

Cultural Heritage: The Context of an Obsession

– Boris Buden

What was before the end of history?—the end of historiography! It is not by chance that Edward Said in his famous lecture on how intellectuals speak truth to power¹ opens his argumentation with a quote from Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* from 1988. He finds support for the necessity of intellectuals to speak publicly as amateurs in Novick's devastating argument against the claim of historians to accuracy and objectivity of their professional knowledge. After having critically overviewed the results of a century of historiographic enterprise in the United States Novick arrived at a conclusion that the ideal of objectivity, intrinsic to the history as science has never been realized. On the contrary, historiography has gradually evolved into a mass of competing claims and counterclaims without any objective validity. Moreover, the claim to objectivity has been ideologically and politically misused by the historians themselves, either in the service of the Cold War as "our"—i.e. American as opposed to Communist—truth, or as the objective truth of each competing separate groups or, as we would say it today, of each separate identity: women, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, gays, white men, and so on and on, respectively of each so-called school of thinking, Marxist, establishment, deconstructionist, cultural, etc. Novick finally concludes that the discipline of history, as a broad community of discourse and of scholars united by common aims, standards and purposes, had ceased to exist. "The professor (of history)", he writes, "was as described in the last verse of the Book of judges: 'in those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.'"

If Novick was right in his diagnosis and history as the knowledge of the past based on objective facts and scientifically validated methods has really ceased to exist, we cannot but ask, what has replaced it? What, if not history, provides now the knowledge of the past?

From history to memory

It is memory, answers French historian Pierre Nora: "'Memory' has taken on a meaning so broad and all-inclusive that it tends to be used purely and simply as a substitute for 'history' and to put the study of history at the service of memory."²

What Said, taking historiography as an example, understands, and emphatically endorses, as a general undermining of traditional authorities, from God to the scientific consensus on what constitutes objective reality, is for Nora a symptom of a very concrete phenomenon—a profound change in our relation to the past.

¹ Edward Said, „Speaking Truth To Power“ in Edward Said, *The Representations of the Intellectual*, London: Vintage, 1996, p. 85-103.

² Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory," *Eurozine*, April 19, 2002, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.html>.

Not only has the historian lost the monopoly he traditionally enjoyed in interpreting the past, the collective meaning of his knowledge has evaporated, or better, it has moved to memory. The time in which there were *collective history* and *individual memories*, a time in which the historian alone was supposed to deliver the truth of the past, is over. In manufacturing the past today he must share his role with others, with the judge, the witness, the media and the legislator. It is memory now that has acquired collective meaning.³

Moreover, for Nora memory is what generally defines the historical condition in which we live today. He even calls this condition explicitly the age of commemoration, the age of, as he writes, passionate, almost fetishistic memorialism in which “every country, every social, ethnic or family group, has undergone a profound change in the relationship it traditionally enjoyed with the past.”⁴ He compares this historically grown interest in the past with “a kind of tidal wave of memorial concerns that has broken over the world.” The most important feature of this shift is a close tie between a new respect for the past—both real and imaginary—and the sense of belonging, collective consciousness, memory, identity and, of course, cultural heritage.

But when exactly did this tidal wave of memorial concerns including the extraordinary interest for cultural heritage historically emerge? To answer this question we should go more than thirty years back, to France where Nora first diagnosed the first symptoms of what he calls the age of commemoration.

It was the year 1980, when Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, then President of the French Republic, proposed to dedicate himself to his country’s national heritage (or *patrimoine* in French). For Nora this at that time quite a surprising move for such a top politician and statesman was result of a profound historical transformation that took place in France during the seventies and that created the stage on which the idea of cultural heritage will subsequently play such an important role. This transformation is, according to Nora, historically contextualized by three phenomena.

The first is what we might call the exhaustion of the promise of industrial modernity. It was the oil crisis in 1973 that abruptly put an end to the belief in an unstoppable economic growth and progress in social welfare that had deeply marked the post-war France. The future too has become totally uncertain. The result was, as Nora writes, “France’s enthusiastic plunge into the lost and recovered past.”

The second phenomenon is a sharp break with the Gaullist tradition in all areas of French society. With general de Gaulle’s death in November 1970 the ideological construction of French official history also collapsed. The dark

³ Theoretically this is, however, the merit of Maurice Halbwachs, a French—or more precisely a Durkheimian—sociologist who discovered the social construction of memory and coined the concept of collective memory.

⁴ Nora, *ibid.* All subsequent Nora-quotations are from the same source.

memories of Vichy France emerged and revealed the trauma of collaboration. Marcel Ophüls' documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity (Le Chagrin et la pitié)* from 1969 that deals precisely with this traumatic moment of the French past was banned for years in France.⁵

In the same turn France also discovered its pre-revolutionary history. The nation seized to identify with the Great Revolution of 1789. It was at this time when, in *Penser la Révolution française* (1978), François Furet wrote the infamous sentence: "The French Revolution is over."⁶ Consequently, the last two post-revolutionary centuries were reinserted into the long continuity of French national history, or better, into the continuity of the nation-state. In popular consciousness, France was now not only 200 but 1,000 years old.

Finally, Nora also mentions a third phenomenon that essentially assisted France's turn to a new memory culture: the intellectual collapse of Marxism and consequently the eclipse of the Communist party's influence on political life, a phenomenon that was clearly visible far beyond the boundaries of French society and its particular history.

Put together these three phenomena – among many others although not so powerful – mark the historical context of the "memorialist" trend for which Pierre Nora has suggested the name "the age of commemoration" and which he located in France of the mid-1970s but which was followed especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, by a world-wide upsurge in memory, the age, to quote Nora again, of "ardent, embattled, almost fetishistic 'memorialism'". It is within the same historical context that "the meteoric rise of the cult of national heritage" has also taken place.

However, there is one more historical transformation that has allowed for such an epochal turn to memory and heritage, a transformation that concerns our perception of history. The unity of historical time has been broken; the sense of continuity and permanence has been replaced by the experience of a constant change. The present is now unable to connect the past with the future. We don't know what has to be saved from the past and preserved for our descendants.

Nora talks also of an inability to anticipate the future that imposes on us an "obligation to stockpile", in an indiscriminate fashion, everything we believe might eventually testify to what we are or what we will have become. The stockpiling of memorabilia is accompanied with the feeling of loss and the exaggerated importance of memory as well as the institutions and instruments that relate to it: museums, archives, libraries, collections, data-banks, etc. The result is what we have already mentioned: "memory" has replaced what was called "history" in the past.

⁵ The film was first shown on French television in 1981.

⁶ See François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

It is in this context that an extraordinary interest for cultural heritage has emerged.

“No future”

The Wikipedia-article on cultural heritage—the one that is even published as a book⁷—gives a very simple and probably the most general definition of the concept: cultural heritage, or as it is also called national heritage or just heritage is “the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.”⁸

Cultural heritage consists of two types of culture, the so-called tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, books, works of art, and artifacts) and the so-called intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge). However, it also includes natural heritage (which doesn’t comprise natural phenomena as such but nature as far as it is culturally significant like some landscapes, or the so-called biodiversity).

The problem with this definition is that the answer it gives to the question of what is cultural heritage is so general that it is actually of no use: It tells us that simply all things in the world, all we can touch and all we can think of including the nature itself could be considered as belonging to the cultural heritage. Yet it doesn’t explain us why some of these things become cultural heritage and others don’t. In fact it additionally mentions that cultural heritage is “unique and irreplaceable” and that these uniqueness and irreplaceability are the reason why the current generation should feel responsible for their preservation. It places so to say the moral burden of preservation on us and yet it doesn’t tell us what is it precisely that makes some things unique and irreplaceable so as to keep them from the present for the future. Instead, it blackmails us with the obligation to preserve cultural heritage although this obligation is by no means a necessity. Not only it is typical for a particular historical epoch; other historical periods were known for their careless or even openly hostile attitude toward the very idea of cultural heritage and its preservation. Today, however, there is almost a compulsion to turn everything around us into some sort of cultural heritage. Take the following example:

In 2011 in the British scientific journal *Antiquity*, two archeologists published an article about a recent archeological discovery: In a flat in London’s West End, in the Danmark Street, on the walls behind the cupboards, a graffiti was discovered, made in the mid 1970s by Sex Pistols when the punk group rented the property. It consists of eight cartoons mostly by John Lydon (aka Rotten) depicting

⁷ Jesse Russell, Ronald Cohn, *Cultural Heritage*, Edinburgh: Bookvika, 2012.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

himself and other members of the band, as well as their manager, Malcolm McLaren, and other Pistols' associates.⁹

The archeologists, who compare the cultural significance of the graffiti with the prehistoric drawings in the caves of Lascaux in southern France and argue that both are pieces of art and both lend themselves to archaeological investigation, also think of the property becoming a conventional heritage site with a blue plaque to mark its historical significance. They refer to it as “anti-heritage” because it contradicts what agencies and heritage practitioners typically value or wish to keep: “We feel justified in sticking our tongues out at the heritage establishment and suggesting that punk’s iconoclasm provides the context for conservation decision-making. Our call is for something that directly follows punk’s attitude to the mainstream, to authority; contradicting norms and challenging convention.” For the archeologists the graffiti itself is “a direct and powerful representation of a radical and dramatic movement of rebellion.”

In fact Johnny Rotten was already in 2002 named among the 100 greatest Britons and assumed the status of national treasure. It was the same Johnny Rotten who with Sex Pistols in 1977 embarked a boat on the River Thames to disrupt Queen Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee by playing “God Save the Queen” outside the Palace of Westminster. It was an open assault on cultural heritage, in the best tradition of avant-garde subversions of traditional culture, which ironically ended as a cultural heritage itself.

As it is well known the famous refrain of the song—“no future”—has become the slogan of the punk movement. But we know now that it already echoed the enemy’s cry of victory. It meant in fact “long live the past!” and can be also considered to mark an epochal turn to the past carrying a sobering message to the “rebels without future”: All you who wanted to change the world for better will most likely end up either as villains or as a cultural heritage—the second option implies that you haven’t changed the world.

But let us take now both the slogan and the time it was pronounced, the 1970s, to introduce the question about the context of our discussion on cultural heritage.

Remembering temporality: the past as the modus of authenticity

How to conceive of such a context? What do we actually mean when we say: the context? Isn’t it in our case what in German intellectual tradition existential philosopher Karl Jaspers once called *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* and what we can translate into English as *The spiritual Condition of the Age*. In fact it is the

⁹ “Johnny Rotten’s graffiti: the new heritage?” <http://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2011/research/pistols-graffiti/>

title of his book published 1931 at the peak of the crisis of Weimar republic and shortly before the Nazis took power in 1933.¹⁰

As it is well known, since that time the German intellectual tradition has significantly changed. The notion of spirit that, not only in Germany, had managed to survive deep into the modern, secular age, has been in the meantime replaced by more timely and less German word Culture. An example: what Germany was once especially proud of, and what could be described as the most precious jewel in the crown of its cultural heritage—its *Geisteswissenschaften* (spiritual sciences)—is nowadays replaced by the so-called *Kulturwissenschaften* (cultural sciences).¹¹

Thus, speaking of context today we rather mean a cultural context, or more precisely a cultural condition, not a spiritual one. In other words, the so-called cultural turn is constitutive of the condition of our age.

But this is not the only reason why to mention here Karl Jaspers' *Spiritual Condition of the Age*. The book is also a reaction to, and a statement on a time of crisis that gave rise to European fascism and subsequently developed into the catastrophe of the world war. It was an attempt at making a diagnosis of a time considered to be sick and—Jaspers was actually a psychiatrist—to suggest a therapy.

These elements, the crisis on the one side, and, on the other, the diagnosis and the therapy—both conceived of in terms of critique—are typical conceptual tools of modernity dealing with its historical condition. Jasper's intellectual intervention is a critique that exposes “the condition of the age” as a crisis and is at the same time articulated as a critique of this crisis.

But what was in crisis actually? For Jaspers it was something he calls “the world of a truly human life”. This truly human life is endangered and alienated by technical mass-order, in short by industrial modernity in which “man has no longer a definite place or status in the whole” and leads “un uprooted sort of life”, a life with “no continuity”.¹² Jaspers also accuses modern education, based on the acquisition of technical skills and realist knowledge, of dismissing “historical tradition”, that is, of having lost relationship with time at all. It is a development that narrows man's mental potentialities, something he also calls “substance”.

To preserve and regenerate this mental substance, which is for him always already a historical substance, “imbued with the selfhood”, as he writes, Jaspers suggests a sort of therapy that includes a certain turn to the past, or more precisely “a sort of historical remembrance which must be something more than a mere knowledge of the past and must take the form of a contemporary vital

¹⁰ Actually, the book is translated into English under a completely different title: *Man in the Modern Age*.

¹¹ And is no longer something Germany is especially proud of.

¹² See: <http://downcastlids.blogspot.de/2012/01/spiritual-condition-of-age.html>

force.” In today’s words it is cultural memory that has to be kept alive if the world of a truly human life should be recovered and saved.

In fact, Jaspers critical description of the condition in which people lived and worked at the time of an advancing industrial modernity could be read as explicitly evocative of the condition we live today under the regime of global, post-industrial and post-fordist capitalism and of its existential consequences, before all, the so-called general precarization of life. It is, in Jaspers words, a life in a movement, in a flux, in a process that exposes both life and knowledge to constant mutually enforced change. However, the conditions of understanding this life, and of dealing with its overall challenges, are today radically different.

In Jaspers philosophy cultural memory was endowed with something we might call ontological deepness. It was also critically deployed and has a mission to fulfil, a mission thinkable on the ground of a radical separation between thought and being, between substance and appearance, between an authentic existence and its alienated form, a separation that is the very precondition for critique in the sense that has been given to this notion from Kant to nowadays.

In short: Jaspers call for memory, for historical remembrance is actually a call to sublimate the alienation of human life under the conditions of industrial modernity, that is, to re-establish disrupted continuity, broken unity, shattered wholeness of a historically endangered being. The past he believes we should turn to is not a historical dimension of time, not a time-space filled with cultural artefacts that should be remembered, reevaluated and preserved. Rather it is an alienated modus of being that should be reappropriated as to restore the mentioned wholeness, unity and the authenticity of a truly human life. What has been historically uprooted should be rerooted, not so much in the past, but rather in the very temporality of being. Here the roots have nothing to do with an identity be it individual, collective, ethnical or simply cultural. The identity Jaspers is calling for is the identity of being and existence. Accordingly, his call for remembrance and generally his interest in the past has nothing to do with nostalgia, or better it is nostalgic but in an ontological dimension, that is, beyond the different dimensions of time, beyond the difference between past and future. Rather it is a nostalgia for the lost authenticity and can be related to the future as much as to the past. It is a nostalgia for the temporality of being.

The past—a homeland of the right?

How different is this interest for the past from the one that informs the very historical context of our talk about cultural heritage, the condition of our age, which, as mentioned above, Pierre Nora explicitly calls the age of commemoration, the age of an almost fetishistic memorialism. Yet this new turn to the past that Nora historically placed in the 1970s has its own social and political context.

The 1970s is the decade, which ends with the first instalment of a neoliberal—and at the same time neoconservative—government in the very heart of the Western

world. Margaret Thatcher is elected Prime minister of Britain in May 1979 with a mandate to curb trade union power. Across the Atlantic in July 1979 Paul Volcker takes command at the US Federal Reserve and within a few months radically changes monetary politics. At that time in China is Deng Xiaoping already in power and after having defeated “the gang of four”, led by Mao’s widow, he takes first steps towards the liberalization of a communist-ruled economy. Finally, in 1980 Ronald Reagan is elected president of the United States: he also curbs the power of labour and liberates the power of finance deregulating industry, agriculture and resource extraction. According to David Harvey these few years at the end of the 1970s should be regarded as a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history.¹³ They have shaped the neoliberal and neoconservative hegemony that lasts until nowadays. And they have also co-created this social atmosphere, cultural sensibility and political reality in which a president of French Republic could suddenly discover the importance of national heritage and dedicate himself to its preservation.

It was the legitimacy of his political power that now also relied on the power of memory and its essential role in forging (national) identity. On the other hand, the growing interest for memory and cultural heritage undoubtedly coincides with the rise of conservative and right-wing politics. Speaking of France at that time it is concretely the rapid rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front. At the same time, it marks the historical demise of the left-wing and revolutionary alternatives to western capitalism and quite generally the exhaustion of the utopian promise of the modernist avant-gardes.

But does this mean that the left has no stakes whatsoever in what we call memory culture? If the past is truly “a foreign country”, as L.P. Hartley¹⁴ once wrote and David Lowenthal theoretically conceptualized¹⁵, does it mean that for the left it is even more than that, a hostile foreign country where it feels like an intruder?— which almost necessarily implies that it is the right the in the past always already feels at home.

Usual answer to this question is, of course, negative. It suggests that the left shouldn’t leave the past to the right, but rather openly claim it, contest the dominant forms of memory, challenge the arbitrary content of cultural heritage and question its political teleology, i.e. its ideology. In short, it should make the memory a site of political struggle, or better, a political cause. This is supposed to be the only way for the left to recover from the loss of history.

But instead of calling for imagination to concretise such a political option we should be rather reminded of some difficulties that stand in its way.

¹³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1.

¹⁴ L.P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between* (1953) begins with the famous line “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

¹⁵ In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985.

Utopia is back on track—on the other side of time

Let us go back to Jaspers again. His political position could have been described as conservative, which obviously also applies to his critique of the historical reality at that time, especially in terms of his turn to the past and memory. And yet he was clearly distant from fascism. Moreover, his critique found significant resonance on the left side of political and intellectual spectrum. It was rhetorically close to the discourses of the left critique of capitalist modernity and, in consequence, almost directly translatable into the left emancipatory visions. This generally applies to the existentialism including Heidegger (even despite of his involvement with Nazis). What they actually shared is before all the very idea of critique and of course its whole rhetoricity, which essentially facilitated its translation into politics.

This has radically changed. In Bruno Latour words, critique “ran out of steam” and with it the idea of the world divided into two levels, or spheres, the one of appearances, that is, of delusions, and the other, the world of reality, the real, true world beyond the first one.¹⁶ This gap, as Latour argues, was an immense source of productive energy that in a few centuries reshaped the face of the Earth. And it provided the very structure of the political epistemology of Modernity—the power to create this difference between the two levels was the very engine of its political dynamics. It also made an empty and abstract time flow into what we call historical time. So, the continuity of time was articulated along this same division between the world of delusion and the one of reality, which also includes the continuity between the dimensions of time. The past and the future were connected by this very gap between what is true and what is false, what is essence and what is appearance, what is authentic and what is alienated from this authenticity and have to be reappropriated within the continuity of time. This was constitutive of Karl Jaspers’ call for remembrance and his turn to the past. It is this critical gesture that cannot be repeated today.

A historical time without critique—having been the very essence of its historicity—has been now abandoned to culture. A cultural time is flattened to one abstract cultural continuum interrupted only by a cultural difference that alone is able to distinguish among the dimensions of time, i.e. between the past, the present and the future. So the past too appears now stripped of its ontological deepness and emancipatory teleology that used to connect it—also in a utopian imagination—with the future (whereas utopia was in itself a critique of the present).

Does it also mean that we live, as it is almost unanimously argued, in a post-utopian age? Well, this today commonsensical statement can be in a way contested. Think of today growing genre of the so-called “what if” or “alternative histories”, a sort of historical fictions, written also by professional

¹⁶ Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/120-NLH-GB.pdf>

historians that retell well known historical events asking “what might have been if”—if for instance a decisive battle might have been won by its actual loser (the triumph of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium 31 BC), or if Pontius Pilatus didn’t order Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, that is, what a Christianity without the Crucifixion would look like; if Napoleon would have invaded North America; if Abraham Lincoln had not freed the slaves; if Great Britain makes peace with Germany in 1940, etc.

It looks like science fiction turned to the past, or better, as though the whole past, the whole history of the world, has been put into H.G. Wells Time Machine. Now the past—not the future!—appears charged with contingency, with, to quote *Times* reviewing one of what-if bestsellers: “counterfactual supposes, would-haves, might-haves, could-haves, possibly, perhapses, probablys and maybes, in all their dizzying permutations”.¹⁷

This forces us to ask what if Utopia hasn’t actually disappeared? If it only has changed sides and is now turned to the past, a new “Promised land” of our imagination where everything could have been different than it really was. And what if today’s compulsive interest for the past and especially for cultural heritage has also clearly a utopian, or to put it more precisely, a retro-utopian character, which slogan might be as follows: since there is nothing we can do about our future, let’s change the past!

However we answer this question one thing is clear: this retro-utopia has nothing to do with a critique of the present that once was the very essence of the historical utopias.

Let us conclude remembering what Walter Benjamin once wrote about cultural history: It may well increase the burden of the treasures that are piled up on humanity’s back, but it doesn’t give us the strength to shake these treasures off, so as to get our hands on them.¹⁸ This also could apply to “cultural heritage”.

Cultural or national heritage is, as Nora explicitly states, a cult, i.e. an object of worship believed to be able to survive each of us and secure the afterlife of the collective. But its treasures also can become too heavy a burden on our back, a burden we will have to shake off precisely in order to survive. This is where the story of cultural heritage should really start, namely with the question of how to take its treasures into our own hands.

¹⁷ Quoted from the cover of Robert Crowley (ed.), *What If? Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, New York: Berkley Books, 2001.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, „Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker“, in: same: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963, p. 79.

