A review of: heritage, conservation and communities. Engagement, participation and capacity building, edited by Gill Chitty

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Heritage, Conservation and Communities is an edited book comprising a collection of articles (19 in total) on the topic of public participation in heritage conservation processes. At the heart of this book is the importance of genuine community involvement in heritage conservation. The authors call for a renewed attention and rethinking of the concept of community, which has lost its traditional meaning in Western societies with the advance of modernity. Furthermore, despite an ongoing rhetoric of participation, the emergence of a genuine change in the predominantly top-down heritage conservation practice remains highly questionable. Notwithstanding some innovative approaches, the overall conservation practice remains a largely professionalized, expert-led domain. As surprising as it may seem, involvement of local communities did not gain much attention in heritage conservation up until the early 2000s, something that is repeatedly pointed out and problematized by multiple contributors to this volume. The new narrative of strong local communities, according to the authors, should shift from being associated with mere ‘stakeholders’ of heritage to becoming the key agents within the heritage conservation discourse. The authors also call for a new understanding of the conservation project itself, becoming the ‘management of creative continuity and socially cohesive heritage practice’ (p.2). Conservation, therefore, should shift from ‘conserving historic buildings’ to ‘helping to save the places people value and provide communities with much-needed facilities’ (p.3). The importance of ensuring community ownership and involvement in heritage conservation practices is the common thread connecting all the chapters throughout this volume.

The book comprises two parts: Part 1 deals with several key approaches and principles to community engagement and capacity building, whereas Part 2 introduces practical insights from various case studies. Here it has to be emphasized that this is not a division into theoretical and practical parts, strictly speaking, since Part 1 is also full of practice-oriented case studies. In Part 1, Nigel Walter’s theoretical chapter (p. 50) on the importance of narrative for meaningful public participation in heritage conservation is particularly noteworthy. Walter interrogates the challenging tension between modernity and tradition, which is at the very heart of conservation, and suggests turning to narrative frameworks as a possible way out. Narratives can be seen as ‘dwelling-places’ where people live, around which they weave their identities and engage with their material heritage. The narrative metaphor, as suggested by Walters, also allows for ongoing continuity and change in heritage conservation, in line with the main message of Heritage, Conservation and Communities. In Part 2, nine case studies are outlined, exploring inter alia the topics of reconnection with industrial heritage, volunteer support, preservation of built heritage and innovative approaches to community engagement based on the examples from UK, India, Japan and Spain. The scientific contribution of Heritage, Conservation and Communities lies, first and foremost, in reviewing and summarizing rich practical experience in the field of heritage studies. The authors are primarily practitioners, who engage with the management of heritage conservation projects in the field, rather than from behind their desks. Much of the material comes from the work of UNESCO and its advisory bodies.

In the context of the discussions emerging from Heritage, Conservation and Communities, it is safe to assume that there is a certain theoretical gap between the disciplines of heritage
studies and human geography. Multiple contributors to this book engage in discussions concerning peoples’ connection with the place they live in, and the relationships between place and identity. Along with this, however, the engagement with insights from the discipline of human geography, which has developed a rich body of theory on this topic, is largely lacking. In the discussion on community involvement in the context of North Yorkshire, Keith Emerick, for example, states that ‘place’ is in fairly common use as a conservation term, entering the language with its current usage through the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1999)’ (p.72), but no contributions from the field of human geography are mentioned in this regard. This is especially noteworthy in light of the recent Special Issue on Tourism Places within Tourism Geographies (Volume 19, Issue 5), which featured several articles discussing place and heritage. This suggests insufficient crossover between human geography and heritage studies, which deserves research attention on behalf of scholars from both fields.

What is also interesting, is that the heritage discussed in this volume was almost exclusively limited to cultural heritage, while natural heritage was virtually absent, since none of the case studies presented dealt with natural phenomena. In this regard, it is worth reminding that four out of 10 selection criteria for inclusion into the UNESCO World Heritage List are explicitly related to natural areas, including such criteria as demonstrating exceptional natural beauty, representing major stages of earth’s history, significant ecological and biological processes, containing important natural habitats for conservation, to name a few. It can be assumed that this is yet another manifestation of the persisting divide between the social and natural sciences. In this perspective, it can be concluded that there is still room for a stronger interdisciplinary integration among various scientific fields dealing with heritage conservation and more research effort is needed in this regard.

For the readership of Tourism Geographies, it would be important to know that the book does not contain any contributions with an explicit focus on tourism and/or tourists’ impacts on heritage conservation. Given the focus of Heritage, Conservation and Communities, it is understandable that the topics are somewhat limited to the practical issues of capacity building and participation, but given the direct link between tourism and cultural heritage conservation in many parts of the globe, this void is rather surprising. This might also tie to the persistent disciplinary gaps discussed above.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that this volume is an outcome of the Engaging Conservation conference, which took place in 2014 at the University of York, UK. The content, therefore, has a very strong focus on York and UK in terms of the featured case studies and theoretical foundations, and nearly all of the contributors have some affiliation with the University of York. There is, nevertheless, a certain geographic variation in the case studies, featuring examples from Japan, India and Spain.

In conclusion, Heritage, Conservation and Communities provides a valuable and interesting insight into the world of heritage conservation practitioners, giving a rich overview of the methods, tools and approaches applied in this field. The ethical platform shared by all authors, i.e. prioritization of authentic and meaningful local community involvement, is of high relevance to any society striving for the inclusion of principles of democracy and social justice into all of its processes. A highly valuable message here is that heritage conservation benefits, above everything else, the community itself. As stated by Gill Chitty ‘[c]onservation in practice here is about developing skills in groups and people management, generating honesty and trust in working together to create equity in new partnerships’ (p.9). This book will be, first and foremost, interesting to heritage practitioners and students of heritage studies, who will benefit from multiple conservation approaches and lessons learned, with open discussions about challenges and failures on the way. The book will also be of value to tourism scholars interested in heritage
conservation, as well as practitioners of nature conservation, who can benefit from expanding disciplinary horizons and unexpected synergistic interdisciplinary insights.

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