which are supposed to take care of our identities, always in danger, as national ideologies present them. Identity politics is one of the forms of legitimate violence exercised by the states. It can be described as an attempt to impose as legitimate and desirable a future that does not depend on what we may wish for our lives, but on what persons authorized by the state, politicians and intellectuals, tell us they should be, namely, what is appropriate within a particular national identity.

The state promotes national identity at the expense of all others – those who have absorbed the official discourse to a greater extent are surprised when told they have many identities, because they perceive such multiplicity as abnormal – as a determination situated in the past, beyond our capacity to choose.[1] All our hopes should be grounded in the past.[2] We are urged to desire only to come closer to our origins, in a vain attempt to be as good as our ancestors,[3] and we learn who those ancestors were through the educational system, from professionals who are authorized by the state to certify the authenticity of the information from the past.[4] The authenticity of the meanings is associated with the material authenticity of monuments and artefacts. However, we know that any object has multiple meanings. Even when a monument is raised with a clear intention, sometimes presented in an attached inscription, it can acquire meanings very different from it. For those who live in Bucharest, familiar examples are monuments such as "The Revival's Monument" (Fig. 1), which carries the inscription: "Eternal glory to the Romanian Revolution and its heroes from December 1989", but is rather known as "The Potato on a Stick", "The Impaled Meatball" and so on, or the monument placed on the entrance stairs of the National History Museum, "Trajan and the She-Wolf" (Fig. 2), conceived as containing complex symbols of Romanian identity, combining Dacian and Roman ancestry, but usually known as "The Man with the Bitch". Despite the efforts to present their intended meanings to the public, the artists and their official supporters were not able to impose them. We may wonder what will be, 2000 years from now, the "authentic message" of the past conveyed by these two monuments.

The problem with authenticity goes beyond such failures. As Richard Handler tells us, the link with the past is semiotic, not physical. We use objects from the past in our thinking about the past, but they have to be reinterpreted in the present in order to survive. To preserve them, to make them a part of our cultural

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[1] Bauman 1992, p. 675.
[2] See Baert 2002, p. 145, commenting on Richard Rorty: "he laments this strongly held conviction that the past somehow holds the key for a glorious future, that the laws will hold tomorrow and the day after tomorrow as they have always done so in the past." Cf. Rorty 1999, pp. 201-209.
[3] See Ankersmit 2001, p. 318: "…identity is like our shadow: always outside our grasp and never coinciding with ourselves."
[4] See, for instance, Hanna Derer, who stated in the communication presented at the ARA Symposium, on April 24th, that the message of the past must be authentic, because our social, individual and cultural identities rely on it.

Fig. 1. The Revival's Monument.

Fig. 2. Trajan and the She-Wolf.

heritage, means to do something new, in the present.[5] What is presented as "the authentic message" of the past is one of the present, a consequence of actions meant to transform some artefacts in cultural heritage, instruments of officially authorized identity memories, frequently disconnected from whatever meanings they had in the past, while other objects are destroyed and forgotten.

Almost all Romanians believe we are the descendants of the Dacians and of the Romans, something that many place inside collective memory, but this is just a product of knowledge imposed by the educational system and the mass media. Among those who cherish their fictive national origins, we find rarely people who know something about their great-grandparents, who were indeed their ancestors. Collective memory is not made of what we remember. It is made of current cultural meanings we are supposed to assimilate, tends to annihilate the right to forget and reduces what we remember to insignificance. Hanna Derer has mentioned four kinds of memory: collective, social, cultural and individual. I believe there is only one kind of memory, at the same time individual and social. The rest and the imagined relations with individual memory are attempts to impose fake remembrances, embraced by the state or by social groups who want to create collectivity by homogenization and simplification. Any collective memory is either ideology or myth.[6]

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[5]   Handler 2003a, p. 355.
[6]   Koselleck 2004, pp. 27-28: "Meine Hypothese ist, dass die kollektiven Referenzbestimmungen nicht auf empirische Daten aufruhen, sondern von den sieben grossen P-s vertreten werden: die Professoren, die Priester, die Pfarrer, die PR-Spezialisten, die Presseleute, die Poeten und die Politiker. Das sind sieben Kategorien in der Gesellschaft, deren Referenzbestimmungen sich auf Kollektivität beziehen, die sie durch Homogenisierung, Kollektivierung, Vereinfachung, Verschlichtung und Mediatiserung selber stiften wollen. Diese ideologische Zuordnung soll darauf hinweisen, dass die tatsächlichen Erinnerungen pluralistisch sind und unlösbar im Sinne der Homogenisierung bleiben. Es gibt so viele Erinnerungen wie Menschen und jede Kollektivität, die daruber gestülpt wird, ist m.E. a priori Ideologie oder Mythos."

Monuments are more likely to convey messages about current political and social circumstances, than able to preserve meanings from the worlds in which they were built and functioned. An inhabitant of Bucharest, who lives in a little apartment from a prefabricated apartment building, decorated only with an old photograph of an actor, snipped from a magazine, and who takes the time to visit the National Museum of Art, cannot fail to register the distance between his private world and the former royal palace with its paintings, which, before being brought there, decorated private residences. He might believe that the palace and the paintings belong to him, that they are his heritage as a Romanian, a heritage of which, of course, he cannot dispose – that is the privilege of the state – and to which he has access only by buying an entrance ticket, taking care not to come too close to the paintings and trigger the alarm. Won by the ideology of cultural heritage as identity founder or not, he will have the feeling that his entire existence is inferior to that of those who live in palaces and collect Flemish paintings, and he might see this as something generated by natural self-effacement in front of the greatness of the nation and of the powerful. This kind of domination is a form of symbolic violence[7] and some sociologists believe that the fight against it is the main task of their discipline.

Although a theoretical estimation of the consequences is difficult, I believe that such politics of cultural dominance makes our museums empty and generates lack of interest for the preservation of monuments. Museums and monuments should enrich lives, not make people feel inferior.

The idea that cultural heritage is more important than people is omnipresent. It appears in the report of the heritage commission which functioned at the presidency's initiative, made public in 2008. We learn from this report what is most precious in Romania: not people, as some might suspect, but its "cultural and natural heritage".[8] To those who have accepted this, the words attributed to Jorge Luis Borges – "Five minutes of anyone's life is worth more than all of Shakespeare" – will appear outrageous.[9] From the same report we learn that "the destruction or degradation of the built or natural heritage means the extinction of the memory and cultural identity of all citizens of Romania and, as consequence, the incapacity to transmit this heritage to future generations".[10] We might ask how were people able to preserve their identity and memory before the 19th century, when the national states have initiated their cultural heritage politics.

The persistence of this vision of cultural heritage can be explained by the long history of its complete dependence on the state, something which makes our situation different from that of the countries of Western Europe, where the preservation of a significant part of cultural heritage was supported by local associations which were not funded by the state.[11] This situation also explains why many do not see any tension between being a researcher and being an official of the state and avoid developing ideas about cultural heritage which might not agree with official ideologies. Normative texts about cultural heritage, produced by national or transnational institutions, are rarely criticized, as it frequently happens in the West; usually they are quoted as sources of intellectual authority, probably with the hope that colleagues will appreciate the strength of such arguments and that the state authorities will notice.

In the current circumstances, well synthesized by Arjun Appadurai, for whom the main contemporary dilemma is "whether to be slaves in the empire of the commodity or puppets in the shadow of the state",[12] the preservation of cultural heritage must be separated both from identity politics and the tendency to make it profitable. People should be encouraged to construct whatever identities they want, to become what they wish, not what they should be according to dominant ideologies. The past should not be used to incarcerate people in their identities. This is what many historians think. Reinhart Koselleck, for instance: "…the mandate of

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[7] See Bourdieu 1991, p. 51. "…the distinctiveness of symbolic domination lies precisely in the fact that it assumes, of those who submit to it, an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint. …a symbolic violence which is not aware of what it is (to the extent that it implies no act of intimidation) can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it."
[8] Patrimoniul 2008, p. 4.
[9] Shakespeare 2010.
[10] Patrimoniul 2008, *loc. cit.*
[11] On "small heritages", see Harvey 2008, esp. pp. 20 and 33.
[12] Appadurai 2001, p. 48.

history is in my opinion higher and more important than the claim to collectively sell memory … The historian has the task to destroy identity, in order to allow for new ways, which will emerge through communication, not to create it.[13]

The idea that the material authenticity of a monument guarantees that of meanings preserved for centuries, must be abandoned.[14] What professionals present as true about the meanings are scientific constructions of their disciplines, with a much shorter life than that of the monuments to which they are attached. Knowledge obtained by archaeologists, historians and architects is very important, but should be presented not as made of uncontested truths but as what it is: debatable, temporary, and made in particular conditions. Visitors should be informed about interpretation problems, about what restorations could be done in particular financing conditions and using current technical solutions, not only about one set of dominant truths, to be accepted because associated with genuine artefacts. We need to be able to tell more complicated stories about ourselves and our pasts,[15] eventually starting with the logics behind the constitution of cultural heritage, with presentations of the ways in which it was used in the past to promote political ideas and continuing with what we know about how identities are constructed using material culture.

The virtualization of cultural heritage offers still to be explored imaginative contacts with the past. Great museums, like the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, offer high definition photos of famous paintings, encouraging everyone to modify them.[16] Not so long ago, this would have been seen as an intellectual crime. The same can be done with archaeological artefacts and architectural monuments. People should be encouraged to modify their images, eventually using alternatives abandoned by the professionals.

Some of the ideas presented so far can be found in the introductory statement and in some of the articles of the Faro Convention from 2005.[17]

Authenticity and memory, major keywords for the politics of identity, are missing. Against the imposition by professionals of supposed authentic meanings inscribed in the monuments, the Convention demands attention for "the value attached by each heritage community[18] to the cultural heritage with which it identifies" (art. 12.b). It also encourages "reflection on the ethics and methods of presentation of the cultural heritage, as well as respect for the diversity of interpretations" (art. 7.a.).

There is one significant use of remembrance: "all forms of cultural heritage in Europe … constitute a shared source of remembrance, understanding, identity, cohesion and creativity" (art. 3.a). Here "remembrance" is used as opposed to "memory", just as in Romanian "amintire" can be opposed to "memorie". However,

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[13] Koselleck 2004, p. 28: "…der Auftrag der Historie m.E. höher und wichtiger als der Anspruch, Erinnerung kollektiv zu verkaufen. … Der Historiker hat die Aufgabe nicht Identität zu stiften, sondern sie zu vernichten, um dann neue Wege frei zu legen, die dann kommunikativ entstehen."

[14] On the meanings of works of art, see Carrier 2001, p. 185: "… interpreters always project something of themselves into the art being interpreted, thereby changing the artwork itself. There is no 'inherent meaning' in an artwork and thus no single artwork whose identity may (or may not) be preserved through time."

[15] Weiss 2007, p. 417.

[16] https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio?ii=0&p=0. 186,486 people had already created on the site of the museum their own virtual collections (*Rijksstudios*) by the 11th of February, 2015.

[17] During the presentation of a previous version of this text, at the ARA Symposium in April 2014, one of the participants said that he was revolted by much of its contents, but that the information about the Faro Convention made him realize that there were no solid reasons for that. This is one of our main problems: we are accustomed to repress whatever we think in front of official, authorized, thinking. In this case, a conflict between two official visions of cultural heritage, an old, familiar one, and a new, current and which might become an authoritative one, seems probable.

[18] On what is meant by this, see Explanatory report, p. 6: "…by valuing and wishing to pass on specific aspects of the cultural heritage, in interaction with others, an individual becomes part of a community. A heritage community is thus defined as a variable geometry without reference to ethnicity or other rigid communities. Such a community may have a geographical foundation linked to a language or religion, or indeed shared humanist values or past historical links. But equally, it may arise out of a common interest of another type. An interest in, for example, archaeology, can create an 'archaeological community' whose members are linked only by the cultural heritage which forms the focus of their activities."

the explanatory report,[19] commenting on art. 3, replaces "remembrance" with "collective memory": cultural heritage is described as "a resource and a source of collective memory for people in Europe". A tension with the Convention appears also when the report explicates "the integrity of the cultural heritage" (art. 9.a) using "identity and authenticity", although they are understood as multi-dimensional values, "including values which are contested", not as a guarantee for an explicit, univocal message from the past.

The Convention uses "identity" only once, in the already cited art. 3.a. The association of identity with creativity runs against nationalist determinism.[20] People are no longer seen as prisoners of the past. The Convention recognises in the preamble "that every person has a right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice, while respecting the rights and freedoms of others, as an aspect of the right freely to participate in cultural life", the "need to involve everyone in society in the ongoing process of defining and managing cultural heritage", and that of putting "people and human values at the centre of an enlarged and cross-disciplinary concept of cultural heritage".

The past appears in two significant passages. In the first one, cultural heritage is defined as "a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions" (art. 2.a). A second one states that "the ideals, principles and values, derived from the experience gained through progress and past conflicts, which foster the development of a peaceful and stable society, founded on respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law" (art. 3.b.) are a part of the common heritage of Europe.

The convention emphasizes the connections between the democratic world and cultural heritage. The signatory countries pledge to encourage everyone to participate in the activities linked with cultural heritage. This is not about just visits or general support, it is about "the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage" and about "public reflection and debate on the opportunities and challenges which the cultural heritage represents" (art. 12a).

The Faro Convention was ratified by 17 states.[21] Romania is not one of them. Nor are France or Germany.

Bibliographical abbreviations:

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Ankersmit 2001   F. R. Ankersmit, *The Sublime Dissociation of the Past: Or How to Be(come) What One Is No Longer*, History & Theory 40, 3, 2001, pp. 295-323.

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Convention 2005   Council of Europe, *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, 2005. http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/199.htm (Accessed 11 February 2015).

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[19] Explanatory report 2005. See p. 1: "The text of the explanatory report prepared by the committee of experts and transmitted to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe does not constitute an instrument providing an authoritative interpretation of the text of the Convention although it may facilitate the understanding of the Convention's context and provisions."

[20] See Lowenthal 1996, p. 12: "Tangible mementos and documentary traces threaten to swamp creative life. Worship of a bloated heritage invites passive reliance on received authority, imperils rational inquiry, replaces past realities with feel good history, and saps creative innovation."

[21] See http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/heritage/Identities/default_en.asp (Accessed 8 February 2015).

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Weiss 2007   L. Weiss, *Heritage-making and Political Identity*, Journal of Social Archaeology 7(3), 2007, pp. 413-341.