Abstract.

1. Introduction

While its intellectual roots go back for centuries, heritage conservation came of age as an organizational field in the second half of the twentieth century. As the typical conservationist went from being an amateur interested in art, architecture, or archaeology, to a professional with a scientific, rational bent, the field became more bureaucratized and specialized (Lee 2002; Koshar 2004). The field also gained strength from UNESCO’s definition of cultural heritage as a human right and the passage of a series of path-breaking conventions. With the world economy undergoing dramatic expansion for much of the period, heritage conservation appeared a growth industry, aided by the changing definition of heritage. From being focused on isolated monuments, the definition expanded to include whole landscapes, and also intangible cultural patterns and practices.

However, ideas and values that serve as powerful generators of social action in one period may lose their potency or assume a quite different significance in another. In their classic text, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1982) demonstrated how science played a liberating role in early modern Europe, helping break the control of tradition over people’s lives and providing emancipatory potential through the possibility of social action based on rational thought. But in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century, science became both a means and an end. Despite its many achievements, science came to be seen as also having the power to oppress by locking people into over-rationalized, bureaucratic structures serving goals that had been become disconnected from much that we associate with humanity.

Drawing on this classic analysis, I propose that the two central concepts that have served to legitimate heritage conservation in the second half of the twentieth century, namely science and human rights, must be viewed dialectically. While these two concepts did much to guide heritage conservation as it developed into an organizational field (Bourdieu 1993), contradictions emerged that reveal the limitations embedded in these values and the necessity of developing additional strategies to address the distinctive problems of the global age. To the extent to which the cultural heritage field does not demonstrate this organizational creativity, it may well be seen as “still fighting the last war,” i.e., still relying on strategies that look backward rather than forward.

The argument presented will itself assume dialectical structure of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. First, I will provide evidence as to how the values of science and human rights served to advance the cause of heritage conservation in the post-war period. Then I shall consider the problems inherent in these values that produce social strains or inadequacies of organizational response. Finally, I shall propose a synthesis: how by combining thesis and antithesis, cultural heritage can more fully respond to the challenges of the global age.
2. **THESIS: How have the values of science and human rights served the cause of cultural heritage conservation?**

Krishan Kumar (1987) has proposed that science and socialism have been the two dominant utopias of the modern age. I would argue, however, that the human rights discourse acquired its own utopian thrust in the second half of the twentieth century. The argument that we have a right to culture was part and parcel of the broader discourse that developed in the aftermath of World War II as worldwide revulsion against the Holocaust led to the passage in 1948 by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The cultural losses in World War II demonstrated that the safeguarding of cultural sites and artifacts required mechanisms that transcended the level of the national state but that relied upon nation-states for their operation.


Along with the related body of declarations and proclamations, these conventions have provided an important framework for a range of actions. When the Hague Convention’s lack of enforcement powers became obvious during the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, additional protocols were approved that had the effect of allowing the international war crimes tribunal to prosecute people accused of despoiling the monuments of other religious and ethnic groups. The 1970 Convention has provided justification for the actions of Italy and Greece, among other nations, to try to recover important archaeological pieces that were illegally exported. And, of course, the 1972 Convention on World Heritage greatly facilitated the identification and protection of outstanding natural and cultural sites globally.

In all these efforts, the principle of universalism has allowed the United Nations and participating international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to claim that cultural products that lie within a national territory nonetheless have a significance that transcends parochial interests and powers. The Human Rights regime shares this principle of universalism with the other powerful utopia of modern society, namely science.

This universalism is first of all evident in the basic fact that scientific findings are meant to be valid for all people, holding all conditions equal. Thus water is supposed to boil at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level, whether one is in Greenwich or Phuket. There is not supposed to be an Irish science or a Peruvian science: the very thought of nationalistic science recalls Nazi experiments and other misguided efforts to pervert the scientific enterprise to serve political ends.

The extent to which the universalism was embedded within both the human rights discourse and associated with science was particularly attractive to people working in the field of cultural heritage. Much of cultural heritage had, by definition, been the affair of nation-states, and not just nation-states, but particular political regimes, not all of which had used cultural heritage for humanitarian ends. Alfredo Conti (2009) has detailed how nationalist discourse influenced the development of historic preservation in Argentina, where an intellectual elite effectively “invented” historic heritage in order to integrate a cosmopolitan immigrant population and to insure its subservience to the existing power structure. Beate Störktuhl’s 2006 edited volume Architekturgeschichte und kulturelles Erbe – Aspekte der Baudenkmalpflege in Osteuropa (Architectural History and Cultural History – Aspects of Historic Preservation in East Central Europe) presents numerous examples from that region of the tension between science and scholarship on the one hand and nationalist agendas on the other.

Science is also attractive to heritage professionals insofar as it provides an alternative image to the previously dominant image of heritage as dominated by elites who were pursuing their own particular artistic interests and indulging their own particular cultural tastes. Besides the evident class and status tensions implicit in such a stereotype, the major ontological problem was that, in short, “there’s no accounting for tastes.” Without scientific criteria, whatever heritage sites were included on the prestigious World Heritage...
List would be there simply because of the cultural tastes and biases of the particular individuals involved in the process, rather than because of their intrinsic merit. Hence it was necessary from the very beginning of this convention to elaborate a set of scientific criteria that serve to guide the selection process if not necessarily to eliminate all matters of national or personal bias.

The six scientific criteria for cultural heritage were not, however, sufficient to the task of selection. As the list grew through the 1980s and early 1990s, it became increasingly evident that it was heavily weighted toward specific types of sites, namely sites of art and architectural merit such as castles, churches and cathedrals, and toward a specific region, namely Europe. For this reason, in 1994 the World Heritage Committee adopted its “Global Strategy for a Balanced, Representative, and Credible World Heritage List.” Based on the scientific principles of classification and categorization, the Global Strategy is essentially a quota sampling mechanism meant to guarantee that effort is made to identify under-represented examples of the full range of possible sites. Thus preference should be given to under-represented regions such as Africa and Asia, and to under-represented forms such as industrial, scientific, or underwater heritage.

Finally, the cultural heritage field has embraced the principle of science in its everyday operation. Papers submitted to heritage conferences are routinely evaluated by scientific review committees, and much of the important work of organizations such as ICOMOS is done by standing Scientific Committees.

The choice of science as model for the organizational field has been all the more important as heritage conservation has assumed a truly global dimension. Science is at the heart of what sociologist John W. Meyer and his colleagues see as a world polity of shared norms and values (Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1997). Rather than undermining the sovereignty of nation-states, this world polity works in and through nation-states. In addition, an important role is played by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), who self-authorize actions designed to help realize these shared values.

Overall, the scientific approach has served to increase the prestige of heritage professionals and of cultural heritage as an organizational field. Nonetheless, contradictions have arisen over the course of the years regarding the use of science and human rights as sources of legitimacy and inspiration for heritage conservation.

3. ANTITHESIS: What is a human right and When is science relevant?

The most significant opposition to viewing heritage as a human right comes from within the community of human rights scholars. These scholars form one side of a debate concerning whether the definition of human rights should be expansive or restrictive. Those who argue for a restrictive definition believe it should include only the limited number of rights that appear “self-evident” to people across cultures (Etzioni 2010) or that have some sort of ontological grounding, such as in the vulnerability of the human body to physical pain (Turner 2006). Rather than undermining the sovereignty of nation-states, this world polity works in and through nation-states. In addition, an important role is played by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), who self-authorize actions designed to help realize these shared values.

As Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) has pointed out, if heritage is a human right, then it is a curious one. The Enlightenment philosophers who propounded the idea of a social contract that gave people universal rights saw such rights as weapons against the arbitrary claims of particularistic cultures. In the mind of eighteenth century thinkers such as Voltaire, cultural traditions, especially religious traditions, were irrational constructions that required unquestioning obedience and that fostered intolerance of cultural differences. An important part of these philosophers’ goals was to limit the authority of culture, rather than to glorify it, through using rational thought rather than tradition to guide social action (Béji 2004). Indeed, particularistic cultures have continued to be a problem for the development and spread of what have been called human rights regimes, with regimes defined as “the principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue area” (Kramer 1982: 185). For example, a complex discourse pertains to what has been called the “Asian values debate,” which has involved both Asian governments and Asian area scholars in questions pertaining to the limits of universalism and the claims of cultural relativism in this important world region (Bell, Nathan and Peleg 2001).
As already mentioned, claims to cultural heritage as a human right emerged as part of the broader post-World War II discourse on human rights. Yet the forces behind the passage of the key United Nations conventions concerning culture differ in marked ways from those that gave rise to other human rights conventions. First, instead of the allied victors stigmatizing their defeated enemies, both parties to the conflict were seen as having committed wanton acts of cultural destruction: for example, the bombing of Coventry Cathedral by the Germans, the destruction of Dresden by the Allied forces. Second, it was not disadvantaged groups that were making claims against the state: rather, members of privileged status groups, notably drawn from the professional classes, were at the forefront of this effort. And, third, while the conventions dedicated to protecting culture that were eventually agreed did provide means for states to intervene in the affairs of other states, as was typical for other rights regimes, intervention designed to defend the right to culture has often been indirect and less than effective (Waters 1996).

As for the claims of cultural heritage to the status of science, two problems quickly emerge. The first is that, while science is evident in heritage professions based on expertise in material science or chemistry, it is less obvious to some people that specialties traditionally considered part of the humanities, such as art and architectural history, can also be guided by a scientific approach. The second problem is that claims to science resonate more positively in some quarters than in others. As Françoise Choay has written, “The Parthenon, Saint Sophia, Borobudur, and Chartres recall the enchantment of a quest that, in our disenchanted world, is proposed by neither science nor critical analysis” (Choay 1996:183).

Empirical evidence for Choay’s assertion can be found in a social survey conducted on a sample of affluent New York State residents who were highly supportive of World Heritage in principle (Barthel-Bouchier and Hui 2007). Among other questions, survey respondents were asked to evaluate a list of twelve heritage sites, with the official UNESCO description provided, and to judge whether the site in question was of national, world-regional (Africa, Europe, Asia) or universal significance. While there was near-unanimity on the universal status of the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China, there was minuscule support for examples chosen to reflect the scientifically-oriented Global Strategy’s efforts to include more industrial sites and more twentieth-century sites, among other under-represented categories. Thus only 12 of the 130 survey respondents believed Sweden’s Varburg Radio Station to be of universal merit, the same number as felt that the Modernist home and studio of Mexican architect Luis Barragan belonged on the World Heritage List. Thus, while the Global Strategy may appear to organizational insiders as an ideal scientific method for eliminating bias by region and by type of site, it carries with it the risk of alienating public support for the underlying principle of World Heritage, a principle that, as Choay rightly perceived, conveys a sense of awe and wonder to those who support it.

In addition to the principle of scientific sampling as a basis for World Heritage inclusion, the public also frequently appears unimpressed with scientific expertise when it is applied in their own communities. As David Lowenthal has written, the professionalization of conservation has served more to increase public distrust rather than trust: “With it goes resentment that heritage concerns are dominated by elites and special interest groups, and suspicions of self-interest undermine appreciation of heritage as a public commodity” (1999: 7). And, as the delisting of Dresden has demonstrated, people are perfectly willing to reject expert advice when other issues, such as traffic flow, are at stake.

Overall, the public appears reluctant to view science as holding the key to the future. Indeed, Kumar demonstrates how utopian visions of a future based on the popular image of science were accompanied by dystopic visions of a future world dominated by science and deprived of human values. These dystopic visions reflect the fact that specific scientific approaches often appear ill-suited to the task of resolving problems of social policy, especially those problems that require some measure of prediction of future trends and outcomes (see Rittel and Webber 1973).

Heritage professionals like to claim that heritage conservation is more about people than about places, more about looking toward the future than preserving the past. Yet the act of claiming the status of science and/or human right by itself alone does not appear to be a future-oriented strategy for dealing with the challenges that lie ahead, challenges relating to ecological crisis and economic reversals. Having gained a place at the table of experts and been accepted as a partner by powerful corporations as well as by governmental and intergovernmental entities, how can heritage conservation gain a similar place of honor among the relatively less powerful in the new global age, that is, among the public at large?
4. SYNTHESIS: On Social Status and Social Action

Dialectical reasoning does not imply the rejection of the starting point or thesis, and this paper is not arguing for the rejection of either science or human rights. Rather, this form of argumentation takes elements from both the thesis and the antithesis and forges them into a more comprehensive argument (1981). A good starting place for this synthetic analysis can be found in Andrew Abbott’s analysis of the sources of professional status (1981). For Abbott, determinants of status differ depending on whether one is a member of a particular profession or of the public it is meant to serve. Within a profession, the further one’s activities are separated from actual contact with the public, the higher the status one is accorded by one’s colleagues. Thus the purely conceptual architect, or the architect who designs only a few highly-emblematic structures, has higher status than the one who works on primary school additions, the university professor who teaches few students has higher status than the one who teaches classes with large enrollments, the scientist engaged in pure research has higher status than the one working on a problem in applied research. Direct and open contact with the public is seen within professions as potentially polluting and even dangerous, and high status practitioners are often separated from unsolicited contact with the public by layers of administrative support. While professions can and do occasionally reward those members whose work reminds them of their essential public service role, on a day-to-day basis status tends to follow separation from public contact rather than immersion in it.

By contrast, the public tends to be most impressed by professionals who display a willingness to engage on a personal level with relevant issues. Examples would include physicians who appear on television talk shows, or lawyers who write advice columns in popular magazines. It would also include professionals who dedicate their talents to solving real-life problems in real-life communities and who commit for a substantial period of time, rather than just flying in to make guest appearances. In the same way, members of the public appear less concerned with whether or not heritage is a science or a human right; they are more concerned with whether heritage conservation adds appreciably to the quality of their lives and that of their communities.

Fortunately, there is much good work going on in heritage conservation by people who are, in Abbott’s terms, not afraid to get dirty through direct contact. In Sweden, Christer Gustafsson obtained the cooperation of the County Labor Board to hire unemployed construction workers and to train them in traditional building techniques by having them work to restore culturally and historically valuable buildings, some of which then became community centers. Thus a triple social benefit was created, and people saw the value in heritage conservation (2006). In the Arctic Circle, Ph.D. student Brendan Griebel is working on educational programs with Inuits. Striving to achieve “multivocality,” he weaves together his own scientific expertise with the oral histories and narratives of the local residents (2009).

When Griebel presented his work to a distinguished audience of heritage specialists at a conference, it met with a warm reception. One heritage researcher commented, “I was particularly impressed that you referred to the local people by their proper names.” The ability to create meaningful social ties is indeed one important difference between direct public contact and the “public outreach” programs conducted at a distance. Heritage organizations speak with pride of all the public information available on their web-sites, but such sites also serve to keep the public at a distance. The sites rarely provide means for someone to contact specific individuals within the organizations, and answering individual public inquiries is often resented as time-consuming, since other activities have a higher priority. As one heritage professional commented, “it’s often a case of choosing between doing the work and talking about it.”

In the coming global age of ecological crisis, economic cutbacks, and predicted social dislocations, heritage conservation will need a higher public profile and a higher degree of public support. It can achieve this not by disavowing the science ingrained in much of its work or the claims to human right status that have inspired many worthy actions. It must do this by finding new visions more in-line with public concerns: visions that can be communicated by a range of media, not just organizational web-sites. In working toward the goal of achieving more visible and effective outreach, heritage conservation should move beyond science to draw more heavily on social science and its findings on such fundamental topics as how to build trust between experts and publics and how to motivate people to make difficult personal choices and to work toward social change. Only then will cultural heritage have not simply a “place at the table” with other decision-makers, but a clear voice and an inescapable presence in the new global age.
5. References


