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HERITAGE, PUBLIC HISTORY AND DEMOCRACY¹

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex relationship between heritage, public history and democracy, arguing that heritage is not a neutral transmission of the past but a contested, constructed and politically charged process. Drawing on critical heritage studies and public history scholarship, the text evaluates how dynamic memory practices can both empower communities and reinforce existing power structures. Special attention is paid to the concept of dissonant heritage, which challenges singular narratives by exposing the omissions, silences and exclusions inherent in heritage-making processes. In contexts where democratic institutions are fragile or delegitimised, the paper identifies grassroots, bottom-up heritage initiatives as spaces for civic interventions and resistance.

This work advocates participatory and reflective heritage practices, positioning heritage and public history as essential tools for democratic engagement and future-oriented cultural governance.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, Future, Heritage, Past, Public History

Introduction

In this paper, we bring together the concepts of heritage and public history, both of which, in their own way, bring forth the dynamic usage of the past in pluralised and globalised contemporary societies. Additionally, these concepts are juxtaposed with contemporary principles of democracy, as they play a crucial role in shaping collective identities, fostering dialogue, and promoting inclusive narratives. By examining how heritage and public history intersect with democratic values, the paper will explore their potential to empower communities, facilitate critical reflection on past injustices and contribute to

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the broader process of societal transformation. In this context, the role of these concepts is not merely about preserving the past but actively engaging with it to build more equitable and democratic futures.

In the preface of his influential book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal (1985) states: “The past is everywhere... Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent” (xv). In this book, and indeed in his entire body of work, Lowenthal insists that the past is not a temporal continuum with the present time; the past does not represent (only) a period behind us—it is a temporally independent category. This constructivist view entails a shift in focus from the temporal to the cultural dimension of the past, which the author constructs primarily through analyses of discourses about the past and its presence in capitalist modernity.

The past is not just behind us; it is present in the here and now and in the future—it is a kind of cultural artefact. As Buden and Žilnik (2013: 19) interpret Lowenthal, “... the past does not appear to us in the dimension of time, but in the dimension of cultural difference². When we say something is ‘old,’ we attribute to it a cultural quality that may be entirely new to us. In other words, our very relationship to time has acquired cultural meaning. Today, we primarily experience time in its (three) dimensionality through the process of cultural differentiation.”

Viewing the past not as an aspect of linear time, but as a cultural process, introduces radically different views on how the past is conceptualized, how the content (from) of the past is used, questioning the postulates of classical historiography, as a specific (Western) understanding of the flow of (historical) time and reflections on that flow—which, among others, was wonderfully testified to by Latour (1991) when he says that “we have never been modern”—claiming that modern historiography purifies itself of the pollution of the temporal, in order to create the past as an object of the present. Lowenthal’s credo, therefore, does not refer to new methods of reading or writing historiography, does not introduce cultural specificities as new filters for assessing the past, but rather culturalises the past itself, providing a kind of analysis of the present using a discourse about the past. If we assume that the past is just another place in (this) time, then we can easily attribute to it all the attributes that apply to other physical and conceptual *topoi* of the contemporary world, first of all semantic polysemy, in the sense that Dick Hebdige attributes to polysemy, which is an idea “whereby each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings” (Hebdige 1979: 117). On the other hand, the content of the past, thus temporally uprooted, enters the domains of politics, economy and culture, and can be attributed with characteristics that are included in contemporary interests from profit, mobility, to control and creative consumption, in

2 It would be incorrect to think that time takes on cultural meaning only in the modern era, or contemporaneity, or after a kind of culturalist turn that Lowenthal proposes in his book. For more on time and the perception of the Other, from an anthropological perspective, see Fabian, 1983.

the way proposed by Fiske (1989). Lowenthal sees the past thus presented as a stage for self-expression in the present.

Understanding how individuals and social groups comprehend and relate to the past can be viewed in two separate but intertwined directions. In the first direction, it is about interpreting the institutional relations through which content from the past is ideologically or discursively produced, adapted and used in the present. In the second direction, it is about interpreting individuals and groups who unpack and decode such institutionally shaped content (Hall 1980) and, depending on other elements of their social positioning, accept, reject or reshape its meaning. Within this framework, the processes of production of historical knowledge independent of the aforementioned institutional relations are also happening. Therefore, in the second case, it is not only about the analysis of reception, but also about the active role of various social actors in understanding the past, as much as in creating the present.

Much of the contemporary research in memory studies focuses on how different versions of the past are articulated in society within political institutions, the school system, but also in art, literature, popular culture, the media, secular and religious rituals, and other contemporary practices and processes. Focus is thus shifting from the research on institutions and power relations that are traditionally considered the main carriers of the “production” of historical knowledge (academy, universities, media, governments, and other elements of Althusserian state ideological apparatuses), to the “audience of history,” that is, citizens who are recognized as having an active role in that process.

Based on this concept of the past, which is not seen (only) as one of the dimensions in the tripartite structure of time in a continuum, a question arises: in what way does a certain version/vision of the past acquire the character of a general³ narrative accepted by different social groups, or in what way and by what means this attribute of generality is retained and maintained. In a framework in which “everyman [is] his own historian⁴” (a position that will be separately addressed in the section dealing with the phenomenon of public history) and creates independent versions of the past, the question arises as to how and under what conditions the content thus created “returns” back to broader discourses about the past and influences them (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998: 178).

Another key challenge with the past, especially the distant past, is that we were not there to witness it. This means we must choose among competing

3 Generality in this case should be seen in the Gramscian sense of the word. The general is never static and unchanging, especially when it comes to hegemonic relations, which are characterized by the constant negotiations between the dominant and subordinate social groups leading to “equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point” (Gramsci 1971: 182). In this way, the views/visions of the past that are considered general in a society are not only in constant conflict with those views that exist alongside them, but are often renegotiated, changed or sometimes completely changed by them.

4 *Everyman His Own Historian*, stated by Carl Becker almost a century ago (Becker 1932).

historical narratives in order to accept a version of events, periods, figures, or objects. The past is singular, but history is plural. As King (2000) notes, memory becomes the medium through which we negotiate the relationship between an event and its reconstruction. Narration is a powerful, complex and potentially risky process, capable of shaping public opinion and, in turn, influencing social attitudes and actions. When storytelling is biased, selective, or distorted—especially in relation to difficult, shameful or violent pasts—it can produce strained relationships between communities and actors involved in those events. This is particularly relevant to recent history, which remains vivid in a collective memory.

In this context, public history as an intellectual and activists' endeavour plays a crucial role: it brings history into the public realm, encourages critical engagement with diverse perspectives, and promotes inclusive remembrance practices. Rather than presenting a single, authoritative version of the past, it invites dialogue and reflection, helping society navigate the emotional and political dimensions of heritage.

Heritage

The term *heritage* has acquired diverse and shifting meanings across different languages and historical periods. Although many scholars emphasise that the concept resists straightforward definitions, a general understanding can still be outlined. A key challenge in defining heritage lies in the nature of the concept itself: what qualifies as heritage, who claims ownership over it, and who engages with or consumes it (Harvey 2001; Schouten 1995; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Smith 2006). Heritage is mostly viewed as something created, maintained and handed down by past generations, with the expectation that it will be preserved for those yet to come. This view may imply that heritage is singular, fixed and easily identifiable (Timothy and Boyd 2003), which, as will become clear, is far from accurate. The issue is significantly more nuanced. Temporal and cultural contexts influence how heritage is perceived and valued, meaning that what one generation identifies as heritage may not resonate with those before or after it (Iguman Glušac 2024).

Whether we consider that: “Heritage is the contemporary use of the past [...] The interpretation of the past in history, the surviving relict buildings and artefacts and collective and individual memories are all harnessed in response to current needs which include the identification of individuals with social, ethnic and territorial entities and the provision of economic resources for commodification within heritage industries” (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1999: 105), or we trust Harvey's words when he says “Heritage itself is not a thing and does not exist by itself, nor does it imply a movement or a project. Rather, heritage is about the process by which people use the past – a ‘discursive construction’ with material consequences. As a human condition therefore, it is omnipresent, interwoven within the power dynamics of any society and intimately bound up with identity construction at both communal and personal

levels” (Harvey 2008: 1), we can understand that heritage is far more complex than simply “passing of something from previous generations to future ones” (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1999).

The significance of heritage in the formation of collective and group identities, self-understanding, and views of Others, economic and local development, as a key part of cultural-diplomatic and even political discourses, is in fact widely recognised and extensively debated in both scholarly and popular literature (for various disciplinary attempts to define heritage, cf. Iguman Glušac 2024; Smith 2006; Schouten 1995). At the heart of this complex concept lies not the past itself, but the contemporary connections between the past and present, connections that are always political, arbitrary and given to (re)interpretation (Hall 1997). To that extent, Laurajane Smith, similarly to Buden and Žilnik, argues that heritage is “ultimately a cultural practice, involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings” (Smith 2006:11). However, the clarification provided by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996: 20, also cf. Schouten 1995) between the past (what has happened), history (the selective attempt to describe the past) and heritage (a contemporary product shaped from history, [formed through selection and interpretation]) is significant for understanding the relational principles of their connections. The analysis of these connections and principles stands central in critical heritage studies, as they shed light on the processes of shaping the past in contemporary circumstances. For this, heritage is also considered a form of distortion of the past through selection (Smith 2006; Timothy and Boyd 2003; Walsh 1992). Schouten (1995) argues that heritage only connects to history once it is “filtered” through cultural and political frameworks such as mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romanticism, or marketing. Rather than being a neutral recounting of the past, heritage is a selective, value-laden interpretation shaped to serve contemporary needs—whether emotional, ideological, or economic. In this sense, heritage becomes a commodified version of history, crafted to inspire identity, pride, or tourism appeal.

As the outcome of a commercial, political, or any other process, heritage is always “reinterpreted depending on the current interests” (Gavrilović 2009). It is thus clear that only a selection of the past becomes heritage, and in that regard, Timothy and Boyd (2006) stress that the process by which something becomes heritage is necessarily context-dependent and never universal. This leads to the possibility of establishing hierarchies where some heritage is seen as particularly important, while others are considered less relevant or visible. As previously stated, this depends on certain social and political conditions, decisions, the social and cultural environment, and economic usability, as well as the global tendencies and changes. Moving the conversation about the constructivist nature of heritage forward, Hewison (1987) provocatively claims that “heritage is everything,” emphasising that theoretically, almost anything can become a heritage resource. Supporting this idea is the growing trend of engaging with past contents connected to previously disenfranchised

and marginalised groups, or a shift from grand narratives to vernacular heritage and everyday heritage (Marcshall 2008).

Everyday heritage refers to the often-overlooked cultural elements embedded in the daily lives of people, those that do not refer to grand monuments or iconic landmarks, but to local traditions, ordinary public spaces, informal social practices, and routines that shape the fabric of a community. Unlike official or monumental heritage, which tends to reflect dominant historical narratives and elite cultural values, everyday heritage embraces the experiences and contributions of ordinary people (Giombini 2020).

By recognising these practices as heritage, we move towards a more inclusive understanding of culture—one that aligns with democratic ideals by valuing diversity, participation, and shared ownership. Everyday heritage strengthens community well-being by fostering social connections, a sense of place, and intergenerational continuity. It also plays a vital role in sustainable development, encouraging adaptive reuse of urban spaces and community-driven planning. This way, everyday heritage becomes not only a cultural resource but also a democratic practice, enabling communities to define, care for, and share what they value most about their way of life (*ibid.*).

In this sense, heritage cannot be understood or defined unless we accept that it is created, constructed, and, most importantly, always represents a semantic field bursting with meanings coming from various directions and driven by diverse motives and actors. Heritage can also be interpreted as a kind of text that can be read and interpreted, or as a discourse in which we can identify social and other actors and their roles in the creation of its meanings.

Recognizing the difference between the past, history, and heritage, and acknowledging that the processes by which heritage is formed always leave many other past elements “in the shadows,” Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) coined the term “dissonant heritage” to emphasize that in every act of heritage creation—through each selection and interpretation—certain other contents are inevitably omitted, marginalized or decentred. They identified four forms in which this “disparity,” this dissonance, arises and becomes visible (*ibid.*: 29). First, dissonance can arise from conflicting messages surrounding a heritage content—“the messages embedded in the interpretation of the same or similar heritage can conflict, causing discord among users (of heritage).” Second, it occurs if the message is not interpreted as intended, if the heritage communication is not received in the way it was designed to be. Third, dissonance can appear if heritage messages are directed at a completely changed society, one that holds entirely different norms and goals than the one the message was originally intended for. Finally, the fourth form of dissonance refers to undesired heritage, the kind of heritage whose messages “a particular society or part of it would rather not hear or not allow others to hear” (*ibid.*).

It is equally important to continually question dominant definitions of heritage, which have traditionally been shaped by Western frameworks and tend to prioritise material, ancient, and aesthetically pleasing heritage. In her seminal work *Uses of Heritage* (2006), Laurajane Smith offers a powerful alternative

by emphasising the role of memory, identity, intangible dimensions, as well as the performative and dissonant nature of heritage. Smith argues for an understanding of heritage that embraces its complexity and ambiguity—not only the parts we celebrate, but also those we may feel ashamed of. It is precisely in this dissonance that heritage gains its true, multilayered significance—not just as a source of information or pride, but as a site of moral and existential meaning.

Such an approach aligns closely with the ethos of *Public History*, which invites us to confront the uncomfortable past, amplify suppressed narratives, and recognise heritage as a space of dialogue rather than consensus.

Public History

Public history is an Anglo-American concept that represents a specific niche of historical research—a subdiscipline of the humanities, concerned with the production and use of historical knowledge outside academia.

One of the best-known definitions comes from Robert Kelley, who defines public history as the “employment of historians and historical methods outside academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice” (Kelley 1978: 111). Although defining public history has been the focus of significant scholarship ever since (cf. Sayer 2015; Cauvin 2016), including its links and differences with seemingly comparative term of applied history (Kaal and van Lottum 2021), the main understandings are revolving around the underlying assumption “that history was no longer determined by grand narratives and traditional political history but by a view from the bottom up” (Nießer and Tomann 2018: 13), while applied history stressed the importance of historical knowledge for the public sector – “applied history emphasized the qualities of trained historians in political analysis (ibid: 14). However, the terms public and applied history often overlap, and depending on the focus, represent complementary activities and approaches. They can be examined through their contributions to scholarly research on historical topics, as well as through activities that commodify and commercialise historical content to justify their existence and serve public needs. The increasing use of historical content, discussed by Lowenthal (1985) and Walsh (1992), has likely enabled the development of these approaches. The expansion of these terms originated in U.S. universities in the 1970s, during the period marked by two phenomena: growing public scepticism toward academic historical knowledge (especially in light of the relationship between universities and government institutions), and the shrinking job market for postgraduate historians. Many turned to non-academic fields where they applied historical methods and research. This resulted in a convergence between academic methodologies and the interests of non-academic audiences—commercial users or the general public (Holl 2008: 31). The spread of these activities to museums, memorial parks, sites of memory, and private collections led to a specific mode of historical knowledge production not always aligned with academic developments.

Such a shift also foregrounded the study of “history from below”—the historical experiences of “ordinary people” and the “everyday”. As Tomann et al. write, this form of “history of everyday life” offers a “theoretically grounded analysis of social processes and structures, with a focus on how these processes are experienced, interpreted, and used among the population” (Tomann et al. 2011). This is why the concept of Everyday Heritage previously entered the discussion, not long after everyday life became a legitimate field of academic reflection in philosophy (Heller 1984, Lefebvre 1988), sociology (Karp and Yoels 1986), heritage studies (cf. Ireland et al. 2024) and cultural studies (de Certeau 1984). The focus on decentralised narratives, local contexts, and marginalised groups found its way into historical research as well, particularly in the U.S., where historians outside academic settings and even non-professionals have become active participants.

These approaches aim to serve as “bridges between social interpretations of the past, academic historical knowledge, and politically motivated collective narratives. Applied and public history promote participatory and pluralistic processes of negotiation between academia, history, and civil society” (Tomann et al. 2011). This favours pluralism in producing historical knowledge across academic, commercial, and civil sectors, while still maintaining a professional foundation.

The emphasis on multiple actors in this process often requires the same discourse analysis and other methods mentioned earlier. The focus is not on professional historians reaching out to the public, but rather on social actors, citizens, and consumers with strong historical interests (Tomann et al. 2011).

A seminal study that shaped the course of public history research was *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998). It debunked the widespread belief that “ordinary people” in the U.S. rarely engage with history, revealing instead that the majority interact with the past daily—visiting museums, talking about history, engaging with photographs as memory tools, etc. Similar studies followed in Australia (Hamilton and Ashton 2003) and Canada (Conrad et al. 2009).

Nearly two decades ago, the mentioned Rosenzweig and Thelen’s study also revealed a negative association with the word “history” among respondents, while “the past” evoked strongly positive and personal reactions. Schools—especially high schools—were seen as unreliable sources of historical knowledge, while other sources such as museums (1st place), family/personal narratives (2nd place), and eyewitness accounts (3rd place) were favoured. Conventional national histories were overshadowed by personal or group identity histories, particularly among minority respondents (African Americans, Native Americans).

When faced with historical content constructed outside of the mentioned favoured sources, respondents would be critical about it and compare it against their own personal or community experience. This is in stark contrast to statements such as that of L. Harlan, then president of the American Historical Association, who equated historical narratives with officially proclaimed visions

of the past and blamed the public for “ignorance and indifference toward our cultural heritage” (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998:177).

Such views contradict the inclusive approaches to the past promoted by public history, where the goal is to understand how citizens engage with the past and to support all forms of acceptance, reinterpretation, and rejection of top-down heritage narratives. The best forms of public history retain critical perspectives, challenge dominant heritage narratives with multivocal views, and “ask more questions than they answer” (Tosh 2008: 22–24; Jordanova 2006: 149).

Exploration of the relationship between public history and heritage reveals that there is no ontological difference between the two: no fixed, immutable relationship, although a synergistic connection is often evident. The political potential of confronting heritage content with that from public history is seen as a useful governance tool, promoting “particular visions of social harmony” (Myers 2006: 38–39). To that regard Dresser (2010: 43–45) links the actions of UK Labour governments in the early 21st century to projects in public history aimed at reconceptualizing the individual–heritage–society relationship. Thus, he quotes Liz Forgan, then director of the UK National Heritage Memorial Fund, who said:

“Once upon a time, we could safely leave the future of the heritage to scholars, specialists and the wealthy owners of our historic houses and objects... But the world has changed... More and more of the money and commitment for sustaining the heritage will increasingly have to come from governments or public authorities... This means that heritage needs political support, a broad constituency which will compel our elected leaders to care for the heritage because their electorates do” (Forgan 2008 quoted in Dresser 2010: 45).

The mentioned political support shifted the focus “from being something that is exclusively defined by experts on behalf of society to [something] that recognizes the importance of protecting a wide range of heritage and also of getting more people involved in identifying and caring for what is valued collectively” (Think Tank Demos, in Dresser 2010: 44–45). This meant shifting away from grand imperial architectures of memory towards narratives potentially in tension with traditional heritage discourses.

This shift is also underlined in the Faro Convention (2005) that emphasises the importance of heritage in the context of human rights and democracy. Through its principles, the Convention insists that heritage can have a positive impact on social cohesion, as well as on the value and identity of the space where it is located or practised, rather than being an isolated value that does not affect space and its people. Additionally, the Convention stresses that heritage should not be seen solely as an aspect of tourism, but as an integral part of the everyday life of people to whom that heritage belongs or whom it simply affects.

Thus, the relationship between heritage and public history can be understood as a space of synergy. Since heritage is always a product of signifying practices and interpretation, it means it is inherently a component of public

history, shaping both collective and individual perceptions of the past. At the same time, heritage—despite being a construct—carries strong emotional connotations, whether referring to national history or the history of smaller groups. From this standpoint, heritage influences broader historical understandings and the interpretation of “history from below.”

Various examples brought forth in this paper remind us of an inherent dependency of both heritage and public history on politics, power, and broader societal self-perceptions. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) describe the existence of “dissonant heritage,” which shows how micro-narratives from public history projects infiltrate and challenge dominant heritage narratives. Heritage thus becomes mapped as content created from/for particular positions in society, defined by dominant power relations and their preferred visions of the past.

Simultaneously, the existence of heritage-labelled spaces, practices, and artefacts invites public engagement through confirmation, reinterpretation, or rejection, constantly reshaping both personal and collective relationships to the past. In this sense, heritage becomes a starting point for public history projects, through which heritage is affirmed, questioned, and potentially transformed.

Heritage, Public History and Democracy

In contemporary societies marked by political polarisation, digital fragmentation, and resurgent nationalisms, heritage and public history are increasingly positioned at the heart of democratic struggles. While traditionally associated with conservation and education, both fields are today being reinterpreted as spaces of political negotiation, civic engagement, and identity contestation. As such, they hold a unique capacity not only to reflect but to shape democratic cultures, especially through their influence on collective memory, historical consciousness, and public dialogue (Nora 1989).

Democracy, with its contestability, inclusion, and deliberation, implies a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. It thrives on values that can also underpin critical heritage practices. Heritage, when approached as a dynamic, participatory process rather than a fixed set of elements, becomes a tool for cultivating historical pluralism. This is particularly in relation to public history that gives space to multiple voices, emphasising those excluded from official narratives. Public history also encourages dialogue between experts and the public, as well as community engagement, which is crucial in contexts where heritage is often a victim of politics. Thanks to this invitation to broader democratic participation in processes of cultural remembrance, the traditional monopoly of experts and institutions over historical interpretation is challenged.

However, the democratic potential of heritage is not given by default. In many contexts, the past is selectively chosen to support authoritarianism and to exclude minority voices. State-driven heritage initiatives may impose singular, tailor-made narratives, creating a national identity that erases dissonant or traumatic histories. This tendency is especially obvious in regimes where heritage policy becomes a tool for nation-building through amnesia, suppressing

contested memories in favour of glorified pasts. Economic interests further exacerbate this trend, as heritage narratives and their protection are often reconfigured to attract foreign investments, boost real estate interests and interfere in urban planning, which directly affects built heritage standing on its way. In such circumstances, heritage and public history risk being instrumentalised to reinforce rather than question existing power structures. These trends are especially noticeable in the developing countries (Timothy and Nyaupane 2009).

In contexts where democratic institutions are fragile, under attack, or hollowed out—such as in countries with authoritarian tendencies or hybrid regimes—heritage can paradoxically become a testing ground for democratic innovation precisely because of the vacuum left by unresponsive or delegitimised state structures. In places where public institutions lack credibility or trust, citizens increasingly claim ownership over memory through informal, grassroots, or bottom-up initiatives (Fiket and Pudar Draško 2021).

A good example of this is Serbia, which shows the state's ambivalent stance toward contested heritage—such as antifascist monuments, urban memory sites, or minority histories—which has prompted civil society actors, artists, and local communities to engage in alternative heritage practices: self-organized walking tours, memory mapping, participatory workshops, and street-level interventions that rearticulate the meaning of places and histories often omitted from official narratives. These practices not only resist the instrumentalisation of the past by dominant political actors but also prefigure more participatory, pluralistic, and inclusive models of cultural governance. In such environments, heritage becomes a space of political imagination, where democratic values are rehearsed even when formal democracy fails. This further underscores the significance of public history and critical heritage work as laboratories of civic agencies, especially when official, governmental institutions fail to deliver it.

However, recent global trends of increased community engagement and environmental and cultural activism prove how heritage can serve as a medium for social critique, historical restoration, and community healing. This also implies that heritage and public history are not only about the past but are inherently present and future-oriented. They inform how societies remember, but also how they imagine the future—what is preserved, who is heard and whose stories matter. This is especially critical in an era where public discourse is being increasingly shaped by algorithms, disinformation, and epistemic fragmentation. Here, public history has a responsibility to counteract historical manipulation and support critical media literacy and historical agency. Also, as cities and institutions experiment with more inclusive governance models, heritage is becoming a testing ground for democratic innovation. Projects using co-curation, deliberative gatherings, or participatory budgeting for cultural heritage demonstrate that citizens are not just passive receivers of memory but can be active co-authors of history. These processes—however fragile—signal an emerging understanding of heritage as a right, not a privilege, a commons rather than a commodity.

Conclusion

Heritage and public history stand at a crossroads. They can be mobilised to defend democratic life or to distort and constrain it. The direction they take depends on how seriously and willingly societies commit to plurality, inclusion and ethical engagement with the past. In this light, safeguarding and expanding the democratic dimensions of heritage is not simply a cultural concern—it is a political necessity.

Heritage studies have reached a critical point, moving beyond nostalgic, romanticised, and static interpretations toward more inclusive, reflexive, and socially engaged understandings. What is increasingly questioned is not heritage itself—its sites or objects—but the ways it is practised, interpreted and governed. Even though global, indisputable institutions such as UNESCO acknowledge dissonance as the useful keyword to move from authorised towards inclusive heritage discourse, they are now being challenged for their mostly Western-centric logic and the necessity to balance standardised global frameworks with the protection of cultural diversity and local meanings.

Today, heritage stands at the intersection of major global challenges: sustainability, climate change, inequality, social exclusion, and urban transformation. In this complex context, rigid and conservative approaches to heritage have proven inadequate. What is needed are flexible, participatory models that reflect the dynamic nature of contemporary societies.

This is where *Public History* becomes essential—as a ground that democratises the engagement with the past by embracing multiple voices, mobilising diverse publics and emphasising shared authority in the interpretation of heritage. Along with *Critical Heritage Studies*, it questions the so-called *Authorised Heritage Discourse* and invites the recognition of heritage as a living, negotiated process—one that is shaped through public dialogue and collective memory rather than top-down narratives. The critique of the Authorised Heritage Discourse draws on Foucault's (1980) understanding of discourse as multidisciplinary, rooted in social practices, and inseparable from structures of power. This perspective challenges the dominant focus on monumental, prestigious, and historically imposing sites, often seen as the exclusive domain of Western, institutionalised heritage narratives.

By exposing these power dynamics, Critical Heritage Studies and Public History invite broader participation in shaping heritage discourses. They encourage individuals, communities and grassroots organisations to intervene, reinterpret, and contribute their voices. In doing so, heritage becomes less a product of top-down authority and more a field of democratic engagement—open to negotiation, contestation, and shared meaning-making. True democratisation of heritage requires not only involving communities in decisions about preservation and interpretation, but also shifting focus toward marginalised, underrepresented, and formerly colonised cultures. It also asks us to move away from commercialised heritage industries and instead support community-based narratives that foster inclusivity, justice, and cultural dignity.

The legacy of the 19th-century nation-building and the post-WWII project of European heritage are today confronted by the rise of far-right populism, which often weaponises heritage to promote narrow, exclusionary identities. In the post-truth era, misinformation and political agendas distort historical narratives, amplifying conflict and polarising societies. Heritage is no longer just about the past—it is a site of struggle over meaning, identity and power in the present, and consequently future perspective.

This makes heritage a democratic imperative. Rather than denying the political nature of heritage, we must consciously integrate it into inclusive, future-oriented policies that recognise its societal role. Public History offers critical tools for this task by creating participatory platforms, amplifying local voices, and encouraging active citizenship. It reminds us that heritage is not a passive legacy, but a space for shared responsibility.

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Miloš Ničić i Sanja Iguman Glušac

Nasleđe, primenjena istorija i demokratija

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad istražuje složen odnos između nasleđa, primenjene istorije i demokratije, polazeći od stava da nasleđe nije neutralno prenošenje prošlosti, već osporavan, konstruisan i politički obojen proces. Oslanjajući se na kritičke studije nasleđa i savremenu literaturu iz oblasti primenjene istorije, tekst analizira na koji način dinamične prakse sećenja mogu istovremeno osnažiti zajednice i učvrstiti postojeće strukture moći. Posebna pažnja posvećena je konceptu disonantnog nasleđa, koji dovodi u pitanje jedinstvene narative time što ukazuje na izostavljanja, tišine i isključenja svojstvena procesima stvaranja nasleđa. U kontekstima u kojima su demokratske institucije krhke ili delegitimizovane, rad prepoznaje inicijative „odozdo“, iz lokalnih zajednica, kao prostore građanske intervencije i otpora.

Ovaj rad se zalaže za participativne i refleksivne prakse nasleđa, pozicionirajući nasleđe i primenjenu istoriju kao ključne alate za demokratsko angažovanje i upravljanje kulturom usmereno ka budućnosti.

Ključne reči: budućnost, demokratija, nasleđe, primenjena istorija, prošlost

