Heritage history – the Swedish Way.

By Owe Ronström. Presented at the symposium Cultural Heritage: A treasure that is seeking its price, Tensta Museum/Tensta Konsthall, March the 7th, 2013

Heritage is hot these days, it is everywhere. Heritage has become a moral imperative, a cult, a national duty. "Never before have so many been so engaged with so many different pasts", writes David Lowenthal, but "the lure of heritage now outpaces other modes of retrieval." A mode of retrival it is – heritage gives artefacts and ways of life that are no longer viable for one reason of another a second life as exhibits of themselves. In general terms heritage is one out of many ways to produce and represent the absent in the present. But it also produces something new: "Heritage is a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:149f). *(The heritage industry has introduced new discourses, redefined concepts, taken control over memory and history: by being heritagisised the past is transplanted into a new domain, and thereby acquiring new meaning.)*

A common way to explain the heritage crusade is to point to global trends or structures. The local example is seen as dependent upon and explained by the global. And yes, heritage is a globalised phenomenon, it is indeed everywhere. Much heritage is about producing the local for the global market (cf Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998). It's most globalised form, the World Heritage sites, represents one of few successful attempts to create a global reality, by locally implementing "outstanding universal values" (Thitchen 1995). But heritage is also a local phenomenon, used strategically as resources in struggles for power and influence. In this paper I will first look at the story of heritage in Sweden, before I turn to the Swedish case as an example of how heritage has become a strategical resource for reformulating who we are and where we came from.

A world of words and metaphors

In Sweden a large repertoire of metaphors have been spun around heritage. It is a church and a shrine, a school, even a temple of education, a museum and an art gallery. It is a treasury, an encyclopedia and bank of memory. It is myth, totem and fetisch.[1] It is surplus value, a kind of

[1] Beckman 1993b, 1998

VAT adding value to selected objects.[2] It is regional development, national cultural policy and big business. It is a weapon raised in political fights over pasts, presents, and futures.

Heritage the Swedish way, kulturarv, is a funny word. Often it comes in the singular, definite form, as kulturarvet. Often implied are capital letters and exclamation marks: KULTURARVET!!! As ”Vårt Svenska Kulturarv”, ”Our Swedish cultural heritage”, it is not only nationalized but also sacralised. As such it is beyond discussion, an institutionalized self-evident matter of course of undisputable value. Which is one of the reasons behind its applicability in Swedish politics, from the left to the extreme right.

Still, what heritage means is unclear. Heritage is a key symbol in a growing field, through which ever larger amounts of monetary, capital, cultural capital and attention capital flow, thereby attracting ever more players to use it in ever more ways. This makes the concept multivalent, charges it with ever more different and even contradictory meanings. A number of factions compete: there are the hard-core fundamentalists, arguing that heritage is everything we inherit, without exceptions,[3] and there are the more moderate wings that advocate careful selection. While one of these points towards the beautiful, unusual, rare, or valuable, another points towards the especially meaningful and symbolically charged, regardless of aesthetic beauty or other values.[4] For all of them culture is a value adding hierarchical system, which in practice turns cultural heritage into a quality stamp, for which age is one criterion, aesthetic beauty another, and the unique a third.

So, yes, heritage is indeed everywhere these days. One of the reasons may be, as David Lowenthal puts it (1998), that people have become obsessed, or even possessed, by the past. But there are also other explanations. One is that ‘heritage’ has become generic: All the different pasts that were - history, tradition, memory, myth, memoir – are consumed and subsumed by heritage. But then again it is necessary to remember that even if ’kulttuuriperintö’ (Finland), ’menningarfu’ (Island), ’duchas’ (Irland), ’kulturerbe’, ’erbgut’, ’ahnenerbe’ (Tyskland),’patrimoine’ (Frankrike), ’(cultural) heritage’ (England, USA, Canada m.fl.), ’wenhua yichan’ (Kina) are commonly translated into ’heritage’, it does not follow that these words mean the same thing. In England heritage may lead you to a small, old and cosy

2, Kirshenblatt Gimblett 1998
3 Se tex Edin 2002:11

villages, while in the US it more often leads to identity politics, as an equivalent of “roots”. In the US you can easily say “I have Swedish heritage”, while in Swedish “jag har svenskt kulturarv” is barely understandable. Even between closely related and mutually understandable languages, as Danish, Norwegian and Swedish there are important differences in usages and meanings of ‘kulturarv’.

Heritage the Swedish way

Sweden boasts the world’s oldest antiquarian state authorities. But it is in 19th century Europe we find the roots to modern preservation policies. One of these roots is a new historical consciousness, a radical separation of now and then, that makes the past appear as the key to the future and at the same time as principally lost, beyond any point of saving. In this new rift between past and present arose a contrastive mirror, in which change and development appear as constitutive of the present and the future, in short, ‘modernity’, while stability and continuity appear as the core of the past, the ‘tradition’. Thus ‘modernity’ gave birth to its own contrastive mirror image, ‘tradition’. This dichotomy was to become one of the most powerful organizing devices over the years to come, an instruments for preservation as well as fast and radical change.

At the end of the1900th century a division of labour is established within the field of preservation in Sweden. While the official state authorities produce the national and monumental history, the local, small scale histories are produced by ordinary people in the growing “hembygdsrörelsen”, which perhaps best translates as the movement for local history, which by the way today is renamed “the Swedish local heritage movement”. By and large, this is a division that still exists, and it is in the interaction between them that the narratives about “Sweden in the good old days” emerges.

With ‘history’ reserved for the national and monumental narratives, ‘tradition’ became the word for the local and particular stories connected to the peasantry in the Swedish countryside. In 1887 ‘kulturarv’, heritage, appears for the first time in print in Swedish, in a lecture by the author Viktor Rydberg, Sweden’s first and only professor in cultural history (Aronsson 2004:113), most likely as a translation of the German ‘Kulturerbe’. At first it was used mainly for the great ideas, values and pieces of art that serve as a common frame of

4 Bohman 1997

reference for the nation or a greater region, that is “what a people or nation in terms of (spiritual) culture has taken over from earlier generations.” During the following 100 years the word was not much used in ordinary language, or in academic or political discourse. After the Second World War the word seems to have been more or less abandoned, as happened to its German counterpart.[5] And as the public interest turned towards modernity, development and future, the past became more or less passé and preservation ideologies outdated.

In the 1960’s, all over the Western world a broad and loosely organized environmental movement took up the fight against the disastrous footprints of high speed industrialization and urbanization. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm, June 1972, became a turning point. With the World Heritage convention a new internationally recognized set of regulations was born, a machinery for identification and protection of natural and cultural objects of outstanding universal value. A new feature in the World Heritage Convention was the use of “heritage” where earlier discussions would have had 'property'. The new term signaled a change from focus on rights (owners’ rights, tenancies) to the moral duty to preserve and protect especially valuable inheritances from the past. The term spread fast and soon became the common buzzword for an international cadre of preservation specialists, a moral community with global pretensions established in many countries of the world in the following decades.

In Sweden this new cadre soon joined forces with young anti-war, anti-establishment and anti- capitalistic activists, in a potent movement against pollution, nuclear power, grand-scale development projects and inner city demolitions. Thus political activists focusing on the present and the near future, and preservationists with more antiquarian interests, often ended up side by side, which led to a radicalization of cultural policies that from the 1970’s gave way to a number of new concepts, such as ‘cultural memory’ and ‘cultural environment’. And then, in the late 1980’s, ‘cultural heritage’ became the buzzword of the day. In only a few decades ’kulturarv’ was established as the new generic term for just about everything considered valuable from ”the good old days”, in everyday language, political debate and academic literature. As in many other countries the introduction of term coincided with the ratification of the World heritage convention, which happened in Sweden 1986.

[5] Regina Bendix april 2004, personal communication

The Swedish ‘kulturarv’ was first introduced as an administrative term by antiquarians in and around Riksantikvarieämbetet, ’the Central Board of National Antiquities’, to cover their central areas of activity. From then on the ‘cultural heritage’ domain in Sweden has been dominated by the board, and marked by its practices and interests. In the last years the meanings and usages of ‘kulturarv’ has been vastly expanded, but a core still is the central interest area of what since 1998 is the National Heritage Board: monuments, groups of buildings and sites.

When heritage is established as the new generic term it is more than just a change of words. Swedish preservation politics is confronted with a new type of discourse linking preservation to identity politics, and a new understanding of production and presentation. If “royal treasury” can be a good metaphor for the first phase of preservation politics in Sweden, in the 17th and 18th centuries, then ‘national school’ may stand for the next, from mid 19th to late 20th centuries. “Heritage” signals a new phase, in which we are again brought back to ‘treasury”, although not so much royal as of universal mankind. As has been noted by Svante Beckman, this in many ways this represents a backlash, a return to ideas and principles that Swedish museums determinedly departed from, or even abandoned, in the 1970’s and 80’s.[6]

A vessel of meaning

In Sweden the fast expansion of heritage in the late 20th century has led to an impressive diversification: there is more heritage and of more kinds than ever before. But at the same time heritage has also become homogenized. While the field of preservation as a whole has expanded, the official state authorities have taken control over the core of Swedish preservation politics. Fuelled by ‘world heritage’ what could be called the heritage industry has developed an aesthetic essentialism hitherto unheard of, transcending all kinds of cultural and social borders, producing objects of outstanding universal value. Heritage, and especially world heritage, is often described as a tool for preserving the world’s cultural diversity. But by being produced in a globalised institutional practice by people with similar education and background, performed and presented in similar ways, and with similar discourses, all these different heritages nevertheless will become more similar.

[6] Beckman 2002:56.

Even if it is not possible to define heritage, it is possible to decide that it is valuable and important. This is what makes it so efficient, as church, school, treasury, development factor, big business and more. Heritage is perhaps best described as a vessel of meaning, possible to fill with ever new contents. A fascinating feature is how it manages to interconnect exclusivity and inclusivity. The universal grand heritages at the top interact with the lesser local heritages at the bottom level. As other globalised phenomena, heritage is constituted by interplay between extreme homogenization at the one level and the not less extreme diversification at the other. This produces an inevitable expansion, which now forces the heritage sector to move on from managing remnants of the past, to managing the consequences of such interests. The present fascination for heritage turns attention away from the politics of preservation to the mechanics of preservation. While the question "how" can be solved with ever more money, the question "why" demands more reflection, which there is less and less time for in a world where the past is seen as vanishing at accelerating speed.

Mindscapes and domains

As we have seen, there are many "heritage-words" in different languages, used in different ways. And there have been others before: in part, the present "heritage crusade" may therefore be an illusion, a result of dressing up many different old phenomena in new clothes. What this points to is that any production of collective memory, of collective pasts, must by understood in relation to other such productions. I will argue that a main explanation to the massive heritagisation of Sweden recently is the relation especially to one of the main predecessors, namely "tradition", as in "the Old Peasant Society", a past produced in a poetics that centers on the local and regional, 'the folk' and "the peasantry" of the 17th to the 19th centuries. I argue that a shift from 'tradition' to 'heritage' has taken place in the late 20th century and that this shift can be understood as a result of a crisis of representation, leading to an urbanisation of publicly displayed and officially sanctioned memorial sites, the "lieux de memoire" of Sweden at large (Harvey 1989, Ristilammi 1994, Nora 1989) *(This in turn can be related to a number of social, cultural and economical changes in the 1970's and 80's, as well as to changes in the political structures in Sweden.)*

'Tradition' vs 'kulturarv'

The word 'tradition' has been used in Swedish since mid 16th century, in rather different ways. The usage that we are concerned with here is "the handing down of customs, practices and beliefs", stressing either the process of handing down, or the customs, practices and

beliefs themselves. In this sense the word is known in Swedish since 1669. In the 19th century it became firmly linked to "the old peasant society"[7], and thereby, as I have mentioned, "tradition' became the natural opposition to "modernity'.

'Tradition' and 'kulturarv' are in many ways similar. Both are produced from things past - memories, experiences, historical leftovers. Both ensure survival to things in danger of disappearing, by adding value, such as pastness, exhibition, difference and indigeneity (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 150). They operate on much the same markets and are rationalized and legitimized in much the same way. They share a set of double references; first to something that has been but is re-enacted in the present; then to artifacts as well as behavior; and lastly to the process of handing over things from one generation to an another, as well as to the things handed over.

But it is nevertheless important to recognize that they are not the same, that we are dealing with two rather different modes of production, resulting in two different mindscapes, organised, formalised and institutionalised in two different domains, or in David Lowenthal's words, different "pasts". My argument is that an explanation to the success of heritage is precisely how these differences work politically and ideologically in the production of cultural representations.

While the tradition-domain centers around the rural, the 'old peasant society' of the 17th and 19th centuries, and is mainly geared towards production of locality and regionality, 'kulturarv' is predominantly urban, centered on the remnants of the noble and the bourgeoisie, geared towards the international or transnational. Both tradition and heritage can be understood as "chronotopes" in the Bachtinian sense,[8] but while 'tradition' tend to use time to produce 'topos', place, distinct localities, interconnected into large cultural geographies, heritage tend to use place to produce 'chronos', specific pasts that are more loosely rooted in place.

'Tradition' '	Kulturarv' ('Heritage')
Folk, peasants	Bourgeoisie, the upper class
Poor	Rich

[7] NE: tradition. The word 'traditional' entered Swedish language in 1836, 'tradition-bearer', in 1916.
[8] Bakhtin, M. M. [1930s] (1981)

Rural	Urban
Customs, rituals, expressive forms	Monuments, groups of buildings, sites
Local and regional	Transnational, global
Sweden	Europe

The two domains operates with two rather different interfaces. Tradition produces a closed space, you cannot just move into it. Tradition works much like ethnoscapes or VIP-clubs: to enter you have to be a member, or to be invited by a member, and membership is genealogical, it comes with birth or marriage. Heritage produces a much more open space that almost anybody can move into. Instead of membership by birth, the right kind of values - and wallets - are necessary. *Using computer language you could say that while tradition operates with restricted access to the source codes and with closed interfaces, heritage operates with open sources and interfaces.*

In Sweden, a core of 'tradition' is customs, rituals and expressive forms, such as narratives, music, dance, while the core of 'heritage' is monuments, groups of buildings and sites. Tradition is principally in the plural - every parish, every group of folk can have its own tradition. Heritage tends to be understood more in the singular, as 'kulturarvet'. There is much less of it, which makes it more precious and expensive. If 'tradition' produces the local, 'heritage' clearly is tied to larger units, such as the nation, Europe, or as in World Heritage, the entire world. Not everybody can have or appoint heritage, which is why heritage production to a much higher degree than tradition is in the hands of specially approved professional experts that select what is to be preserved according to certain approved criteria. In that sense heritage is a good example of the kind of global abstract expert systems dependent on new forms of impersonal trust, that Giddens (1990) has described as one of the consequenses of late modernity. Selection is the key, the more selection the more need for expertise. The current expansion of the word threatens this order of things, which is a possible reason why some main actors now seem to be on their way to abandon the concept.

Not least important is how the two mindscapes structure feelings. Tradition tends to evoke a nostalgic, bitter-sweet modality, a longing for and mourning over lost good old days, together with commitments to honour a specific local past, often personalized as "family roots". Heritage is about a much more generic past that you may pay an occasional visit to without

much nostalgia, obligation or grief. If tradition mirrors the desires, anxieties, longings and belongings of modernity, heritage is more of an answer to processes in late or post-modern world that promote play and experience, a shift ”from informative to performative” in relation to the past.[9]

Heritage is a global phenomenon, but what interests me here is how this phenomenon is used locally to redefine, reformulate and take control over aesthetics, history, economy and power. The idea is that the change from tradition to heritage is significant, that it signals changes in the production of collective memory. So, again, why is it that ‘kulturarv’, ‘cultural heritage’ has become such a great success in such a short time?

A part of the answer, I think, lies in the fact that the field of tension between tradition and ‘kulturarv’ coincides with and reinforces many other important fields of tensions with long history in Sweden: rural- urban, low-high, peasants/workers – intellectuals/bureaucrats etc. A result of this strongly charged set of relations is that other possible heritage productions, built around industries and workers’ history or around ethnic groups and ”multiculture”, have become less relevant and visible. As already mentioned the shift from tradition to heritage represents in effect an urbanisation of publicly displayed and officially sanctioned cultural representations.

Effects of heritage production

Three effects of heritage production, at the same time closely related strategies for taking control over results of such production, is historization, culturalization, and aesthetization. Historization is to use the past to give form to the present and the future. Culturalization is to reformulate in cultural terms who we are and what should represent us as a collective. In heritage production aesthetisation is both a goal and a means to reach other goals. On the one hand aesthetics often is a self-evident good and an unquestionable value, on the other it is also an important means to seize power. Through aesthetization important issues can be easily moved from the political sphere to rooms where decisions upon style and taste are taken by professional aesthetical expertise.

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[9] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, lecture in Gotland University, 16/3 1999. cf Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998

The influx of monetary and cultural capital in connection to the much heritage production has led to an intensified aesthetisation, resulting in something like an art gallery that exhibits objects ready for visual consumption: represented as full-scale models of themselves. “The artists”, then, are not the creators of the parts, but of the whole - reconstructors and preservationists, such as antiquarians, architects, cultural historians. In this light Heritage production can be seen as a part of a general development in which precedence over formulation and interpretation of central cultural representations has moved from producers to reproducers (cf Gillgren 2000).

What does heritage say and do? An important part of the machinery that produces heritage is certain rhetoric formulae that provide general abstract explanations and legitimation. Five common types are easily distinguishable: heritage creates/reinforces identities and gemeinschafts; heritage creates stability in a world marked by increasing tempo of life, faster changes, fragmentation and decreasing continuity in people’s lifes-worlds; heritage is a result of a general growth of interest in history in times of economical recession; heritage is aesthetical compensation for structural, cultural, and/or economical marginality or deprivation; heritage is an answer to the audiences request for play and experience.

Together with the heritage productions themselves, these rhetoric formulae represent and reinforce widespread ideas about a growing qualitative difference between the past and the present. The heritage industry’s answer to this alarming development is of course preservation. Heritage also reinforces ideas about cultures, nations, groups as having an identity that can be lost and found, and that without such an identity people cannot make their way towards the future. Perhaps even more important is that heritage reinforces a commodification of memories; sets up markets where such commodified memories can be displayed, bought and sold; and increases and directs attention, tourist flows and cultural capital etc. In short, it is not so much that heritage is about power, or has a power-aspect, heritage production is a way to exercise power.

Although often projected as neutral and objective, preservation is a process that constructs the very objects that is to be preserved. The old and valuable objects is a result of this process, not the other way around. Archivists, collectors, museum curators, not so much preserve, but produce “history”, “tradition”, “heritage”, using memories, historical remnants and all sorts of

leftovers as raw material. This makes control over the usages of preserved artefacts a major issue in the history of collection and preservation, and in the history of archives and museums.

Conclusion

In conclusion, heritage is production, a new mode of representing the absent in the present. The production of “heritage” departs from a reformulation of the relation between local, national and global and also between “preservation” and “use”. One of the ways to use the remnants of the past is as raw material for the experience and tourist industries’ expansion into our pasts, creating new memorable sites and destinations, projected as local and unique, but cast in a globalized mould. If before preservation could often be presented as an end in itself, and the experiences derived from the preserved objects as secondary, today, more often than not, it is the other way around. The idea is that the preserved artefacts no longer should be displayed in museum monitors, or in printed collections, but instead be used, in one way or the other, to produce experiences. This implies a major shift in the control of what there is to preserve, and of course, for what reasons and purposes.

My main argument is that the question of control is a key to the understanding of recent trends in global heritage production, and a key to the important but notoriously difficult difference between “use” and “abuse”. When certain objects are to be preserved, it is not so much the objects themselves we need to examine, as the preservation: its objects, methods, techniques, goals and ideologies. Again, a key to heritage is selection, which takes not only to what is selected but also to the selectors themselves. Who elects them?

The central questions is “What is heritage”, but also “What is it not?” and ”Why is it not?” Heritage production is as much about creating backsides and peripheries as fronts and centers, as much about hiding some things as about forcing other things up front. This brings us to heritage politics, how selected pasts are used to assume control and power over public space, which, in turn, brings us back to production: how, by whom, and why is heritage produced?