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The role of the ACHS / Critical Heritage Studies in the UK

Critical heritage studies, cultural heritage and the current political context in the UK: supporting critical practice?

Looking at the current ACHS president's summary of present challenges and opportunities, the next stage in the development of critical heritage studies might be encapsulated as to further embrace other areas of enquiry, to continue to draw on cognisant fields of study, and to remain alive to the possibilities of international comparison and contrast. Its *purpose*, in a UK context, over and perhaps above its continued development as a coherent and rigorous discipline, might be to support the evolution and embedding of *critical practice* in those organisations and communities to whom heritage matters. This goes beyond 'accounting for its relationship to today's regional and global transformations', to informing the ways those transformations are documented, interpreted and debated and the ways in which heritage decisions are made and acted upon, in the context of significant change, at organisational, local, national and international levels.¹

In its simplest terms, the approach embodied by critical heritage studies presupposes at least a challenging of 'traditional', 'elite' or Western heritage forms, typified in the UK by the castle, the historic house, the civic museum and its collections, the national museums and theirs. It emphasises, too, the political dimension inherent in all forms of heritage definition and designation and thus in its use and management.

In the current context, the institutions that designate, present and manage those forms of heritage are under considerable, though differing, pressure. How might the ideas and assumptions that make up 'critical heritage studies' – the critical enquiry, the links to other disciplines – support those institutions in an uncertain present and as they approach a still uncertain future? Where might a new agenda for museums, under the auspices of the Arts Council – 'the national development agency for culture'² – leave buildings and landscapes, archives and memorials? Where does heritage sit, within such a view of culture? How might 'intangible cultural heritage' become more fully recognised by an organisation that deals with it all the time, but never talks about it and scarcely perceives performance, theatre, literature or music in these terms?³ Might the current crisis in funding for local authority museums, in

¹ From the President's introduction to the ACHS, <http://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/presidents-welcome>

² Darren Henley, evidence to the Culture, Media, Sport Committee, May 2016: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/culture-media-and-sport-committee/countries-of-culture/oral/32941.html>

³ In contrast with the Scottish Arts Council – a difference which merits further consideration than is given here

particular, become the basis for new forms of engagement with different forms of heritage, in which the hold of old assumptions and of old institutions is at least relaxed? How might critical heritage studies inform and help shape new forms of heritage practice within and by the organisations it sets out to challenge? How might it energise and embolden heritage practice outside them?

I will begin with a few words about scope.

I don't, in this paper, want to revisit the frequently repeated attempts at definition or the long lists of what heritage is – or that it is not 'just' the object, the memorial, the museum, but also the idea, a process, the sense of identity and belonging. I take it as given that what heritage is *is* contested, that it means different things to different people, and that our sense of what matters – what is worth holding onto from the present and handing onto the future – changes over time. I take it as axiomatic that heritage is not about the past, but about a reading of the past that serves current purposes.

We talk in shorthand, of course. We refer in the UK, for example, to the 'heritage sector' and sometimes assume that this embraces museum collections and the historic built environment, archives and landscapes, the tangible and intangible, formal institutions and community-led activity. But sometimes not. The differences between the different parts of this sector are as significant as the common ground they appear to share. The differences between the four home nations that make up the UK, in which heritage and culture are devolved responsibilities, are equally striking and equally important. These, I think, are areas for further analysis and discussion, in relation to the formation and impact of public policy, professional practice and wider perspectives about what heritage is and why it matters.

This isn't quite the paper I thought I would write when I drafted the abstract. I had thought of it as a brief and fairly straightforward survey of some of the current, imminent and potential shifts in policy and personnel, which might shape 'heritage practice' and which might become the basis for further analysis within critical heritage studies. I intended a brief survey of the Culture White Paper and of the broad focus – if focus isn't too flattering a term – of current government policy. I thought I might speak about the actual and potential implications of changes in governance in a number of heritage organisations, from the splitting up of English Heritage to the move to trust status by many local authority museums, and the inevitable impact of reductions in public funding. Instead, I found myself rehearsing the events of the last few weeks and their disorientating effect: the EU Referendum, the 100th anniversary of the battle of the Somme, games of football, Chilcot, and the Museum of the Year Award.

The current political context in the UK is one of fragmentation and deeply felt division and inequality – between the home nations, between different parts of each nation, within and between communities. The Leave vote in the EU Referendum is significant because of the political responses and reactions it precipitated and will

continue to precipitate for months and years to come. It is also significant because it confirms what we already knew. As Gary Younge put it, just a week after the vote:

On the day after the referendum, many Britons woke up with the feeling – some for better, some for worse – that they were suddenly living in a different country. But it is not a different country: what brought us here has been brewing for a very long time.⁴

Looking at England, in London, 75% of voters in Camden wanted to Remain; it was 78% in Hackney, and 66% in Kensington and Chelsea. But Remain was the exception across many parts of the country. Voters along much of the coast and the in east of England voted overwhelming to Leave. Almost two-thirds of Labour voters did vote Remain – but a significant number of the working-class, the poor, and the overlooked opted for Leave, and the alternatives it was thought to represent – however incoherent or dishonest they turn out to be. Opting for leave was more emphatic still in Wales; the reverse was the case in Scotland. The campaign, on both sides, continued to conflate the issues of race and migration, as though they were one and the same thing. The post-war, post-Empire debate about “Britain’s role in the world” and its “proud history” was claimed by both sides, and unresolved by either.

To quote Younge again:

Ever since the Suez crisis, Britain has struggled with its place in the modern world. Nostalgic about its former glory, anxious about its diminished state, forgetful about its former crimes, bumptious about its future role, it has lived on its reputation as an elderly aristocrat might live on his trust fund – frugally and pompously, with a great sense of entitlement and precious little self-awareness.⁵

“Heritage” mirrors and reflects, distorts and magnifies, obscures and disguises all of these lines and divisions. It both represents, and has something to say about, this former glory and these former crimes.

The recourse to historical cliché and rhetoric, as politicians draw on partially remembered pasts to make points about the present and future, is one such mirror, in which ‘heritage’ is hazily reflected – or forms the distorting mirror itself. Michael Gove, as Secretary of State for Education, famously found intellectual solace in ‘our island story’ and thus the basis for a reformed History curriculum. Launching the reform process at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2010, Gove told his audience that

One of the under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past. Children are growing up ignorant of one of the

⁴ Gary Younge, ‘Brexit: a disaster decades in the making’, *Guardian*, 30 June 2016
<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/30/brexit-disaster-decades-in-the-making>

⁵ Ibid

most inspiring stories I know - the history of our United Kingdom. Our history has moments of pride, and shame, but unless we fully understand the struggles of the past we will not properly value the liberties of the present⁶.

David Cameron, announcing additional funding for the commemoration of 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War in October 2012, made a point of speaking specifically of Gallipoli and of the loss of Turkish lives. He recalled a visit to the Gallipoli monument, and the inscription on it, which ends in direct appeal to the mothers of those who, having died in Turkey, became Turkish too. Cameron then went on to make a political, pro-European point:

That from such war and hatred can come unity and peace, a confidence and a determination never to go back. However frustrating and however difficult the debates in Europe, 100 years on we sort out our differences through dialogue and meetings around conference tables, not through the battles on the fields of Flanders or the frozen lakes of western Russia⁷.

How rapidly the world changes.

We can quote many such examples, and replay them in the context of shifting political perspectives and priorities. Heritage comes into the foreground for a while, including, as in 2012, in the shape of allocated funding for specific and precisely delineated projects and events – ‘doing heritage’ through the redisplay of the First World War galleries at the IWM, funding for school children visiting to the battlefields of France and Belgium, and a myriad of local projects, from the restoration of war memorials to theatre and performance. We speak of heritage as memory and legacy, as physical evidence, as event and exhibition. It exists, simultaneously, as an act of remembrance and as a capital programme funded, developed and delivered by a raft of heritage organisations – the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the Imperial War Museum.

All this remembering has a clear purpose, beyond the immediate act of so doing. It merits critical attention.

Moreover, the specific disposition of power and funding across these and other heritage organisations is as much a matter for critical heritage studies as the manifestation of power that goes into defining and designating ‘heritage’ in the first place.

The funding crisis in English museums, for example, speaks of an imbalance between the capital and the rest of the country that plays out in a variety of ways, including in terms of access to heritage and culture. The national museums in London continue

⁶ Michael Gove, 5 October 2010, <https://toryspeeches.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/michael-gove-all-pupils-will-learn-our-island-story.pdf>

⁷ David Cameron, Speech at the Imperial War Museum, 11 October 2012
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans>

to flourish, cushioned by a reduced but, as yet, reliable core of central government funding and able to exploit the huge potential of international tourism, corporate and private sponsorship, and their proximity to power: the BM operates within the context not just of cultural policy, but foreign policy too. The V&A – Museum of the Year 2016 – fulfils a similar role: its partnership with the Shekou Design Museum in China, for example, has direct benefits to it and to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Interestingly, the V&A has announced that it intends to use its prize money to revive its Circulation Department in order to take its collections ‘beyond our usual metropolitan partners and engaging in a more intimate way with the communities we reach so that we can continue to deliver on our ambition to be both a national museum for a local audience and a local museum for a national audience.’⁸

Elsewhere, National Museums Liverpool must bridge a much wider gap between their core funding and other sources of income, while institutions in Lancashire and Leicestershire reduce their opening hours or close altogether as local authority funding is withdrawn. Campaigns against such closures are vocal and heart-felt but they are rarely given the kind of coverage devoted, more generally, to library closures; and the Arts Council reports that there is little evidence of any mass public support for museums as an entity – as a valued and valuable part of the fabric of everyone’s life, irrespective of where they live or whether their ‘own’ museum happens to be under threat. There is something of a paradox, therefore, in the Minister of Culture’s recent observation that ‘in times of uncertainty and division it’s the arts that bring us together’. Government austerity measures clearly makes this more difficult for some arts organisations, especially those reliant to a greater or lesser extent on local authority funding, while others, perhaps, have still not succeeded in making themselves integral to the lives of their communities and to a much broader range of people within them.⁹ This too, is a critical heritage studies question – the transformation of professional practice in the context of funding reductions and changing public expectations, including among those who don’t visit – and why should they – museums at all.

One question here, I think, is how to act on the understanding that, far from being fixed and finite, what constitutes ‘heritage’ changes constantly and continually; and that the organisations charged with managing heritage are not necessarily synonymous with it: that collections may have a life beyond the museum, for example, and that the conservation of historic buildings is utterly and invariably dependent on their present use. Another is the implication of closure: what happens when a community does lose its museum? The Museums Association’s “Museums

⁸ Martin Roth, Director of the V&A, accepting the Museum of the Year Award, 6 July 2016: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/network/va-wins-museum-of-the-year-2016>

⁹ Ed Vaizey, London Evening Standard, 28 June 2016, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/arts-can-heal-rift-caused-by-brexit-vote-says-culture-minister-as-actors-admit-to-anger-and-sadness-a3282856.html>

In the same interview, Vaizey also spoke of ‘London 2012 [which] united the nation and the world looked on in awe of our creativity, courage and character. Now is the time to come together once more.’

Change Lives” initiative was, in part, an advocacy campaign on their behalf. Its call to arms claimed, with some justification in some cases, that:

Museums are rooted in places; they help shape and convey a sense of identity and contribute to local distinctiveness, counterbalancing the effects of globalisation. The best museums work with communities to collect and represent a place’s diverse and collective history and heritage. They see it as a fundamental right of citizens to connect to their inheritance. The collections held by museums and the knowledge and skills of their staff are but a small part of the cultural resources and expertise in an area. The best museums recognise this and enable their audiences to benefit from wider assets beyond the museum itself.¹⁰

This enabling role, and this sense of the museum as a small part in a much more complex whole, suggests a whole raft of possibilities for different ways of working, which might better reflect a diverse and collective history.

What might they be?

What else might have to change to more truly realise such an inclusive view?

Given that we may now need such inclusivity more than ever, how might this Association speak more directly to potential partners in the sector and help them, not necessarily to save museums, nor to protect ‘heritage at risk’, but to embed and extend critical practice across heritage institutions and beyond them?

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¹⁰ Museums Association, *Museums Change Lives*, 2013