Heritage: A Conceptual Paper
Toward a Theory of Cultural Heritage in Humanitarian Action

By
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Abstract
This conceptual paper deals with definitions of and approaches to cultural and natural heritage and discusses functions of heritage and culture as elements of sustainable peace-building. The paper assumes the necessity of a longer-term strategic thinking.

A fundamental question occupying heritage research is why some parts of the human Lebensraum are singled out and marked as a cultural heritage and why this need for preserving, protecting and capturing in time and space is escalating globally. Some researchers argue that this is a consequence of that we seem to be living in a fragmented, post, post-modern society where no coherent story is told and people and places are regarded as texts and isolated narratives open for interpretations and re-interpretations. Some others argue that the Drang for heritage is based on economic interests and connected to the booming tourist industry, while others refer to the politicizing of place.

The conceptual discussion will be exemplified with the ethnographic case of The Museum of Terror/ Terror Haza in Budapest in order to show the complexity of heritage as elements of reconciliation and transition.

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When political realism does take cultural considerations into account, these are typically based in crude stereotypes of how other people behave, insensitive to both history and context. Good negotiating practice, Rubinstein argues, should be informed by a proper appreciation of the cognitive and emotional force of symbolic forms. This is no minor plea: the future security of entire populations depends on it. Tim Ingold (1994, pp. 751)

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I. Introduction: When Heritage is Everywhere

The multi-facetted concept of heritage triggers notions of power, memory, representation, identity, sacred and secular places, and of course, heritage as a commodity in the booming tourist economy. There is no doubt that heritage has become a buzz word that is used by many different stakeholders, global and locals alike, in their conflicting and straggling agendas on transition, reconciliation and preservation. In this way, it can be claimed that *Heritage is Everywhere* as once *Culture was Everywhere* (Hannerz 1993, Fox 1999).

The task of UNESCO’s World Heritage Center is to identify, preserve and safeguard cultural and natural heritage sites for future generations. The World heritage list contains at present 878 sites of “outstanding universal value” and for each year new sites are added to the list. There is also a growing list of intangible heritages that are made up of a wealth of human cultural products consisting of dances, songs and languages. The concept of heritage was made operational through the adoption of the UNESCO Convention from 1972 concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. Places as unique and diverse as the wilds of East Africa’s Serengeti, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America make up our world’s heritage. What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. This is embodied in an international treaty called the *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, adopted by UNESCO in 1972 (http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/).

The definition claims to have universal application, which from my point of view on culture and heritage is attractive, as I believe we would gain by using a more universal approach to culture and civilization and try to look at what unites us instead of what divides us as human beings. Therefore, it is of greatest importance to take seriously the
comments by researchers at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogjakarta\textsuperscript{2}, Indonesia, who made me aware of the fact that the definitions of heritage (as will be further discussed) might be Eurocentric and consequently not applicable in their present form in any easy way on heritage outside Europe. Although they could not give me an alternative definition, I think we should work further on this line of thought, as it is only through joint efforts that the concept per se will be made truly universal and operational.

For UNESCO, heritage is part of or even regarded as a necessity for sustainable development. I argue, that if we are serious in using the concept of heritage as a tool or model for transition and reconciliation in disaster-ravaged societies, (regardless if man-made or natural), we have to deconstruct the concept and consider it from a trans-disciplinary perspective. Our studies also have to be deeply rooted and backed up by old-fashioned ethnographic work. We have to rewind and accept that we as scholars have a responsibility, and we should no longer accept the post-modernists pronounced lack of responsibility and even cynicism towards real problems such as environmental destruction, human suffering, war and natural disasters. Real people are more than texts to be seen as something that can be negotiated and re-negotiated in a hermeneutic interpretation circle. But, of course, it is as Bernard also claims:

\begin{quote}
There is also an important (but not incompatible) difference between those of us who seek to understand people’s beliefs and those of us who seek to explain what causes those beliefs and action and what those beliefs and actions cause (2006, p. 3).
\end{quote}

To operationalize the heritage concept for the use in humanitarian action and development projects it will be necessary to both understand as well as seek explanations for people’s actions and behavior. It will be necessary, I believe, to work with a theoretical model that goes beyond the view of a reality consisting solely of individually constructed realities.

\textsuperscript{2} I thank the researchers at the seminars at the Center for Security and Peace Studies (CSPS) 2007-07-16 and the Center for Southeast Asian Social Studies (CESASS) 2007-07-18.
In the heritage literature and policy documents there is a tendency to unconsciously (I think) fall back on a view of society that has similarities to the functionalistic school in anthropology going back to the 1940s. Functionalism is based on the ontological and epistemological notion of society as consisting of systemic entities that operate in ways analogical to living organisms. The function of the system is to maintain equilibrium within its defined and bounded space. But this stable organism could be disturbed by a force from the outside, which destabilizes the entities and lays bare the naked bones of society (Sahlins 1978, p. 214). In anthropological literature it was once suggested that a severe crisis, a breakdown of society, might reveal the structural oppositions within society:

Only occasionally comes a crisis, a crisis revelatrice, to lay bare the structural oppositions beyond any possibility of mistaking it. If there is something that might be called a revelatory crisis what do we expect to find? A hidden cultural code which is activated during bad times in order to maintain social continuity? The bare-bones of human nature – a naked self-interest (Sahlins 1978:214)

Sahlins’ thoughts about hidden cultural codes and structural opposition lead us to questions about the integration model of society with its well-known problem of how to account for conflict and change (Boissevain 1978, pp. 10-11; Block 1977, pp. 280-281; Buchler & Selby 1968, p. 76) due to the basic premises of the functionalistic-structuralistic model of society as a societal equilibrium.

More recent network analysis, used for studying complex systems, has concluded that change may occur within a system without considering any new external event that has “precipitated the change or that serves to explain the change as a reaction to some new external context” (White & Johansen 2005, pp. 32-33). Thus, it is argued, a system seems to be able to change from within by itself, which might be the result of a critical mass or tipping points having been reached. Ethnographic longitudinal studies of rural communities have also come to the result that unexpected changes occur on a regular basis dismissing the notion of them as stable and static entities (White & Johansen 2005, pp. 32-33).
In a research on heritage in humanitarian action and development projects, the issue of change is constantly present as there is a tension between heritage as representing narratives and materialized memories of the past and development as representing visions of the future.

In this paper I am only at the beginning of exploring the heritage field in connection with the field of humanitarian action, but I notice that I feel very close to the anthropologist Russell Bernard’s standpoint in regard of theoretical perspectives:

I’m not in the least interested, for example, in transcending my disgust with, or taking a value-neutral stance about genocide in Germany of the 1940s, or in Cambodia of the 1970s, or in Bosnia and Rwanda of the 1990s, or in Sudan in 2004-2005. I can never say that the Aztec practice of sacrificing thousands of captured prisoners was just another religious practice that one has to tolerate to be a good cultural relativist. No one has ever found a satisfactory way out of this rationalist-empiricist dilemma. As a practical matter, I recognize that both rationalism and empiricism have contributed to our current understanding of the diversity of human behaviour (2006, pp. 4-5).

Rationalism with its stress on the ability of human beings to reason to reach knowledge and progress, and, empiricism with its stress on knowledge as a result of our experiences (truth is what we have experienced) are essential for our further discussion on the issue.

II. The Concept of Heritage

In more precise terms, the concept of heritage is as difficult to define as the concept of culture. Culture\(^3\) is defined as a “In the traditional definition, culture is a highly patterned, cohesive, and coherent set of representations (or beliefs) that constitute people’s perception of reality and that get reproduced relatively intact over generations through enculturation” (Fox 1999, np.). Heritage is defined as suggested by Harvey (2008:19):

Heritage itself is not a thing, and does not exist by itself – nor does it imply a movement or a project. Rather, heritage is about the process by which people use the past – a ‘discursive construction’ with material consequences (see Smith 2006:11-13)

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\(^3\)There are many definition of culture but the following one is classic: “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Taylor 1871 I:1, quoted in Barnard and Spencer 2000:137).
Harvey insists that this discursive process is inevitably related to the power structures of any society and intimately connected to identity construction on all levels. A history of heritage is therefore possible to write from a power perspective focusing on the control and selection of heritage. This process can be divided into several different and interconnected processes, according to Grundberg (1999: 19-32):

- The cultural heritage as materialized memories
- The cultural heritage as cultural processes
- Cultural heritage as values
- Cultural heritage as existential feelings.

To Grundberg the heritage process is highly politicized because it involves elements of socio-political inclusion and hence socio-political exclusion. The materialization and institutionalization of memory legitimize interests and write history, and there is more or less an inevitable hierarchical order built into the cultural heritage process: from an infinitive number of memories of the individual members of a society to the restricted number of materialized memories that can be saved as museum objects, monuments or buildings functioning to strengthen the present as well as the future. The selection procedure is governed by a cultural heritage expert, national committee, museum curator who in this way is assigned a real power position (1999, pp. 24-26). Grundberg is following the main stream reasoning in cultural heritage research by lifting forward this kind of structural Foucaultian power struggle. As noted by Juan Carlos Gumucio (personal communication), heritage in this view is a problem rather than an asset shared by the members of a society.

For the heritage researchers Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge: “Heritage is knowledge, a cultural product and a political resource” (2005, p. 30). If heritage is a political resource, it is important to know whose interpretation of heritage is promoted and who has selected this particular event, place or artifact to be moved to an exclusive domain and tagged as heritage. Lowenthal formulates this power dimension in the words:
“History is still mostly written by the winners. But heritage increasingly belongs to the losers” (1998, p. 78).

Nevertheless, I am hesitant because the Foucaultian power concept is vague, broad and as strange as it might sound, too useful. It seems never to be wrong to use this kind of power reasoning and it is frequently used in the new museological literature. Of course, the national state has during a certain stage of its construction used heritage to create an imaginary unity, a common past, a joint people, yes, in other words – the imaginary community so well described by Anderson (1983). There are countless historical and contemporary examples of the role of heritage in the nationalistic enterprise.

But I still claim that this one-sided power perspective is no longer valid at least for the making of heritage in Western countries, but probably also in the new democracies and in the fourth- world nations. It becomes harder and harder to keep up the power relation argument, as more and more people are involved in the heritage process, which is both transparent and democratic involving experts and locals on different national and international levels. The selection is surprisingly multi-vocal, multi-cultural and often contains strong local participatory elements. For example, in South Africa there is soon a museum, a heritage site in almost every town with the outspoken purpose of strengthening local identity and the place attachment. A praxis of heritage is developing that has similarities to social engineering.

In Sweden the problems facing museums and the heritage sector today are how to select and preserve all the objects, photographs, music, dialects, personal narratives that people would like to donate. Much of the working time of the curators is spent on declining donations, because of lack of institutional resources and limited value in the donations themselves⁴. This new public interest has to a great extent been supported by the museums themselves, because the objectives of the museums are to be democratic

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⁴ With value is meant informative and knowledge value, not only economic value.
institutions open for all. This is part of the democratization of cultural heritage. Another busy activity is to investigate places that are suggested to become heritage sites by the locals, or by a cultural heritage researcher/entrepreneur who is building an image and career by pursuing this new field of opportunities (which does not exclude any genuine interest in heritage). So where are the power structures? If there is a power structure, it is an imaginary one, at least in democratic countries, if we do not claim that the often underpaid curator is the omnipotent person here.

From a theoretical point, heritage is always something that is being used by the present for its own purposes. “Heritage resides in the here and now – whenever and wherever that here and now happens to be” (Harvey 2008:20). Heritage is present even if society denies its past, because the process of remembering is also a process of forgetting. However, this demands from the users of heritage an insight of the fact that heritage is a cultural construct, although materialized and “authentic” in its own way.

In comparison with the concept of culture, I find a strength in the concept of heritage as it explicitly encapsulates several temporal orders: past, present and future as materialized collective memories expressed in objects, buildings, places and recorded life histories. The memories associated with these temporal orders are:

retrospective : history culture : prospective

Heritage is, hence, a function of individual and collective memories which has become an institutionalized memory because it has been singled out and moved to another cultural domain – a domain that contains things of value worth preserving for mankind. These things (movable, immovable, tangible, intangible stuff) are singled out to be a heritage based on social, economic, political, cultural and religious values that are imbued in the structures of a given society, or, segment of society. It is a process that goes from

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5 For example, one of the tasks is to collect contemporary socio-cultural expressions and consequently the museums ask the public to contribute which is announced on their web-sites, e.g. the skate-boarder. Photos, narratives, cloths, music, posters apart from the skateboard were collected and preserved for eternity. This is known as contextual collecting.

6 The cultural concept can harbor several times expressed as Past time: Present time: Future time which can be very useful in the analysis of ethnographic material describing a process of change, as demonstrated by Aronsson (2002).
heritage resources to heritage outputs. Or, as Harvey puts it: “Heritage, as present-centred phenomenon, has always been with us” (2008, p. 22).

Ethnographies, the culture of a people and place, are mainly written in the present tense without further consideration of the past. These accounts recognize that we live in a material world, but the emphasis has been on how we live our lives according to a meaningful order, a symbolic scheme, constructed by us. Consequently, according to this view, it is culture that constitutes utility, not the other way around. But cultures as self-contained wholes, rigidified by cultural values, governed by systems of symbols and meanings have been much criticized by anthropologists with a materialistic view on culture. It has been argued by Roger Keesing (1989) that it is necessary to back up this interpretative view on culture with historical, economical and political contexts. The culture has to be situated.

Accordingly, heritage contains the cultural necessary elements of symbols and meanings (as the concept of culture), but it does not halt there, because heritage is also materialized collective memories, narratives of lived experiences and it also considers the intangible cultural stuff produced by humans.

Let me return to Lowenthal (1998), who argues that it is necessary to make a distinction between heritage and history. According to his reasoning, history explains, or tries to explain, in a systematic way the past. History, through its systematized and source-critical perspectives claims to obtain “truth”. History tells for those who would like to listen what happened and why it looks like it does. To question an historical “truth” (well-established fact) one has to have strong evidence to support one’s reasoning. History strives to know as much as possible about the past, and presents it in a precise language.

On the other hand, heritage tells myths and lifts forward the continuity of a well-defined group with the aim of giving this particular group meaning and status. Heritage has no truth claims; it infuses the past with our present aims and is therefore a construction
consisting of beliefs and a great portion of creativity. It operates with imprecise expressions and is not interested in historical timelines, but in how our memory generalizes about “the good old times”, or, “the bad times”. Hence, heritage works with schematic assumptions, a distorted past that sometimes is elevated to a national myth. Actually, some nations are built on a misrepresentation of the past that serves the present. It is a kind of “pseudo-history”.

Heritage is re-structuring history by improving the past, and what is not brought out, is concealed. History, on the other hand, stresses that nothing should be forgotten by using selective memory. Lowenthal (1998, p. 156) claims that we practice selective forgetfulness for the benefit of the nation when we nurse our heritage. Therefore, we must be aware of the difference between “to remember” and “to elevate”.

But why has heritage become so important? It is argued that this is a consequence of that we seem to be living in a fragmented, post, post-modern society where no coherent story is told and people and places are regarded as texts and isolated narratives which are open for interpretations and re-interpretations. Some others argue that the Drang for heritage is based on economic interests and connected to the booming tourist industry, while others refer to the politicization of place. I follow Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2005, p. 30) who stress that heritage “(…) underpins the idea of continuity and its essentially modernists ethos of progressive, evolutionary social development” (2005:30) and that “Societies create emblematic landscapes in which certain artifacts acquire cultural status, because they fulfill the need to connect the present to the past in an unbroken trajectory” (Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge 2005, p. 30). Consequently, “the past provides a sense of termination in the sense that what happened in it has ended, while, finally, it offers a sequence, allowing us to locate our lives in what we see as a continuity of events. (Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge 2005, p. 30).

Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge continue to argue (with reference to Lowenthal) that “the past validates the present by conveying an idea of timeless values and unbroken lineages and through restoring lost or subverted values. Thus, for example, there are
archetypal national landscapes, which draw heavily on geographical imagery, memory
and myth (Gruffudd, 1995 quoted in Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge 2005, p. 31). In the
Diaspora literature there are many accounts describing the need to keep alive the
memories of a past landscape, recreated through years of repeated narratives that have
created an imaginary landscape. It is argued, that the belonging to this landscape becomes
fundamental for one’s Self identification. Without it, one is nobody, lost in transition
without hope.

III. Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Heritage is materialized memories (collective and individual) converted into monuments,
libraries, museums, archives, natural landscapes, shrines, churches, temples, spiritual
places. The common denominator necessary for heritage in conflict areas would be that
they are “contested sites”. This approach considers identity and power dimensions that
are always present in contested sites. With cultural heritage is meant the built
environment, i.e. secular and sacred buildings. With natural heritage is meant the natural
environment (landscape) cultivated or/and uncultivated. The focus is on the perception
and use of place.

However, there is a burning question inherent in the tangible, materialized heritage. That
is: How tangible is the tangible heritage, really? The tangible heritage is about values
and authenticity, or rather the claim to authenticity. Consequently, when talking about
values, we do not only enter the domain of culture, but also the intangible heritage and
this complicates things. Let me mention one ethnographic case as an example of how
entangled the material heritage and the symbolic heritage are. According to Dawson
Munjere who refers back to ICOMOS 1995, it is said that “[For Africa] the spirit of site
takes precedence over the substance” (2004:14). Munjere’s ethnographic example comes
from the Lobi people.

To the 160,000 Lobi people of south-west Burkina Faso, the imagery of the village is more
important than the physical fabric. The centre of the village is the dithil or earthen altar whose
authority defines the territorial unit. Lessons learnt from nature, and parallels between the spiritual
world and reality influence the architecture of the buildings. An iron rod on the roof picks up
alarm signals and passes them in turn to the ancestral objects in the living area. The ancestors in
turn alert the altars outside. The entire system is directed to the earthen altar which is the supreme guarantor of the community as represented by a tree under which a heap of stones symbolically embodies all evil that could befall the inhabitants (2004:14).

How is this to be interpreted? Munjere connects authenticity to the above case and follows a line of thought laid down by Herb Stovel who argues that authenticity is a way of perceiving “truthfulness” and the “completeness” of values attributed to the heritage. In this way, the Lobi case would be a “testimony that the real truth lay in intangible heritage” (2004:14). I will comment on both concepts (truth and authenticity) used in his reasoning. First however I will comment on the text as an ethnographic text. The Lobi culture in this text seems to me to be presented as something static. It is not a thick description in the Geertzian sense; it is a tableau lacking the necessary reflexivity that must be demanded of a modern ethnographic text. One must ask oneself: How representative is this description of the present cultural praxis? Is the interlocutor maybe the eldest man in the village, guarding a dead heritage no longer valid for the younger generations (who might have been more interested to find out if the researchers’ laptop could be connected to internet). Let us not fall into the trap of making the indigenous and local people exotic by presenting their heritage as something totally different from ours – the “others” heritage.

In regard of my other consideration, truth and truthfulness, my line of thought is; to perceive truthfulness is not a problem. One can perceive what ever one wants. But truth per se is problematic even if one is not a post-modernist. There are truths, I believe, because there are facts, even in social science. Truth “possesses very considerable practical utility”, as Harry G. Frankfurt (2006:15) expresses it. Every functioning society must be able to operate with some kind of truth. Following this line, the Lobi find truth in the spiritual connectedness to the land and the forefathers who warn and protect the village from evil.

Both truth and authentic aspects are crucial for our understanding of how heritage might be connected to reconciliation as the latter is strongly connected to justice and peace.
IV. The Use of Heritage in Reconciliation Processes: Terror Haza

As discussed above the concept of heritage embraces politicized meanings, power reasoning, institutionalized and materialized memories of three temporal orders and symbolic expressions of identity. The heritage concept has strong similarities to the cultural concept and both can be said to be everywhere and is used actively. In this section I will elaborate on the use value of heritage—the practice of heritage as an element in transition and reconciliation processes. I will present one ethnographic case and relate it to heritage in regard of a transition and reconciliation process.

The House of Terror in Budapest

The use of heritage as part of a nationalistic enterprise, does not exclude the telling of pain, horror, human suffering and degradation caused by wicked ideologies. It is even that “..the past as rendered through heritage also promotes the burdens of history, the atrocities, errors and crimes of the past….” (Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge 2005, p.31). The atrocities have become the heritage. Around the world there are many museums and heritage sites recognizing the evil deeds of war on mankind and heritage.7

Since the turn of this century, there is a museum trend that focuses on reconstruction of sites where evil has been carried out. Many new museums have been inaugurated recently aiming at both the tourist industry but also as a purgatory for the local people. These museums and sites have been a big success and people are coming in thousands. Another way to move forward is, as Duffy (2001) points out, the opening of human rights museums, which also have come in vogue. So far they are not as many as the prison

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7 The most prominent and frequent ones are the holocaust museums: there are 61 holocaust museums in different countries of which 24 are located in the USA (http://www.science.co.il/Holocaust-Museums.asp).
museums and the museums of torture, but they will certainly increase in number within the short future. My ethnographic case will be The Museum of Terror in Budapest.

*House of Terror* (also known as *The Museum of Terror*) in Budapest is located on Andressy Avenue No. 60., which is one of the main boulevards in the city [http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/index_2.html](http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/index_2.html). The museum is founded and run by the Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society. It opened in February 2002 in the authentic house that harbored first the Fascists and then the Communist secret police. The house was renovated and redesigned to be adjusted to the needs of a museum. It tells about the evils carried out by Fascists and Communists alike who under the same roof operationalized their oppression of the people. These two ideologies operated in the same physical space following each other in time, using the same detestable methods. When entering the museum, which is located in the authentic, although to a large extent reconstructed house, the visitor meets a room whose walls are covered to the ceiling with black and white photos of men and women. These are the victims. But around the corner there is another wall covered with photos of men and women, with their full names, birth and when appropriate death dates. The visitor is not given an explanation and might as I did, assume those were also victims. My gaze was that of pity. But turning around the corner the museum presents a text with an explanation. The photos showed the perpetrators; they were displayed for the visitor, to see, recognize and judge. The museum argues that they have chosen to present the perpetrators because regardless of system and ideology, no system can function without people assisting and working with the system to do its dirty work. In the exhibition, there is a video film showing an actor first putting on a uniform, then undressing and changing to civilian clothes, opening a door, walking out of the room. The video is called “Changing clothes”. The museum explains that this is what happened: the perpetrators put on the appropriate uniform regardless of color; did his/her wicked deeds and undressed when the period was over and walked out in society as if nothing had happened. This behavior is described by Hannah Arendt who noticed that the most striking thing about the Nazi Adolf Eichmann during his trial was his “thoughtlessness”

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8 The original house was more or less destroyed after the Soviet occupation.
and “cliché-ridden language” (1978, p. 4). He insisted until the end that he was without guilt; he had only followed orders as a good bureaucrat.

As a Swede brought up with a view of personal integrity as almost sacred, I have anyhow come to the conclusion that the House of Terror in Budapest does the right thing. When I returned to the room of photographs my gaze was no longer that of pity, but of dissociation and repudiation. My understanding had traveled the hermeneutic circle, but I also looked around and wondered if there were any relatives present who looked at a family member on the wall and how they felt about that. My gaze had widened and included a wider range of actors, which would not have been the case, if only the victims’ photos had been displayed. From a heritage point of view, the evil deeds of some of the members of a society also make up the common heritage of a people. But to tell or not to tell the horror story is an important question to dwell on for a society with such a past. We know there are cultures that practice the art of “silence” in dealing with conflicts as described in the cultural anthropological study of the Iraqw in the Karatu district in Tanzania (Hagberg 2001), but more research is needed in regard of the relationship between memory, transition and reconciliation.

In what way does the House of Terror as a cultural heritage contribute to the transition and the reconciliation process of Hungarian society? Although, the museum uses technical means to achieve emotional engagement, I find that the collective memory presented in the House of Terror is about knowledge in a Durkheimian sense - it is an act of classifying and seeing the world and not only as a way of providing communal solidarity through spiritual cleansing. The photos function as facts about the past that single out individuals and not only the highest military leaders, but the guy next door. The gaze of the visitor is guided towards recognition, evaluation and moral judgment which could lead to satisfaction and even peace of mind on the victims’ part. Imagine your mother was picked up by a large black car with curtains that always arrived in the early morning. (The car is part of the display of the museum). All the people in the neighborhood knew that when you get in that car, you will never come back. And all knew that your neighbor was in charge of the whole thing. By looking at the photographs
and being able to say, yes, my neighbor is guilty, the world knows and will always know, my mother did not die in vain, could be the beginning of a healing process. It is the moral dimension that is important here, a dimension that cultural anthropologists so far have argued is totally determined by culture, but according to the latest research in cognitive evolution, March Hauser (2007) argues that we as human beings have evolved a “moral instinct” which is a universal feature of our mind that should be “deeper” than any cultural construct, although it is shaped by the cultural frame in which we are brought up. This moral instinct guides us at a very early age to recognize when we, or others, are unfairly treated. Furthermore, in cognitive experiments, it has been shown, that when one of the parties in a negotiation game cheats, the others prefer to lose all, instead of granting the cheater anything (Hauser 2007). Among us human beings, thus, there seems to exist a strong need for moral justice and if cultural heritage can capture and convert this to a vehicle for healing without becoming vulgar or sentimental much has been gained in a reconciliation process.

The exhibitions and the building, which is constructed as a monument over the victims, probably have a profound impact on Hungarian society and the visiting foreign tourists by engaging them to reflect on how we best could contribute to the implementation and sustainability of universal human rights. There was however in 2006 an uneven distribution of visitors. The main bulk of visitors were tourists from abroad. The other main group of visitors was Hungarians who lived in and close to Budapest, who visited the museum much more than people from the rest of Hungary. It is difficult to say how this fact influences the depth and scope of a reconciliation process, because this uneven distribution of visitors from Hungary might be an expression of class differences assuming there is a stronger gathering of intellectuals and middle-class people in Budapest. It is well-known from museum studies that the most frequent museum visitor is a resourceful person with economic, cultural and social capital in the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu.

Finally, we have to deal with one major problem and that is where to draw the line between who was or who was not participating in the oppression. When I discussed the
display of the House of Terror with people in Europe the reactions were manifold. I recall
one Frenchman working in Brussels who contextualized the display and said: my father
was a judge during the Nazi time and he was forced to participate in the system. He tried
as much as possible to manipulate it, but there is always a limit to it. The question is:
should his father’s photograph be put on the wall?

Let me finish by remembering the quotation at the beginning of this text; never
underestimate the emotional force of symbolic forms.

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