VU Research Portal

Chosen Legacies

Egberts, L.R.

2015

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Egberts, L. R. (2015). *Chosen Legacies: Heritage in the Construction of Regional Identity*.

SUMMARY

What is the role of heritage in the construction of regional identity? This question is the point of departure for my doctoral research that has resulted in the book that lies in front of you. It is a question which encompasses three concepts: *heritage*, *region* and *identity*. These are all embedded in existent historical and spatial discourses, but they have been rarely studied in direct relationship to one another. In my research, I explored the role of heritage in the construction of regional identity in a theoretical framework and three case studies of essayistic character, each with a distinct approach.

The first essay (Chapter 2) explores the relationship between heritage and regional identity from a theoretical perspective and describes how the concept of 'region' has been perceived and defined by geographers over the course of the last century. It records the transition from essentialist perspectives that focused on stable, rural regions, to approaches that perceive the region as a social category and emphasise change, globalisation, and the importance of external networks. I also addressed the more recent fear of "placelessness" and concerns about the decreasing importance of the region as the immediate

lifeworld of people, arguing that regional identity is still a valuable concept. In my interpretation, it encompasses the physical characteristics of a portion of the earth's surface as well as socio-cultural processes of signification. Moreover, while I contend that *heritage* plays a role in the construction of regional identities, I do not interpret that concept as standing in opposition to *history* or *memory*. Rather, I concur with Sharon Macdonald's plea to regard heritage and identity as overlapping parts of what she terms the *memory complex*. And I go further, holding that history is part of that same complex, since it is also a means of giving the past a place in the present. I conclude the chapter with my own interpretation of heritage, which might be called "moderately structuralist". I acknowledge that heritage is constructed in the present, but, at the same time, recognise that it has strong relationship to the past, since it always has a history of its own.

The second essay (Chapter 3) focuses on heritage from one particular era of the past, namely the Early Middle Ages, and examines its role in constructing the regional identities of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine and of Alsace. By analysing the use and meaning of three historic places in

Alsace and evaluating three publications on the Euregio Meuse-Rhine from various dates and backgrounds, I was able to demonstrate that the heritage of the Early Middle Ages is present today only because it has continuously been re-interpreted, re-used and re-appropriated to legitimise power relations. In both regions, the Church was, and still is, the main guardian of the continued existence of this heritage, which essentially consists of four aspects: language, places of memory, relics, and religious traditions. In Alsace, these aspects can be seen playing a role from the 1870s onwards, as the conflict between France and Germany heated up and evoked a strong reaction: the construction of a regional identity which sought to negotiate and intermediate position between these two major forces. In the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, this process took place on several moments from the late 1950s onwards, on occasions when the region was defined as a coherent whole thanks to the invocation of an obviously shared past. Charlemagne plays the main role in this context whenever the region is presented as a small-scale example of European unification.

In the third essay (Chapter 4) I concentrate on one region and the role of various heritage themes in the present (or the very recent past). The cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen and their surroundings have been defined as a single region only relatively recently, as part of an effort to carry out a major housing development plan and to upgrade infrastructure in the area. In studying the public policies of the various administrative entities involved – the province, the Arnhem Nijmegen City Region, and both cities – I discovered that there have been very few attempts to define the region as a coherent whole on the basis of a common past. Competition rather than cooperation characterises the various efforts that have been made so far to create an identity for the region, and, in fact, heritage has sometimes been used to reinforce this competition. Moreover, the analysis of four spatial plans in the region indicates that it is not only competition between Arnhem and Nijmegen that is being intensified through the use of heritage, but also competition between various groups, including heritage professionals, designers, and ordinary citizens. One subject of contention is the question of what parts of the past should be chosen for re-use in spatial planning; another is deciding which forms of

authenticity should be given priority in re-uses of the past. At the current time, the regional identity of Arnhem Nijmegen appears to be "thin", and the only role assigned to heritage in defining this identity seems, ironically, to be that of emphasizing its persistent divisions, borders and diversity.

The fourth and final essay (Chapter 5) focuses on one region, the Ruhr region of Germany, and the changing role of heritage and memory during the last six decades with respect to one particular part of its past, namely its industrial golden age. I was able to demarcate various phases in this process, beginning in 1958 with the dramatic death of the mines (*Zechensterben*), which initiated a decade of forgetting and attempts to move forward as quickly as possible. Then, artists and architects, along with politically concerned intellectuals, started campaigning for the conservation of industrial complexes and worker settlements, on the grounds, respectively, of their aesthetic value and existing social structures. Starting in the late 1970s, this led to a museum boom, in which bottom-up versions of the industrial past took centre stage. Later, the megaproject *Internationale Bauausstellung*

Emscherpark (1989-1999) sparked many experiments with the re-use of industrial remains to help regenerate the region, and *Industriekultur* became the central focus in the emerging discourse on regional identity. Industrial monuments became landmarks and symbols of change. The next megaproject, RUHR.2010, devoted more attention to the experience of and artistic references to the industrial past, with physical remains functioning more as settings for a variety of activities. Several very broad developments in society contributed to these processes, which go beyond the boundaries of this region. However, I found that Frank Ankersmit's work on trauma, or Promethean pain, to be of considerable help in understanding how the industrial heritage in the Ruhr area evolved. The symptoms that Ankersmit describes as typical of post-traumatic periods can be found in the Ruhr region at least until the mid- 1990s. From then on, regional marketing strategies sought to turn the industrial past into something akin to a regional mythology and to de-emphasise the traumatic aspects of its declining years. The structural change in the region is still not over, but it seems unlikely that the generous public funding which propelled the

region's regeneration will ever be available again. In the future, bottom-up conservation and temporary re-use are more likely to be major factors in treating the region's industrial heritage.

It appears from these cases studies that the role of heritage in the construction of regional identity is plural. The urge for identity in relation to place seems to have decreased. For the formation of such an identity, four aspects are important: stories, symbols, places and "the other". Heritage plays a role in all four of these aspects, as appears from the case studies. Moreover, the past is always assigned one out of three different roles in processes of regional identity construction. Firstly, an historic theme can be appropriated as the creation story of a region; a role that is often conferred upon the Roman past, that already knows a long history of appropriation upon appropriation. Secondly, an historic theme can be assigned the role of Golden Age, in order to mark the importance of a region apart from its surroundings. And thirdly, the role of a recent, collective trauma can be conferred upon a specific part of the past. This specific historic theme is deeply anchored in the memories of a region's inhabitants and visitors, or that of their parents

and grandparents. The Second World War or the ending of the mining era in the Ruhr area are examples of such a recent trauma that can have a formative role in the construction of regional identity. The case studies show all the more how political agendas determine heritage practices. At the same time, a balance needs to be found in region marketing between stimulating open, flexible and future-oriented aspects of regional identities and holding on to the connection with stable, traditional, and past-oriented characteristics of regions. This is necessary to enable inhabitants to recognise themselves in the communicated regional identity. For the preservation and re-use of heritage, the relevance of this bottom-up connecting to the past will not decrease in the future, even though new conflicts over authenticity might arise. As governments have less means available for heritage preservation, the role of civilians and small-scale initiatives will increase.