

CONTESTATION AND REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL HERITAGE

DA CONTESTAÇÃO À REFLEXÃO SOBRE PATRIMÓNIOS CULTURAIS E HISTÓRICOS

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The book *Patrimónios Contestados* (Contested Heritage) compiles 10 texts on heritage as a historically and socially constructed convention. While controversies about the cultural decolonisation processes are still raging, this book provides various contributions for reflecting on the transformations affecting perceptions of those processes and the practices to make it happen. It is a contribution that draws on different viewpoints based on national and international perspectives of this sociological phenomenon.

In their introduction, “O Bem e o Mal do(s) Património(s)” (The Good and the Evil of Heritage(s); pp. 5–9), the curators Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and Walter Rossa first focus on the accuracy of the word heritage, warning about the ambiguities and misunderstandings of this term, especially in times of social tensions. Among the diversity encompassing the concept of heritage, the authors believe that the variants of *cultural heritage* and *historical heritage* are the key to deciphering the focus of this book’s objects of study.

To materialise this twofold conceptual variation, Jerónimo and Rossa introduce the reader to three facts: “heritage is something that exists, it is not past; nothing emerges or is produced as cultural or historical heritage, only eventually as a heritage; heritage is synonymous of stable possession of assets, what derives from social and historical conventions” (Jerónimo & Rossas, 2021, p. 6).

The authors underline cultural heritage as the outcome of an understanding and a “pact of collective recognition of distinctive and identity cultural values, naturally observant of specific logics of power, in a given set of assets” (Jerónimo & Rossa, 2021, p. 6). Following the Bourdieusian conceptions of power (Bourdieu, 1978/2001), they admit the need to renegotiate this pact after any significant change in the perception of the values at its origin. They state that the tension generated during this renegotiation is highly complex and conflictual insofar as the previous order is destabilised and that this destabilisation provokes various reactions. Property ownership is perhaps the dimension that generates the most tension and contestation of all issues.

Like the controversy and tensions in renegotiating the dynamics and cultural heritage, the historical heritage dynamics and concept, more aligned with the concept of the monument (like, for example, statues or obelisks), are also conceived as a representation of something thriving and meaningful in the present. That imprints on it a constant restlessness about the meaning of tomorrow. Hence a provocative statement from the authors contrasting culture and history: “the cultural heritage has in the system of cultural values recognised in a set of assets, what the historical heritage has in history” (Jerónimo & Rossas, 2021, p. 8). In other words, might cultural values be more liquid and transitory — an expression dear to Bauman (2003/2006) — than the informational sedimentations of history?

In the chapter “Património Cultural em Conflito: Da Violência à Reparação” (Cultural Heritage in Conflict: On Violence and Reparation; pp. 11–25), Dacia Viejo Rose addresses the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage during armed conflicts in various parts of the world. Spurred on by a surge of media coverage — from the Mostar bridge to the museums of Baghdad and Palmyra — the discourses have grown to extremes of positions, adjectives and linguistic hyperbole. However, this linguistic and communicative extremism, often invoked even by great personalities, hides a weakness: “the motivations, the immediate consequences and the medium and long-term impacts of these dramatic acts are anything but simple” (Viejo-Rose, 2021, p. 11). Insisting on pro-heritage and anti-destruction moralisation makes agreements difficult and creates further conflict.

Dacia Viejo Rose explains that cultural heritage can easily be a vehicle for passing on anger and resentment through generations when narratives are singular and binary (we are like this and the others are not), thus imposing meanings. Relegating various groups in society to the unspeakable, where memories, attitudes and values cannot be heard and read because they do not conform to the dominant narrative, operates a situation of cultural and symbolic violence. The problem is that the physical and objective violence around cultural heritages makes one forget this symbolic and silent violence of the unspeakable “that cultural heritage usually perpetrates” (Viejo-Rose, 2021, p. 12). In other words, this dimension of cultural heritage as a generator of multi-layered and ever-changing meanings entails greater understanding among institutional agents of change.

Lilia Schwarcz, in “Ser ou Não Ser Patrimônio: Bandeirantes e Bandeiras e Outros Conjuntos Escultóricos Contestados” (To Be or Not to Be Heritage: Flag bearers and Flags and Other Contested Sculptural Sets, pp. 27–49), resumes the problem of social and historical conventions introduced by Jerónimo and Rossas. Drawing on Foucault and the world of classifications, she first questions why the cultural products in Europe are authorial art and handicrafts or mere pieces made by anonymous people in the indigenous world. The differences in the politics of recognition according to the place of origin, region, era or trace represent what Viejo-Rose claims: a dangerous silencing of groups, permanent symbolic violence, which fosters galloping extremism. The constant “process of patrimonialization”, that is to say, that piece of memory and history that gained recognition and social and collective validity, first created monuments and then made it heritage — often underlining naturalised values and completely disconnected from the need for cultural decolonisation.

These considerations by Schwarcz, specifically about the Monumento às Bandeiras (Monument to the Flags) and the Estátua de Borba Gato (Borba Gato Statue), both in São Paulo, Brazil, are analysed in light of the figures of the *bandeirante* as “great and daring frontier-clearers”, who “the most mundane performance of these actual informal militias, as great captors of runaway slaves: both Indigenous and African” (Schwarcz, 2021, p. 32). Thus, the author underlines that consecrating and contesting are binary pairs of the same equation, and this heritage ambivalence has never been as exposed as today.

The classification of the world by separating *westerners* from the rest of it (especially Africa, Asia and Latin America) is also analysed by Marie Huber in “Patrimonialização Internacional, Desenvolvimento e Política Nacional da História: O Legado Institucional dos Programas de Conservação da Unesco na Etiópia” (International Patrimonialization, Development and the National Politics of History: The Institutional Legacy of Unesco’s Conservation Programmes in Ethiopia; pp. 51–71). As she glosses on Lalibela in Ethiopia, the author elaborates on the patrimonialization of the city as a world heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). She refers to the decision-making practices about what is or is not “heritage” and what this means from the political, cultural, social and touristic perspectives. How it divides the world into developed and underdeveloped, taking Europe and North America as references. She argues that “international organisations were not only political arenas or diplomatic staging, but also massive bureaucracies, which obtained much of their authority in expert knowledge” (Huber, 2021, p. 55).

According to Marie Huber, heritage as a discourse and practice of disseminating what is dominant is fundamental to understanding and demonstrating why the development paradigm has further politicised heritage and its classifications. All the bureaucratic and institutionalised processes of patrimonialization have reinforced the idea and culture of specialisation and scientificity, with the dominant western elite as its axis. That is nonetheless paradoxical: both in theory and practice, the Unesco concept of universal cultural heritage is, at the same time, the outcome of colonial practices and legacies due, in part, to “its ideological origins and for the scientific principles that guided the practice of conservation” (Huber, 2021, p. 68).

Ariel Sophia Bardi, in “Doma-Cracy Planeada: Memória e Apagamento na Índia e em Israel” (Planned Doma-Cracy: Memory and Cleansing in India and Israel; pp. 73–87), recalls the 1992 popular demolition by 150,000 protesters of the Indian Babri Masjid mosque, and the 1948 destruction of the Hurva synagogue in Jerusalem by the Arab Legion. The author believes that in both India and Israel, “transformations in the built space have been supported by dominant ethnic-nationalist movements, which aim to diminish the presence of the foreign minority while emphasising the unity of the demographic majority” (Bardi, 2021, p. 74). Both architecture and archaeology have, in both countries, been politicised and made warlike, used to visually instigate claims of territorial belonging where one includes and excludes, both in design and in space. That is what is termed “doma-cracy”, “a kind of ethnic democracy where the people’s power has been eclipsed by the homeland’s ethos and the spatial imposition of a homeland for the majority” (Bardi, 2021, p. 74).

Alice Procter, in “Desconforto, Disfunção: Quem Se Sente em Casa no Museu?” (Discomfort and Dysfunction: Who Feels at Home in the Museum?; pp. 89–103), recalls the difficult transition in 2019 from the previous definition of the museum concept by the International Council of Museums to the current one. According to the author, the current definition was (and still is) “so controversial that the vote on adoption was postponed. Some considered it too political and others too vague; others claimed that under the new definition, the Louvre, and most French museums, would no longer be considered museums” (Procter, 2021, p. 90). However, according to the author, the meaning is the same as before the change in 2019: “spaces open to the public, aimed at collecting and exhibiting material culture, producing educational and public programmes” (Procter, 2021, p. 90). The goal of making museums more active and more in line with upcoming political events and not waiting for historical validation has been a challenge. Still, without any practical results, even among the world’s most prominent museums, such as the case of Smithsonian or the New York City museum. The criticism of museums and their sponsors (which include oil, weapon and pharmaceutical companies) demonstrates how these institutions allow themselves to be led by financial partners. Ahdaf Soueif, a member of the board of the British Museum, stepped down in 2019 because of the inertia in the restitution and repatriation processes and the fact that this museum accepts the sponsorship of British Petroleum (BP). The example seemed to be the beginning of a turning point — especially when everything pointed to the rise of a wave of resignations in this and other cases. But it was not: there were no more layoffs, nor did BP stop funding the museum. For Procter, despite the change of concept, everything seems to stay the same.

Along with museums, cultural heritage and historical heritage, the great consecrated historical figures have also been the target of the ambivalence of celebration and contestation. Such is the case of Gandhi, where Elizabeth Buettner reminds us that, except for some countries, including Portugal, there is contestation about this human rights activist. In Africa, in the United States of America, in several European countries or even in his homeland, India, it is possible to see that the perfect image of the past has undergone major transformations in recent years. In “Gandhi@150: ‘O Mahatma’ Como um Ícone Global Celebrado e Contestado” (Gandhi@150: “Mahatma” As a Celebrated and Contested Global Icon; pp. 105–123), Buettner recalls the flurry of actions directed at Gandhi from 2015 onwards. That year, a statue of Gandhi in Johannesburg was reportedly doused in white paint and posters bearing the words “Gandhi must fall” a few weeks after, in Cape Town, the statue of Cecil Rhodes was vandalised with the words “Rhodes must fall”. Even though Gandhi was an anti-colonial nationalist (unlike the pro-imperialist Rhodes), the issue of Black disadvantage in South Africa explains much of it, along “with uneasy interethnic relations with a community of Indian descent” (Buettner, 2021, p. 112). Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed’s 2015 biographical studies cast an unfavourable eye on Gandhi insofar as they reveal the episode of demanding rights for “Indians as ‘Aryans’ and ‘civilised’ explicitly distancing himself from Black Africans, whom he repeatedly referred to as ‘Kaffirs’” (Buettner, 2021, p. 114).

In Goa, the issue of heritage and its relation to the colonial past is reflected in the texts by Amita Kanekar (pp. 125–145) and Jason Keith Fernandes (pp. 147–169). Kanekar discusses the conflicting identity of temples, where “the transformation of the Goan Hindu Brahminical temple architecture, or its absence, is not merely an aesthetic issue, but the result of political arrangements and aspirations, both before and after 1961” (Kanekar, 2021, p. 142). Part of the outcome of these political arrangements lies, precisely, in one need to assert the identity independence Jason Keith Fernandes (2021) describes for us, where there is a need to deny and to “acknowledge Goa’s Portuguese identity” (p. 148). The 1961’s aggression led to the rupture of diplomatic ties between Portugal and India, which only resumed in 1975 after the fall of the dictatorship. It was unable to produce a reflection on heritage beyond the logic of the nation-state, either here or there. The policies of repatriation and concession of nationality to minorities on both sides are more than strategies to affirm the nation-state: they aim at granting historical and family relationships that would otherwise be separated.

Finally, Paulo Peixoto (pp. 171–176), Luís Raposo (pp. 176–184) and Bárbara Reis (pp. 184–189) summarise problems, cases and debates around the topic of contested heritage in Portugal. They propose three axes to which they try to provide answers: (a) the fact that in Portugal, there is great potential for contestation around the Portuguese cultural heritage in its relation to the colonial past; (b) how to resolve actual or potential conflicts in an integrated, lasting and comprehensive way; and (c) the issue of erasure, reformulation or journey, being possible in some cultural heritage assets, but impossible in architectural and urban assets.

In his reply, Paulo Peixoto invokes three major factors to understand this contestation: (a) the colonial past being recent; (b) the very ethnic-racial composition of Portuguese society; and (c) the current focus on cultural diversity and post-colonial heritage. To justify (a) and (b), the author notes the absence of disputes about cultural heritage with Castile due to the long and intense journey already undertaken. To explain (c), he points out that Portugal has neither a Musée Royal de l’Afrique de Tervuren (Belgium) with 180,000 pieces from the Congo nor a Museo América in Madrid with 122 Quimbayan objects. In other words, the lack of any such museum leaves Portugal out of the restitution protests — except with “Angola, still under analysis” (Peixoto, 2021, p. 174).

Meanwhile, Luís Raposo opts for a more Socratic style, questioning the issue of ownership of heritage assets: whom are we discussing? Only the countries with overseas colonial empires? Or all the empires, from all times? Only the museums, and among these the public ones? Or all the museums? What about natural heritage? Is it about the mineral or the fossil? Does it belong to the country because of the territorial “ownership” of the nation-state? Whose is the million-year-old mineral or fossil collected on an expedition?

These and other questions are unsettling and revisit the issue of ownership, which has always been the subject of dispute. As for Portugal, Luís Raposo asks about the ownership of the Indo-Portuguese: Indian or Portuguese? And what about the monument that Diogo Cão commissioned in Namibia? That is, “questions of the legitimacy of the

feelings of belonging in the present relative to the past” should be considered (Raposo, 2021, p. 178). In other words, a restitution plan should adhere to a set of criteria, which Raposo lists: (a) the legality of incorporation; (b) the conditions of the collection; (c) the definition of ownership; (d) the nature of the collections; (e) the identity icons; and (f) the final destination of the restitutions. Such a survey could provide answers to most of the issues associated with the restitutions.

Furthermore, Bárbara Reis discusses the need for a policy for the art of the colonial empire, suggesting a citizens’ assembly as representative as possible of the ethnic-racial diversity that forms Portuguese society. She argues that this discussion on cultural heritage, restitution and contestation is “political, legal and philosophical” (Reis, 2021, p. 186) and should be discussed in a citizens’ assembly.

The authors have used the term contestation in the title and throughout the book. Bruno Latour (2012), when introducing and synthesising more clearly the actor-network theory, launched an approximate suggestion, simultaneously epistemic and methodological: the social study of controversies. He believed that the social scientist would be exactly on track with the dynamics that would make their way in the present and future by doing so. Because in controversies, both individual or group interests and facts fight until they are synthesised into something that tends towards a certain social stabilisation. In fact, this is exactly where the authors set their thinking and study down, providing clues for the present and future understanding of such heritage disputes. The collection of the various interests and facts that triggered the contestation described here provides a basis for the present and future in this important contemporary debate.

From my perspective, I particularly share Luís Raposo’s view: any heritage contestation or review on this topic should return to the Socratic model: whom are we discussing? Only the countries with overseas colonial empires? Or all the empires, from all times? Do we approach the subject from the perspective of public museums only? Or of all types of museums? What about natural heritage? What are we addressing? Is it about the mineral or the fossil? Does it belong to the country because of the territorial “ownership” of the nation-state? Whose is the million-year-old mineral or fossil collected on an expedition? Before the contestation lies, as I see it, the need for a broad debate on the concept of “heritage ownership” and what it all means.

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