FROM OWNERS AND AUTHORIZED INTERPRETERS TO PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT CULTURAL HERITAGE AND WHAT THEY MIGHT SEE

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Non, les braves gens n’aiment pas que
L’on suive une autre route qu’eux…
Georges Brassens

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Abstract: The representation of cultural heritage as property of descendant groups is inaccurate and should be replaced with notions inspired by the capability approach to well-being and the Faro Convention. The current administrative and scientific practices, pervaded by knowledge without piety, aiming more at dominating the past than at understating it, generate indifference towards the monuments and alienate the public, whose knowledge is devalued. The encouragement of amateur knowledge could bring more interest for cultural heritage and improve participation in public life.

Rezumat: Reprezentarea patrimoniului cultural ca fiind proprietate a unor grupuri de descedenți din strămoșii comuni contrazice realitatea și ar trebui înlocuită cu noțiuni inspirate de abordarea bunăstării din perspectiva capabilităților și de Convenția de la Faro. Practicile administrative și științifice curente, marcate de o cunoaștere lipsită de pietate, de dorința de a stăpâni trecutul și mai puțin de cea de a-l înțelege, generează indiferență față de monumente și îndepărtează publicul a cărui cunoaștere este devalorizată. Încurajarea cunoașterii produse de amatori ar putea aduce mai mult interes pentru patrimoniul cultural și îmbunătăți participarea la viața publică.

Cultural heritage is usually presented in Romania as being a common inheritance, a public good belonging to the people, preserved by the state through legislation and institutions. However, most presumed owners have no possession rights over monuments and other artefacts and are not encouraged to think about them, because they are presumed incompetent. Knowledgeable people designated by the state are supposed to do that.

People who want to protect monuments are not groups of owners. Their actions are set in motion by particular interests which cannot be declared as such and therefore are presented as general interests of large collectivities, sometimes using the support of international norms and the prestige of foreign scholars whose interest for monuments is also not derived from ownership claims.

The representation of the presumed owners does not function as we would expect. Administrators act as if they were the only ones endowed with the appropriate knowledge and as if cultural heritage was their property, taking out from the list of protected monuments what other people think it should be left there. Their mission seems to be action in the interest of people who do not know what their interests are and, eventually, one of educating them, rather than one of representing informed owners.

De facto owners are also frequent among archaeologists, who create cultural heritage during their excavations, when their research strategies lead to the preservation of some artefacts and to the destruction of others, without any external control over such decisions (this is a good thing). The artefacts transformed by them in cultural heritage remain at their disposal for an unlimited time and they do not make them public unless pushed by the requirements of their profession. The reluctance to offer access to the finds is greater when scientific performance is linked to the control over the artefacts and when their presentation to selected publics, in chosen circumstances, is a valuable career strategy.

The notion of ownership, which is structured around the idea of the power people have over the things they own, does not seem appropriate for describing our relations with cultural heritage. Property is a form of domination, of subordination of the things owned to the wishes and interests of the owners. In the case of monuments, the opposite seems to be the case: their value comes from the fact that they transcend the wishes and interests owners might have. We might care about them, but they are indifferent to whatever we may