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A map of the Arctic published in Amsterdam in 1606 (from G. Mercator & J. Hondius, Atlas, Amsterdam 1606).

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This book offers a substantial reading for contemporary experts on cultural heritage, who are expected to be up to date on current research, who face better-informed citizens than ever before and who as trustees have to act quickly, competently and cost-effectively. Since the early 1990s research has been enriched by a more reflective and dynamic concept of cultural heritage than previously.

This anthology of texts, originating from a conference, has a rich thematic introduction, where the editors attempt to frame its purpose. We are told on p. 11 that there is already an extensive literature concerning the development of cultural heritage preservation and its prevalent value criteria. The intention is to use these texts as a basis for new alternative forms of such preservation. This is not to be done by providing concrete preservation instruments or tools but by stimulating a critical as well as a constructive reflection on what constitutes a cultural heritage, what values it embraces, how it is perceived, and what the current consequences are for its preservation. That is, how cultural heritage is perceived, shaped and preserved.

This is followed by 15 chapters in which more general issues are discussed against an empirical background. Most of the contributors are Norwegian experts, but a few Danish and one Swedish researcher have also contributed. All the chapters are written in their author's native language.

The theoretical orientation of the texts leans towards a general social constructivist concept of cultural heritage that has, at least rhetorically and reflectively, replaced the previously predominant essentialist perception in which the objectivity of these aesthetic and cultural history values were taken for granted. Within this framework an exciting variety of tracks of reflection are presented, in most cases elucidated with refreshingly and rewardingly concrete examples. I will highlight some of the most interesting of these reflective tracks.

The impact of the concept of an existence and strength of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) is evident. It adheres to a tradition emanating from Michel Foucault’s power and discourse analysis which focuses on the power of knowledge and language in shaping reality. The paradigmatic cultural heritage research reference is to Laurajane Smith’s work Uses of Heritage, from 2006. The concept, which has had
a great impact on cultural heritage studies in recent years, may seem to constitute an adequate description of the hegemony exercised by formally authorized cultural heritage over the interpretation of landscapes and of the past. One advantage of this concept is its usefulness as a framework within which it is possible to compare fairly different empirical examples (see Hammami 2012).

There are, however, several articles that point out how more complex exchanges make it difficult both to identify a single predominant discourse and to establish how strongly it affects perceptions and actions. The circulation of concepts and values between different perceptions and actors with different logics of action appears clearly in Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen’s article on the Viking heritage and in Leidulf Mydland’s account of the establishment of “Olavsrosa,” a NGO quality assessment of “heritage offerings” in Norway. The way in which popular usages twist and displace official usage makes it less productive to use AHD in order to identify official actions.

In one of the longest and most interesting articles in the anthology Knut Fageraas describes how the establishment of a cultural heritage possessing the strongest claim to universality, a UNESCO world heritage site, in this case the Vega Islands in Northern Norway, had such a powerful effect on earlier officially protected cultural landscapes and monuments as well as on local action, despite its non-existent administrative power. Thanks to the extreme strength of support and legitimacy, community self-understanding and action horizons have been restructured. It is highly unlikely that any interested party or even coherent logic lay behind this transformation. It was and is rather an ongoing result of a series of situational adaptations and negotiations in a complex cultural and socio-economic ecology.

In her article, Anne Sætren argues that new forms of support for agricultural heritage preservation have emerged in spite of the current AHD. Naturally, it depends on how the discourse is identified. If its meaning is extended to include rural Norwegian community-based nationalism, it will be totally in keeping with the new support forms.

My comments reveal that the value of AHD as a theoretical starting point can easily become the opposite, that is a rather blunt tool for analysis, which suffers from both the strength and the weaknesses of structuralist and discursively established power concepts. The approach is somewhat arbitrary and difficult to delimit, which renders these concepts hard to test empirically and turns them into blunt instruments for understanding the actual strength of different ideas in forming perception and action. It seems hard to draw general conclusions about how far the
strength and type of relations between public and popular actors is immediately dependent on where the public institution is located. Sometimes the relationship remains strong, while at other times it weakens.

Another way of studying cultural heritage is to view it as series of performative acts, as illustrated in several articles. Lothar Diem conducts a general discussion of exchanges, while Bodil Axelsson demonstrates how the artistic configuration in two heavily institutionalized cultural heritage environments adds owner ideals that contrast with collective cultural heritage ownership, because artists hold both moral rights and copyright to their works.

This is a conflict between different logics which may increasingly come to the fore because conscious aestheticization of cultural heritage experiences and intermedia references to music, film and authorship are gaining ground in the cultural heritage sphere.

Another track includes references to Bruno Latour, where the strength of material objects, as “actants,” and network mobilization of action offer a more materialistic and social approach which is more easily attached to an earlier more essentialist appreciation of the value and strength of both artifacts and buildings. This is discussed by Elin Rose Myrvoll in terms of affordances in a phenomenological tradition. In the internal cultural heritage terminology this emerges as the issue of how to perceive the relation between material and immaterial cultural heritage. Several writers, like Joel Taylor, argue that, instead of representing two opposite fundamental values, these are two aspects of every cultural heritage, because both a material bearer of some kind and an immaterial meaning production are needed in order to create a cultural heritage.

The next track consists of the field of tension between, on the one hand, securing and preserving the original authenticity of the cultural heritage and, on the other, a usage which inevitably transforms, exhausts, or develops it. Where should the lines be drawn? Torunn Selberg asks whether the difference between medieval and contemporary pilgrimages, whose journey—rather than the relics—is the goal, involves a falsification of the tradition or is necessary in order to communicate the wanderer’s reflexivity in an authentic way.

Criticism both of AHD and of culture constructivism in general is implicit in Terje Brattli’s argumentation that cultural heritage possesses a more fundamental and timeless dimension which lays an apolitical foundation, using materiality as a bridge, for forming ontological ties over time and across political differences of opinion. The “joint action room” establishes a present time and an arena for playing out motives of self-interest. This may be viewed as a downtoning synthesis between the old objectivist
and an altogether constructivist perception of cultural heritage.

As a whole, the anthology presents approaches that are essential for replacing an older layer of literature that looked for absolute values of an aesthetic or cultural history character. Although offering material for problematizing reflection, to what extent do these approaches support the emergence of new constructive forms of preservation? There is a lack of a comparative approach towards evaluating the extent of the writers’ own conclusions. How valid are the Vega finds? How are Vikings regarded as a cultural heritage in history cultures other than the Norwegian? In her discussion, Grete Swensen tries to explain the differences in how the cultural heritage potential of prisons evolves, but this is done only in a Norwegian context, which is radically and intriguingly different from, for example, the Australian context. However, Carsten Paludan-Müller, in his comparison between various well-known world heritages for the purpose of discovering whether they are of a universalist or a hybrid character, feels quite depressed to find that they essentially reflect national ideals and narratives. Perhaps this is what is to be expected from a cultural heritage that is fished out by means of national political processes.

The major question to put, perhaps both to this and several of the other articles, is rather what effect cultural heritage experiences have on different users. Do they contribute to developing a more creative, tolerant and conflict-solving culture or not? There is no self-evident answer to the effect that some forms are better than others per se. A series of studies would be required to demonstrate the premises on which a cultural heritage makes the impact expected by initiators and actors at all levels, ranging from the UN via nations and regions down to local communities. Only then will we have a foundation that will enable us to state the terms in which the development of the current cultural heritage preservation will improve related values—and not the opposite.

REFERENCES


Peter Aronsson
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Linnaeus University
Sweden
peter.aronsson@lnu.se