## Cultural contestation

Wagenaar, F.P.; Rodenberg, J.

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CHAPTER 1

# Cultural Contestation: Heritage, Identity and the Role of Government

*Jeroen Rodenberg and Pieter Wagenaar*

## Burning Flags and Toppling Generals

In the summer of 2017, Charlottesville, VA, was the scene of violent riots. The direct cause was local government's decision to remove a statue of General Robert E. Lee, which provoked a protest march of white nationalists. Human rights and anti-racism movements immediately reacted with counter-marches. In the ensuing riots, a car drove into a group of protesters, killing one and injuring nineteen. The events soon evolved into an intense national debate on the question whether Confederate monuments are 'symbols of hate or heritage' (Kenning 2017). President Donald Trump blamed both sides for the riots, publicly asking whether statues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson would be next to be toppled (Shear and Haberman 2017). Since the riots statues, plaques and even stained-glass windows depicting Confederate generals, politicians, and judges have been removed from the public space in no less than 26 cities. All in all, almost 40 monuments commemorating the Confederation have been removed by local

J. Rodenberg (✉) · P. Wagenaar
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



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administrations, acting either on their own accord or reacting to local communities' demands. In a few rare cases, they have been removed by the protesters themselves (Carbone 2017; *New York Times* 2017). Confederate flags have been burnt as well, sometimes as part of art projects aimed at opening up the debate on racism and attributes symbolizing the Confederacy (Thrasher 2015). Yet, at the same time, there seems to be a rise in repositioning dismantled monuments on privately owned lands and in erecting new ones (Tavernise 2017).

The toppling of statues is not unique to the USA. The year 2015 saw the emergence of the *#RhodesMustFall* movement in South Africa. In March of that year, a student of the University of Cape Town threw excrement at a statue of Cecil Rhodes, founder of former Rhodesia who was linked to *apartheid* by protesters. Not long after, the statue was removed by government and a nationwide discussion emerged on the ways in which society deals with monuments, which painfully symbolize racial divides (Shankar 2017).

These recent examples of iconoclasm in the USA and South Africa illustrate how statues can become focal points in processes of 'cultural contestation'. Some groups connect them to positive (hi)stories and use them as building blocks for identity formation. Others see them as witnesses to a dark (hi)story of (post)-colonialism, racism, and social exclusion, to which equally strong feelings are attached. The ensuing claims on the past, the present, and the future lead to fierce societal debates. During such intense cultural contestation, government is often explicitly looked to for guidance. Yet, the various roles it plays in such instances are understudied.

## Contested Heritage

Obviously, at the core of cultural contestation is 'cultural heritage'. In this book, which is positioned explicitly in the growing stream of critical heritage studies, heritage is defined not as 'a thing', but as a social and cultural practice, enacted by communities and individuals, in which histories are selected or rejected (compare Smith 2006). Such 'histories' can be connected to objects, landscapes, and cultural expressions and traditions.

Cultural heritage, thus, has to do with meaning-giving. Both the tangible and the intangible are meaningless in themselves. It is the (hi) stories surrounding traditions and artifacts that enact them, which is why

heritage is a social construction. When, in processes of meaning-giving, objects and cultural expressions are labeled 'heritage', conservation measures might be taken to save them for future generations. The opposite is also possible, though, when meaning-giving takes a different turn (Graham et al. 2016; Graham and Howard 2008).

As heritage has to do with selecting and neglecting (hi)stories that give meaning to objects and traditions, it is a discursive practice in which some (hi)stories become dominant and institutionalized to the exclusion of others (Hall 2005: 25; Waterton et al. 2006). Smith (2006) draws our attention to the existence of an 'Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD), arguing that it is this that constructs heritage practices and the way we perceive heritage in the Western world and even worldwide. AHD focuses on the great moments of national histories and selects tangible and intangible heritage representing exactly these. Because of this, heritage is bound up with processes of identity formation. The great histories of national pasts are not chosen without reason. They are carefully selected expressions of an envisioned national identity (Lowenthal 1985, 1998). At both national and local levels, these narratives give meaning to objects and landscapes, providing communities who relate to them with a sense of place and belongingness (see, e.g., Jones 2005; Waterton 2005). As a consequence, heritage practices have material effects in what is and what is not labeled as heritage and hence preserved or demolished. More importantly, they have social effects as well, in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

Heritage is a zero-sum game (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). There are winners and losers, in various different ways. Certain narratives are articulated and become dominant, resulting in objects and cultural traditions being authorized as heritage, at the cost of others. There are those who successfully claim heritage, and those who fail in their attempts, which results in the drawing of demarcation lines between those who belong and those who don't (Smith 2006; Waterton 2010; Graham et al. 2016).

Because there are always several, often conflicting, meanings, which are bestowed on heritage, it is always dissonant (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Heritage is claimed for different uses and with different purposes by individuals, groups, communities, nations, and states. As the heritage of one group can't be that of another, different forms of contestation come into being. Legal fights over ownership are not uncommon, not even between states as the case of the Parthenon Marbles illustrates

(Harrison 2010: 174–182). Economic considerations and the daily practical use of heritage can also be the cause of dissonance. An agricultural landscape, for example, is exactly that to farmers—a means for agricultural production—whereas the same landscape can be labeled as cultural and historical heritage by landscape historians and planners. An example of this is the discussion surrounding the placing of the Dutch *Noordoostpolder* on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Rodenberg 2015). Yet, dissonance can also flow from a heritage's troubled history. There might be feelings of unease that are inherent to it. Holocaust memorials are a prime example, and discussions can arise on how to deal with such 'dark heritage' (Logan and Reeves 2009). Dissonance runs deeper when identity formation and processes of social inclusion and exclusion come into play, as we have seen with the statues in the above.

Although heritage is always potentially contested, this contestation is not always played out. Yet, as soon as feelings of not belonging become too strong and are articulated in public debates, symbols can become focal points in processes of 'cultural contestation'. The discipline of critical heritage studies has identified many instances of this, but is none too explicit on ways of dealing with it. The political sciences do provide answers, though.

## Cultural Contestation

Political science deals with conflict resolution extensively and also with ways of solving cultural contestation. Marc Howard Ross offers a way to not only analyze contested heritage, but to also mitigate it. The concept he introduces—and which we have used in the above already—is that of 'cultural contestation'. Cultural contestation is about identities expressed in a society's symbolic landscape. This landscape consists of cultural practices, expressions, and enactments, as well as of objects. As it gives a clear message about who belongs to society and who doesn't, it reveals identity politics and politics of acceptance and rejection. Cultural expressions are vital to a group's identity, and as soon as these expressions become a threat to another group's identity, heavy contestation can occur. As said in the above, cultural expressions and objects are meaningless in themselves. It is groups in society who attribute meaning to them by constructing and articulating narratives. In cases of cultural contestation, several of these narratives are in opposition. And when that happens, emotions can run high (Ross 2007, 2009a, b).

The narratives not only depict images of the in-group, but also of the out-group. Claims of who belongs to society and who doesn't are being expressed, and the stakes are high, as inclusion in a society's symbolic landscape means access to resources and opportunities. Often, the involved parties experience it as a zero-sum game in which looking at a higher authority to resolve the matter is useless, because in many cases at least one of the involved parties doesn't acknowledge its legitimacy (Ross 2009a).

Yet, studying the symbolic landscape and the narratives giving meaning to it can still be fruitful. It brings a deeper understanding of the groups' fears and as a result some guidance for solving the problem. Narratives, after all, as Ross argues, are constructions and can therefore be reconstructed, based on shared experiences and commonalities, which these also show. Mitigation can be achieved if the parties involved are open to one another's narratives, are willing to listen, and try to construct inclusive narratives (Ross 2009a). Ross' ideas on the cultural contestation surrounding contested heritage form the starting point for all the case studies presented in this volume.

## Roles Governments Play

Heritage scholars often pay attention to government. They study the social effects of heritage policies and deal with the question of how states and governments use heritage for identity formation or to make political statements (see, e.g., Silberman 1995; Smith 2006; Waterton 2010; Harrison 2010; Laurence 2010; Bendix et al. 2012). The general image we have, however, is that in heritage studies government is rarely at the center of attention. A notable example is the volume edited by Bendix et al. (2012) comprising of ethnographic studies on the role of state bureaucracies in heritage policies and management. As far as we know, studies on the role government plays in cultural contestation are even lacking. Yet, as we have seen in the above, in political science some scholars, most notably Ross, do study it. In his work, Ross shows how governmental actors act in instances of cultural contestation. True is that he does not focus specifically on their role. Yet, even without systematically analyzing the role of government, Ross demonstrates that government, in various ways, is always involved (Ross 2007, 2009a).

In this book, we proceed where Ross has left. In the various chapters, the authors explore the different roles governmental actors play during

cultural contestation in different sociocultural contexts and political-administrative systems. Because of the variety of backgrounds of the contributors, we look at the problem from different disciplinary backgrounds. To get a better grip on the case studies presented in this volume, we use a categorization of possible governmental roles, which also functions as the structuring mechanism for the book. In the concluding chapter, we will return to this categorization and reflect on its usefulness.

The first role governmental actors can play, according to our categorization, is favoring certain expressions of heritage over others, by way of listing and subsidizing. There are instances where governments go even further than not favoring, and actively repress social values expressed through minority heritage, denying groups their heritage and identity. The first part of the volume comprises five chapters exploring cases in which it is this role of government that causes cultural contestation. Maags explores how the political-administrative design of the Chinese state, characterized as 'multi-level governance', might be the cause of more subtle forms of resistance. By looking at the formulation of heritage policies of Lancang County, she illustrates how the administrative fragmentation resulted in both administrative contestation and cultural contestation, with a threatened local identity at its core.

William Logan asks attention for the uses of heritage by the Myanmar government. The way Myanmar government deals with ethnic minorities makes it hard to arrive at more inclusive conceptions of heritage. At the root of the problem lies the fact that heritage plays such an important role in the country's nation-building.

Comparable processes have taken place in Bangladesh, as Rumana Hashem argues in her contribution. She explores the causes and consequences of a 27-year ethnic conflict between the Bengali and Jumma people. It is by depreciating certain heritage that the successive governments of Bangladesh have created conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Deniz Ikiz Kaya and Mehmet Calhan look at Turkish heritage policies in a historical perspective. Since the establishment of Turkey as a nation-state, its government has used heritage as an instrument for nation-building. However, this could only be done by de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing certain heritage sites. The authors reveal government's role in the ensuing cultural contestation by looking at Greek Orthodox religious heritage.

Michelle Tisdel too takes a historical policy perspective, when looking at Cuban cultural policies from 1902 to the present. During the Republican

Era (1902–1959) and under Socialist rule, Cuban governments persecuted Afro-Cuban religious practitioners. Nowadays, museums showcase Afro-Cuban religious heritage, promoting it as a symbol of cultural blending.

Desiree Valadares zooms in on cultural contestation surrounding natural landscapes. She examines how at Forillon National Park in Quebec government hides the fact that the park's former inhabitants were removed from their homes and how the history of national park policy works socially exclusive.

The second part of the volume deals with contestation on a supranational level. Central in the contributions is the way the use of heritage can lead to interstate contestation. Using Famagusta, Cyprus, as a case study, Carlos Jaramillo examines the difficulties this city faces in formulating heritage policies, due to the heritage system created by UNESCO and the UN. The refusal to recognize the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus as a state by these supranational institutions has prevented the discussion on the future of its cultural heritage. Jaramillo shows how dominant views on cultural heritage at the international level are intertwined with political contestation.

Biljana Volchevska explores the relationship between heritage production and heritage destruction as two coexisting processes at a time of political conflict. She looks at Macedonia, an unstable, multiethnic state, to demonstrate how the obsession with heritage production is related to cultural contestation with Greece.

Marja van Heese discusses what is perhaps the most extreme form of contestation, zooming in on the war over Nagorno Karabakh. She examines cultural contestation between former Soviet states, focussing on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the period 1992–1994. The cease-fire, signed on May 5, 1994, formally gives sovereignty over the enclave to Azerbaijan. Yet, Armenian armed forces are in control. Several reports mention the destruction of cultural heritage in the district. According to Azerbaijani authorities, traces of Azerbaijani cultural heritage are erased, for example, by the replacing of Azeri inscriptions on monuments by Armenian ones.

Ioan Trifu explores the ways in which dark heritage has led to cultural contestation between Japan and South Korea. In 2015, Japan announced that it would recommend nineteenth-century industrial heritage for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The South Korean government was quick to point out that at these industrial sites Korean civilians had been made to do forced labor during the Second World

War. This attempt at heritage listing, therefore, quickly leads to political conflict between the two states.

The last part of the volume, and of our categorization, consists of four chapters focusing on cases in which governments try to mitigate cultural contestation. Emilia Pawłusz examines the attempt of the Estonian state to reconcile itself with its Soviet past and bring together the different ethnic groups that inhabit the country.

Elizabeth Kryder-Reid and Larry Zimmerman also look at parks. They describe how over the last several years at two government-owned parks in Indiana debates have been held between different groups of stakeholders. An analysis of the debates shows the way these stakeholders deal with their conflicting concepts of cultural heritage.

In the last chapter, Pieter Wagenaar and Jeroen Rodenberg discuss attempts at mitigation by government during the Dutch *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pet) controversy, which has rocked the country for years. The clash between opponents of the figure—who see him as a remnant from a sinister colonial past—and his supporters—to whom he is a vital part of their identity—has been so fierce that government found itself compelled to intervene.

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