Paradoxes of Patrimonialization

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Essay – September 30, 2004

Using several historical lines, the Belgian sociologist Rudi Laermans analyses the present 'heritage regime'. Actualism, which so dominates the modern era, is characterized by an emphasis on forgetting. The present focus on heritage seems to contradict this. Yet stressing the autonomous value of the past in fact reinforces the division between past and present. According to Laermans they are two sides of the same coin. The often expressed criticism of Disneyfication merely diverts attention.

A lot changes in a man's life. The gentleman regularly went to look at the landscape marred by motorways, because he knew how it had looked in the past. A curious habit.
Armando, De haperende schepping */ 'The Faltering Creation', 2003*

In Cologne the famed Dom is merely a good stone's throw from the train station. In something like five minutes you walk from the station to the majestic church building the Cologne tourism office likes to pride itself on. Those five minutes on foot bridge a huge gap in time, as Boris Groys rightly notes in 'Die Stadt auf Durchreise' ('Travelling Through the City'), one of the essays in *Logik der Sammlung* ('The Logic of Collecting'). While the architecture of the Cologne train station cannot really be termed contemporary, it is nevertheless vaguely recognizable as 'of our time'. Moreover, we would not be surprised if the station building were to be partially demolished or if an entirely new station were to be built somewhere else. The Dom, on the other hand, seems timeless, indeed eternal, and alludes to an era other than our own. 'The monumental in the city is thus for us the other, the inaccessible, the displaced in time – and therefore the invariable in space', writes Groys. 'The Dom of Cologne can be destroyed, like a utopian city, but it cannot be altered.'

The difference between, in Groys's imagery, the monumental and the changeable city is not factually given but rather actively produced. Over the last decades the gap between old and new urbanity, the historic city centre and the rest of the public space has increased, by the generalization of what is officially known as patrimony or heritage policy. We know that a portion of the built environment is quite often designated as historical patrimony in order to increase the tourist appeal of a city. In the essay quoted above, Groys goes one step further. Rather than the urban patrimony awaiting the tourist gaze, it is the reverse that takes place, according to Groys: 'it is only tourism that creates these monuments, it is only because of tourism that a city is monumentalized, it is only in passing through the city that the ever-flowing, constantly changing everyday urban environment is turned into a monumental image of eternity'. This stimulating premise by Groys is rather arbitrary. It ignores, after all, the whole heritage or patrimony machine, the dynamic network of legal regulations, government subsidies and divergent interests, that each time selects specific artefacts from the past, transforms them into workable political and administrative dossiers, with official protection and preservation as the final result. Without these the tourist gaze would simply have a lot less to look at. This gaze, in quite a few cases of patrimony policy, serves as an implicit premise and indirectly contributes to it. But in any case heritage production and heritage tourism are two different things, even if one undeniably implies the other.

The usual patrimony or heritage practice has very direct effects on how time and history presently manifest themselves within the urban environment. For the time being, along with the officially commemorated city area, a usually far larger section of the city emerged, without a 'stone memory', often even without a past as such. Particularly in new-build districts, as in post-war suburbia, there are few if any architectural signs that refer to the past. Nor does one find many symbols from the present intended for the long run, with a view to creating something like a spatial memory. The public space is all provisional; it exudes no supratemporality or monumentality – and when it exceptionally does so, the constructions seem contrived and rhetorical. In short, designating a small portion of the urban space as patrimony underscores the manifest lack of memory of the greater part of the built environment of the twentieth century, especially that of the post-war era. Is the visit to the 'monumental city' supposed to compensate for, if not legitimize, living and working in the 'changeable city'?

There is another paradox: the monumental city is made to stand outside historical time; it is made to be invariable. Buildings, squares or monuments are, as it were, temporally frozen, usually after a thorough cleaning (which rejuvenates them) and often after restoration (which amounts somewhat to artificial aging). Future interventions are unacceptable and are made almost legally impossible as soon as a relic is designated as official patrimony. It is precisely this temporal conservation that is the clearest indication of the active transformation of an artefact from the past, whether material or not, into a piece of heritage or patrimony (I will use the two words henceforth as synonyms). It literally becomes something else; it becomes trapped as a 'witness to the past' in an autonomous zone outside of time, strictly guarded professionally as well as legally. This is in fact probably the basic operation of every form of 'patrimonialization', or to use an even uglier neologism, 'heritaging'. The advantage of these verb forms is that they immediately dispel the illusion that the heritage character of an artefact from the past is simply something observed. This is manifestly not the case. Something is designed as declared heritage, and that is undeniably a performative act of language and not a neutral observation.

A third paradox is that the practice of patrimonialization continually appeals to 'the importance of the past to the present'. But nothing and no one can guarantee that the officially commemorated city area can count on a living community of remembrance. It is one thing to preserve and restore; it is another to remember – in the sense of 'think of'– the past through relics. The inventoried and classified, often legally protected monumental

city is of course never completely without memory. It has at minimum a memory of use, which probably has a collective character to a significant degree. Striking structures from the past function as shared landmarks in the otherwise entirely singular memories of all who live, work or regularly consumes in, for example, a historic city centre.

This memory of use, however, is like any normally functioning individual memory. It mostly does not remember reflexively or consciously; it pays little if any attention to its surroundings to the extent that this is familiar and seems normal. The user of a familiar environment acts without thinking, if not distractedly 'Nothing more invisible in the world', an ironic Musil once observed of monuments that are meant to make the living remember the dead – and he was speaking, of course, of the average city user. This user is inattentive and a few stereotypical images are enough for him to be going on with. Active city users concentrate on their own current affairs; they constantly *forget*, therefore, any monumentality or supratemporality in the built environment. They want a coffee or a beer, are hurrying to their work or home. Everyday chores turn the much-vaunted splendour of the historic city centre into at most a fleetingly perceived scenery (or into a source of traffic irritation ...). Anyone who finds a monument or building worth seeing, admiringly gazes up and down a street or takes in a square is perhaps an elderly resident *flaneur*, but more probably a passing tourist.

The French Revolution

We now find it self-evident that a building, square or monument be immovable heritage (there is even such a thing as world heritage). However, this self-evidence has a history inextricably linked to the more general process of modernization. Two lines can be more or less discerned in this history, as Françoise Choay shows in *L'allégorie du patrimoine* ('The Allegory of Patrimony'). The first and older line, involves, at first glance, an unusual stake: how to deal with the relics of a past that has been emphatically rejected? This question was faced soon after 1789 by the heirs of the French Revolution. What to do with the seized churches and their contents? What to do with the mansions, castles, artworks, furniture of the royal family and the countless nobles in exile? The revolutionaries wanted to consciously forget – but the public, material traces of the officially abolished past, among other things, served as the well-known 'return of the repressed', as insistent symptoms of a rejected historical reality. This led, predictably, to an attack on the symptoms: some seized properties were destroyed, including during the officially sanctioned wave of vandalism that followed the arrest of the former king during his attempt flight in 1792. This is not the whole story, however, for a significant part of the symbolically contaminated legacy of movable objects ended up in the Louvre, perhaps the first museum in the modern sense of the word (the idea of turning the Louvre into a public museum, incidentally, was already circulating during the last years of the *Ancien Régime*). For buildings, monuments and other immovable artefacts, rules were drawn up for separating the important from the unimportant, to distinguish what was worth preserving from what might fall in the cracks of history.

The post-revolutionary French state inaugurated, under the flag of the notion of patrimony, a centralist policy with a strong nationalistic stamp. 'The rich past' was politically and socially wrong, yet this was not necessarily reflected in the preserved patrimony. The material relics of the past could be subsumed into a different genealogy, that of the people, nation and nation-state. Their historical or documentary value was of course not denied, but as pieces of heritage they were part of a discourse different from scientific historiography (at the same time, this in itself during the nineteenth century very often tended to legitimize the mythical genealogy of a nation-state). The official patrimony lent the nation-state, in the first place, an imaginary family tree, and in addition aesthetic grandeur. It could therefore contribute to a sense of citizenship and public responsibility: it was to elicit respect for their nation-state among 'the people'. 'All these precious objects that were kept far from the people or were displayed only to impress or command respect;

all these riches belong to the people. Henceforth they shall be used for public development; they shall serve the education of lawmaker-philosophers, of enlightened magistrates, of evolved farmers, of artists whose genius shall be fruitfully devoted to celebrating the successes of a great people in an appropriate manner', as it was described in the *Instruction sur la manière d'inventorier et de conserver* ('Instructions on inventory and conservation') of 1793.

The French Revolution was not a one-off political event. Modernity and political revolution, as we know, are two sides of the same coin. Sometimes an uprising was driven by the utopian possibility of a total political upheaval, other times the struggle for political independence took priority, and still other times both motives were combined. But whatever its stakes, every revolution was inevitably followed by the moment of 'the return of the repressed'. Political institutions could be profoundly modified from one day to the next; this was not possible for the material past, nor for the customs, traditions and other forms of what is termed immaterial heritage. The public material traces of the past were just there, as simultaneously eloquent and silenced remnants of the officially abolished 'old days'. Their former symbolic value was no longer recognized, but in a post-revolutionary patrimony regime they usually acquire two new dominant meanings. Patrimonialization, in this context, as noted, was primarily a process of nationalization, literally and figuratively, on the one hand, and the aestheticization of the inherited material past, on the other. This relationship with 'the past tense' is hardly a past perfect tense, rather the opposite.

Ruskin

The second line in the treatment of relics from the past emerged in England and is inextricably linked to the names of John Ruskin and William Morris. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, theirs was a broad response to the erosion, if not the destruction of landscapes – deemed picturesque – , buildings and monuments in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The process of industrialization, however, created, in a broader sense, a rupture between past and present that was perceived as fundamental. On the one hand, the industrial capital production methods created a new architectural reality: factories, industrial towns, proletarianization and concentration of workers in urban ghettos. On the other hand they strongly undermined the value of manual labour and the skills of artisans, of tradition and community life. The 'new civilization', a term widely used at the time, in turn created a crisis of remembrance. Unlike a revolutionary regime, it did not consciously reject the pre-industrial past, however. Instead it sufficed to ignore it and push it aside: what was useless was by definition economically valueless, and 'therefore' the past deserved neither attention nor acknowledgement; 'therefore' it could be undermined, transformed, even destroyed, without nostalgia or regret. It was precisely this ostensibly neutral, but in fact brutal showing together of instrumental rationality, market value and social worth that the romantically inspired cultural criticism was to keep fighting, in the name of an elevated concept of art as well as of a historical awareness presented as inescapable.

'We can live without architecture, worship our God without her, but without her we could not remember', Ruskin remarks somewhere in 'The Lamp of Memory', the famed six chapter of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). The idea that the built environment plays a crucial role in the collective memory was certainly not new in the mid-nineteenth century; it was a commonly accepted notion in architectural history. Ruskin, however, takes it quite literally, which partly explains his committed campaign for the preservation – but without restorations! – of sites or buildings. For in Ruskin's vision the built environment safeguards a quasi-direct contact between past and present. Through statues and monuments, simple houses and showy palaces, intact landscapes and city centres, the past would thus speak to us quasi-directly, often with multiple voices but always forcefully. Ruskin coins a neologism for this, 'voicefulness'. In short, architectural

relicts are always more than purely material artefacts from the past. Along with their presence in the present, one or more meanings from the past are represented as well. Churches tell how people used to worship God, dwellings tell how our ancestors decorated their houses, city districts show how earlier generations shaped social distinctions.

According to Ruskin the built environment speaks out loud, and for this very reason it must be treated with care: a conversation partner is owed at least this much respect. But why could he hear the 'voice of the past' in a collection of stones when so many were deaf to it? Why did he have to convince his contemporaries that there was anything to listen to at all and that this was why old country houses or cottages were worth preserving? Ruskin naturally was well aware that the indifference to the language of the past he condemned was closely related to the new industrial context. Modernity produced practical and future-oriented people, who had neither time nor inclination for past conditions and their sedimentation in stone or wood. They did not mind a hitherto untouched landscape being covered in the soot of a factory, or an elegant country estate making way for a profitable mine operation. Ruskin and his allies would not accept this basic oblivion motivated not by political rejection but by indifference and profit. To them respecting the relicts of the past was less a matter of nationalism or aesthetics – although the latter was of course involved – and more a *moral* question in and of itself.

In Ruskin's wide-ranging observations one can indeed detect a basic attitude that leavens thinking on heritage and patrimony – which is incidentally primarily a question of action – to this day. It acknowledges that the past is over and done with, and that it offers neither lessons nor identities to modern or contemporary people. Unlike the nationalistically inspired forms of patrimonialization, this second line is neither didactic nor pedagogical. Relicts of the past are instead valuable in themselves, in fact good in a moral sense. They deserve regard and respect purely because of their temporal origins, and therefore an acknowledgement of their preservation is a moral minimum. In short, the cultural or symbolic distance between past and present is duly recognized, but at the same time moralized. This produces a genuine paradox: current living circumstances tend to favour forgetting, but this should not be allowed to define our general living condition; there must be a domain in which we emphatically remember, in fact *honour*, traces of the past. In this regard heritage production and heritage tourism are evidence, in the first place, of the existence of a specific morality with quasi-sacred traits, one that attempts to counter the dominant oblivion by asking for a minimum of respect, even piety, toward relicts of the past. This patrimonial morality, as is often the case in moral communication, has been propagated as self-evident and forms one of the cornerstones of the official heritage discourse. Arguments are lacking – but the entire heritage sector has always suffered from a remarkable lack of theorization and reflection.

Distanced past

The patrimony or heritage exposition reduces the past to an autonomous object of moral valuation, with no direct links to the present and with a denial of the always specific historical context in which the preserved artefacts originate. It is in fact not about the individual objects, although, for example, every preservation dossier likes to set out the historical particularity of the defended artefact. The deciding factor is the positive and morally charged valuation of the Past, with a capital P – and this can, in essence, be directed toward any era. A heritage tourist in fact admires the past as such and looks at all architectural relics in an old city centre without any discrimination; nor does he find it odd that a museum route starts in Ancient Egypt and suddenly ends somewhere halfway through the nineteenth century. It is precisely this general nature of the patrimonial regime, reflected by the breadth of the heritage sector, that differentiates it from the scientific treatment of the past. Historiography studies, if possible value-free, in essence all that has ever been the case. It views the past as an immense history, as an unfathomable see of temporal events among which connections may exist, but which in any case are datable and locatable. Place and date form the two basic co-ordinates of any form of scientific historiography; it is simply inconceivable without them. The heritage regime, on the other hand, produces its own object out of an isolated positive valuation of the past. Usually this refers in part to the time of history and historiography, but both the production and the reception of heritage artefacts are ruled by the simultaneously homogeneous and abstract, non-event time of the past as pure *pastness*.

The heritage regime has another salient characteristic, to which I have already alluded several times. It places the past at a distance, and literally: it makes it worth showing and seeing; it creates a gigantic collection of visual attractions. In this collection, periodization or dating is far less important than the simple fact that it contains relicts of the past. No direct connection is made, on the contrary. The placing of old objects behind glass, the all-to-familiar signs in museums admonishing 'do not touch!' or the temporal freezing, in fact, immortalizing of buildings illustrate that the past, in the patrimony regime, is literally and figuratively placed at a distance. Neither city residents nor heritage visitors have any direct connection with this *distanced past*. They live among the sanitized traces of a general 'pastness' or they admire them, without and outside built spaces – but usually without their acquiring a place in the present, without their being woven into individual biographies and thereby made current. Patrimonialization creates its own object, 'pastness', and simultaneously a huge archive that remains a dead past. The preserved past is given the utmost care, it receives a great deal of visual attention and is widely admired, even celebrated and honoured. But it usually does not function as a social or cultural memory within which remembering is synonymous with commemorating.

The Viennese art historian Alois Riegl was undoubtedly the first to see that patrimonialization amounts to both an isolated, non-historical valuation and a great distancing of the preserved past. In *Der moderne Denkmalkultus* (1903) Riegl draws a distinction between monuments, in the strict sense, and historical monuments. The former are explicitly intended as memorials, erected by a collective to remember an event, rite or conviction for itself and/or to remind coming generations of it. Historical monuments, on the other hand, are a specific invention of the Renaissance, which began to revalue highly diverse artefacts, because it saw a historical golden age reflected in them. Unlike actual monuments, these artefacts were not intended as memorials. Their value asmemory value – a notion, incidentally, that Riegl expressly employs – has in fact a predominantly cognitive character. Historical monuments, Riegl argues, can presently still be evocative in purely aesthetic terms, but they derive their value as memory value primarily from the fact that they enrich the general historic knowledge or present art-historical insights. The historical monument, however, can be enjoyed, aside from purely aesthetically or cognitively, in yet another way. *This* memory value is the '*Altertumswert*', the age value of a relic of the past. This may be of little cultural or art-historical

importance, but it can elicit a 'vaguely aesthetic' sensation in everyone because it has stood the test of time and yet bears its traces.

Riegl offers at first glance no explicit value judgement on the admiration for 'the old' he observes. At the same time, the title as well as the general tone of Riegl's essay indicates that the author, who held key positions within the Austrian historical preservation circles and thus probably expressed himself somewhat carefully, was duly aware of the moral, even quasi-sacred aspect of the phenomenon he described. Although Riegl does not emphasize it in so many words, it is logically the age value in particular that installs an unprecedented cult status on historical monuments. Riegl classifies this, among other things, in terms of a 'Stimmungswirkung' that requires no historical knowledge and makes a complete abstraction of the historicity of the concrete object. Even the object itself 'evaporates in this third class of monuments into a necessary evil', says Riegl. 'The monument remains nothing more than an unavoidable sensory substrate to elicit in its spectator that sentimental effect that arouses in modern people the idea of the systematic cycle of creation and decay, of the emergence of the individual out of the universal and its slow naturally imperative reabsorption into the universal.'

Riegl's age value, let there be no doubt about it, does not coincide with what I earlier called 'pastness'. Riegl's characterizations make it clear that in his view the age value cannot be separate from the patina of an artefact of the past, the presence of visible traces of aging. 'Pastness', on the other hand, is that supratemporal and non-historical zone in which material objects – whatever state they may be in – end up after being declared to be heritage. It is the specific temporality of museums as well as of buildings that, paradoxically enough, is regarded as historic. For that matter, it is anything but original to separate 'pastness' and historicity, heritage and history or historiography. Since the large-scale public access to built and other patrimony starting in the late 1970s, there have been endless complaints about the staging of the past as spectacle, about inauthenticity and 'fakelore', about historical simulacra. But is it useful to oppose the heritage regime and its reductionist valuation of 'the old' to the scientific historiography and its neutral concept of history? What do we achieve by continually setting the 'pastness' of the patrimonial discourse against the past? Such a basic cognitive critique unmasks the homogeneous time of 'pastness' as false, but ignores the underlying act of valuation. The specific nature of this act has a great deal, if not everything, to do with the modern regime of historicity. This last expression – coined by the French historian François Hartog – alludes to the way in which a group or culture deals with its own past from the standpoint of the present, and more generally, to its relationship with time and temporality.

With modernity emerged a new regime of historicity. In some social contexts, especially those of the intimate and family relationships, the premodern regime based on the possibility of a direct symbolic exchange between present and past, still reigns. A dead parent or deceased partner is actively remembered; he or she often continues to structure or give meaning to everyday activities and is therefore never entirely dead, as long a living memory links the remembered with feelings, actions or objects. In almost all other spheres of life, on the other hand, forgetting, intentional or unintentional, dominates, with or without revolutionary credos (it has been the latter for some time, which partly legitimizes the diagnosis of postmodernism). Economics and education still count in terms of one year – the annual account, the school year, the academic year – but the news coverage of the mass media on, for instance, the radio has a duration of at most one hour. Between these two extremes are located the operational or functional times of most other macrosystems (this is sometimes different for their archives – but that is why it is a matter of archiving). Forgetting quickly is in short the societal rule, including in organizations, for example. To be perfectly clear: I am not arguing that a modern (or a postmodern) society undergoes something like a memory crisis. This often-cited diagnosis applies a literally one-sided and therefore questionable outlook on memory work. A memory remembers as well as forgets, and modern social memories simply have a structural tendency to forget.

This is probably nowhere as clear as in the sphere of fashion and consumption.

With its emphasis on forgetting and thus the limited importance of reminders and other traces of the past for the actual functioning of the economy, science, art, politics..., the modern regime of historicity tended from the outset toward a watershed between past and present. Perhaps the moment of postmodernity, already an archaic-sounding expression, precisely signifies exactly the semi-completion of this evolution? In any event, symbolic exchange relationships hardly exist anymore between 'then' and 'now' in our society; economic or social, cultural or technological changes have simply been happening too fast for that for some time. This temporal non-communication results in two completely opposite value regimes. That of *actualism* parallels the de facto dominance of forgetting in our society. It values change in the present, true to the motto 'to stand still is to go backward'; it praises renewal and a flexible attitude, until recently from a future-oriented faith in progress – but it is possible even without this metalegitimization: 'postmodernity = modernity minus futurism'. In actualism, at all events, change is a value in and of itself. 'New = good' and 'old = out' – this is the defiant basic morality of actualism as a value regime. The second value regime, that of patrimony and heritage, emphasizes on the contrary the autonomous value of the past. 'Old = good', and therefore it is worthwhile to preserve and protect old artefacts on the one hand and to visit and admire them on the other. Not only does our relationship to the past acquire an autonomy that often merely reinforces the dominance of forgetting and of actualism, but the moralized past also becomes an object of care and piety; it is isolated and therefore set a distance.

On the one side the present, the time of news, fashion, bank records, internet information – in short, the transient. True to the morality of actualism, it can never change fast enough, for changes are good in and of themselves. At the other end of the spectrum is the past, in the form of a massive pastness inhabited by countless artefacts 'from before'. They are carefully preserved and managed, and they are there to be looked at. The gaze of the museum visitor or heritage tourist does not bridge the gap between past and present, nor is it structured by much historical knowledge or imaginative power. But in its sheer focus on the seen, this gaze does express a specific valuation: 'that which has come to us from the past deserves respect'. This does not mean the past is also actively memorialized, remembered or made current. On the contrary, by respecting it within the isolated domain of heritage and patrimonial preservation, it is all the more easily ignored in the daily *train de vie*. Actualism and patrimonialization form two sides of the same coin – and yet another complaint about the Disneyfication of the past within the heritage regime will do nothing to change that.

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Tags

Aesthetics, Architecture, Memory, Public Domain