Ongoing conservation of fabric at the Athens Acropolis

What sustaining heritage really does

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly across the globe, heritage agencies have taken on board the critique of heritage management enshrined in Smith's (2006) argument about the dominance of an 'authorised heritage discourse' and the way this has been developed by other writers in the field. To this end, they are increasingly engaged in extending their work towards working with communities. This is highly commendable and contributes towards the sustainability of heritage as a category.

What gets lost in the debates about community engagement and involvement, however, is any consideration of the nature or role of the heritage agency as a type of institution; and yet an understanding of the role of these institutions in the process is essential if we are truly to break away from limited, top-down, highly managerial conceptions of what heritage is for. It is not just a matter of organisations doing what they do in a more inclusive manner; it is more than them moving from positions of authority to acting as facilitators. There needs to be a clear understanding by all involved in the heritage process – including those who work for institutions – of how institutions function in relation to the object of their attention and others who have an interest in that object.

KEYWORDS

1.   INTRODUCTION

The question this paper addresses is: what is it that efforts to create a sustainable heritage actually sustain? Drawing upon work from sociologists, anthropologists and others, this paper will outline an approach to gaining the necessary insights by an examination of heritage bodies as particular types of bureaucracy. The object is not to dismiss or denigrate the work of heritage bodies but to demonstrate and highlight the particular role they play in relation to maintaining heritage as a sustainable resource for the future. Bureaucracies function in particular ways: heritage agencies inevitably also do so. The ultimate consequences, which derive from sustaining heritage, therefore derive from the work of these bureaucracies and we need to understand what they are. This paper is therefore an attempt to consider what institutions do when they do their work. I start on the basis of a point once made by Michael Foucault: that people generally know what they do, and they have a good idea why they do it; what they do not know is what they do does (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983: 187).

The same applies to organisations: they know what they are for and what they do; they know how they work; but they are unaware (possibly because it is not really their job to ask) of the results of what they do at a larger scale. To take a possible example: the police of any country know their job is to prevent and combat crime; they know they do that by acquiring information on crimes and apprehending criminals; but what policing as a practice also does is define a category of 'criminal', which it then perpetuates by treating certain classes of person in particular ways and demanding resources to deal with them in those ways. It can be argued that criminality is the product of policing, not the other way around, but the police themselves are unaware of this.

In a similar vein, earlier work of my own (Carman 1996: 30-31, drawing upon Schwarz & Thompson 1990: 91-92) has shown how heritage is not protected and preserved because it is valued, but rather that it is valued because it is protected and preserved. This is in fact how legislation on heritage works: it first identifies its object, separating it from all other things in the universe; it allocates it to a particular set of institutional arrangements for its treatment; and as a result that material acquires particular sets of values appropriate to its manner of treatment (Carman 1996). It is not clear to what extent those involved in the day-to-day management of heritage realise the role they play in this, and it can be argued that there is no need for them to do so in order to do their job; but if the concern is to go beyond established practice, it becomes quite important to know what those practices are.

2.   HERITAGE MANAGEMENT AS BUREAUCRACY

Heritage agencies of all kinds are necessarily bureaucratic bodies. This is not meant pejoratively: bureaucracies are particular kinds of institutions that have certain characteristics and work in particular kinds of ways. They are designed to achieve particular kinds of results and do so effectively because of the kinds of institutions they are.

Peter Berger (1973: 202) describes bureaucracies as tools to impose "rational controls over the… universe"; in this respect, bureaucracy is to the social as factory machines are to the material. While factories change raw material into something of practical use, bureaucracies serve to order the social world and make it manageable. They do this through three characteristics all bureaucracies share.

- The first is termed limited competence (Berger 1973: 46). A bureaucracy can only deal with those things with which it is directly concerned. A heritage agency cannot process a claim for social welfare payments or a tax claim; but a welfare or tax office cannot make decisions about a prehistoric monument, even though all represent officialdom. In the same way, bureaucracies subdivide their own organisation so that different aspects of the overall work are undertaken by different sections: the parallel is with processes

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of factory mass production. It is of course highly rational to do this: but that reflects the purpose of the bureaucracy to impose rational controls on an otherwise chaotic universe.

- The second characteristic is orderliness (Berger 1973: 50). Previously-agreed sets of criteria are applied in all cases so that things are done identically. This reflects Mary Douglas' (1986) description of How Institutions Think which is really about how individual humans make decisions mediated through sets of shared assumptions so that agreement is reached even when there is evidence to the contrary. An example from the world of heritage management is perhaps Startin's (1997) paper on the assessment of archaeological field remains in Britain which studied how archaeologists had made decisions even without clear criteria, and the work discovered that in large measure they shared similar approaches: while a very positive thing it also demonstrates the level of 'groupthink' at work in people with similar training and shared objectives.

- The third characteristic is called general and autonomous organisability (Berger 1973: 53), whereby similar processes are being applied in different sections of the organisation by different individuals. This is exactly what Startin (1997) identified in his work even though he did not call it that: it consists of different people in different places looking at different things but nonetheless applying the same kind of approach to reach very similar results. This is a great strength of a bureaucracy: that it can achieve this level of consistency.

This is what we hope from any organisation: system predictability and consistency, leading to "a general expectation of justice" (Berger 1973: 52). Because it does not matter which individual out of many is doing the work of the organisation and making the decisions, similar results can be expected to be achieved in similar circumstances. This is what Berger (1973: 53) calls "moralised anonymity" which is the sum and result of all the characteristics of a bureaucracy, and which provides protection for the agents of a bureaucracy because it does not matter who does what so long as they follow the accepted rules.

So what does this mean for those who work for heritage bodies? First, consider the purpose of a bureaucracy: to impose order, not to act in accordance with a pre-established order that exists independently. A clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our position is necessary, and they may not be what we think.

3.   ISSUES OF VALUE

That 'value' is a key issue in relation to heritage is widely recognised. What is interesting in the debate about heritage value is how little of it is devoted to saying what we mean by 'value'. Our discourse of value is in fact highly truncated and collapses to three kinds of arguments:

- about types of value (cultural values versus economic values; or lists of uses to which sites can be put)
- about what is being valued (individual objects or places, broader categories of heritage object, or the purposes heritage serves, all of which are different kinds of things); and
- about how to measure value (usually reduced to descriptions of attributes such as age, rarity, aesthetic quality, condition and so on).

All of these discourses carry with them a host of untested and unquestioned assumptions about the nature of value, where it resides and how it relates to the thing that is valued. They also tend to be 'closed' arguments: lists are exclusive rather than inclusive, and one discourse (e.g. an economic one) incorporates no element of another but operates entirely independently (and academic papers are published in quite separate journals). The result is rather than reflecting the complexity of value that we all claim to acknowledge, we reduce that complexity to a set of separate issues which sit side by side. This is institutional (Douglas 1986) or bureaucratic (Berger 1973) thinking in operation at its least useful.

While I suspect we all know and recognise that all values are ascribed and none are inherent to any heritage object, site or place, we do not act upon that knowledge; and we allow slippery concepts such as

'authenticity' to slide by us without too much question. The same is true of other concepts which those who call for more flexibility (e.g. Thomas 2004) bandy about without too much concern for close examination: 'community' is one such (see Smith & Waterton 2010), and the rise of the 'stakeholder' concept (e.g. Carman 2005: 83-85) another. A particular issue which relates to all of these is the failure to engage seriously with issues of ownership (Carman 2005): and this is an issue not limited to denying the rights of metal detectorists, collectors or others to appropriate or damage heritage. It concerns instead an attempt to look seriously at how ideas of property infuse our own thinking and limit our capacity to act in relation to others. Even those who argue for greater public engagement by "help[ing] others to engage with the past for themselves" require that it can only be achieved by "use [of] our own, privileged positions" to do this (Thomas 2004: 199): note that we need to 'help' here; our involvement is an actual requirement. This claim to ownership of the past – 'allowing' others access to what remains of our past – is one of the many factors impeding our capacity to understand what we do does. One of things what we do does is to establish, maintain and authorise particular ways of approaching the complexities of the universe.

[activity that] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs
(Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development [Brundtland Commission] 1987; http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm);

living and managing activities that balances social, economic, environmental and institutional considerations to meet our needs and those of future generations (Fraser Basin Council, Vancouver, Canada; http://www.fraserbasin.bc.ca/about_us)

a state of organisation… that ensures… an opportunity for evolution, not just now but well into the future (Solstice Institute; http://www.sustainability.org/index_secondary.html).

Table 1.
Definitions of sustainability.

4.   DISCOURSES OF SUSTAINABILITY

There are many definitions of the term 'sustainability'. All of them consider sustainability to be a good thing and it is primarily a future-oriented concept (see examples in table 1). The latter is especially important in the light of recent work that specifically addresses the issue of 'futurity' in heritage practice (Högberg et al. 2018), which points out that the heritage field has no specific vision of the future for which we work and we instead exist in a 'continuing, rolling present' (Högberg et al. 2018: 6) which takes no account of any potential difference of the future from our own time.
This idea of 'sustainability' derives from two different disciplinary contexts.

- As a concept originally deriving from biology (e.g. Adams 1990), sustainability represents the attempt to create or maintain self-sustaining biological systems that will persist through time. Plants and animals can be introduced into a space and allowed to interact as they would if left entirely alone: the result will be a stable ecology where cycles of reproduction and predation will result in the continuing survival of species. Existing ecologies will be managed in such a way that the cycle of reproduction and predation already established will be allowed to continue and thus ensure the survival of species.

- As a concept adopted by economists and development agencies, sustainability means the creation of types of new economic activity that – by allowing the creation of new wealth – will allow a human community and its established way of life to continue. 'Development' alone has come to mean the introduction of new opportunities for the creation of wealth regardless of cultural factors, that may lead either to rejection of the new wealth-creating opportunities or their adoption but with significant effects upon the community whose well-being they were meant to ensure. 'Sustainable development' means the introduction of new wealth-generating opportunities which are grounded in local ideology and existing practices, allowing the established way of life to continue.

Figure 1.
Ongoing conservation of fabric at the Athens Acropolis.

What biology and economics have in common is a propensity for self-generation. Plants and animals reproduce themselves: as individuals die, they leave behind offspring; as each generation dies, it leaves descendants to carry on the cycle of reproduction and predation. Economic activity generates wealth and this wealth can be used to finance further economic activity: economic activity therefore leads to more economic activity. It is this capacity for ongoing and continuing activity – both biological and economic – that gives the idea of sustainability its meaning in these fields. Sustainability here does not mean mere survival of discrete entities but the creation of systems of activity, and it is the activity which is sustained, the system, rather than the individual components.

The concept of sustainability has spilled out beyond biology and economics into other realms. MacFarlane

(2000: 152; after Rannikko 1999) lists the 'dimensions' of sustainable development as: ecological sustainability; economic sustainability; social sustainability; and cultural sustainability. The common theme here is that of working in harmony with – rather than against – the object of sustainability, whether it is a natural ecology, economic wealth creation or a human community. Where one or more objects are concerned – such as in creating an economic system that will conserve biological systems and existing lifeways – the task becomes one of combining several different imperatives so that they do not conflict (see also Sustainable Communities Task Force 1993). In similar vein, Selman (2008) argues that the concept of 'sustainable landscape' contains five elements (environmental, economic, social, political and aesthetic sustainabilities), although for him these are

ranked equally.

It is evident from these two examples that sustainability itself is not a unitary concept, but can be subdivided into various kinds of sustainability, all of which are required to achieve an overarching state of 'generalised' sustainability. In considering sustainability from a heritage standpoint, therefore, we need to do the same.

5. HERITAGE AS A PROBLEM FOR SUSTAINABILITY: MATERIAL AND PROCESS

The question that arises is how to envision the idea of sustainability in relation to heritage. The name of our discipline can be used in two ways:

- to represent the material that is the focus of our enquiries: the sites, landscapes and artefacts that we study and manage (figures 1 and 2);
- to represent the practices of heritage in understanding and managing the material remains of the past: this is heritage as process (figure 3).

As material, heritage represents a problem for sustainability as conventionally understood. Heritage objects do not breed, they do not renew themselves, they do not create further heritage, they do not generate resources to be used to create new heritage sites. Instead the heritage is classically held to be finite and non-renewable (e.g. Darvill 1987: 1; McGimsey 1972: 24). Accordingly, a 'sustainable heritage' is a problematic category: it is inherently non-sustainable if subject to continuous destructive interventions, such as the process of excavation of archaeological sites or development projects, since once destroyed it cannot be remade. Nevertheless, some commentators (Carman 1996: 7-8; Holtorf 1998) have argued that the heritage is in fact – at least to some degree – 'renewable' and non-finite. They do so on the basis that it is a creation of heritage managers through their practices: we are constantly seeking new sites, new categories of material, new ways of exploring and interpreting the past, and thereby constantly increasing the amount of material we can include in the heritage. As a body of material, then, heritage can be considered to be sustainable so long as the process of heritage can be continued.

It is necessary therefore to decide what we consider to be the process of heritage that is amenable to sustainability. As practiced across the globe, heritage is at once an academic pursuit, a profession, an amateur avocation, a public service, a cultural activity, an industry, a legal requirement, an entertainment, and no doubt a host of other things (see e.g. Carman 2016). Those we call 'heritage managers' do many things: they work in museums and other sites, teach, write, appear on television, think, advise on policy, assess others' work, and serve as bureaucrats in local government and national and international agencies. Some do several of these things; others do only one. If heritage as a process is to be sustainable, we need to consider what will be sustained into the future:

- heritage as a concern with the past through its material remains? In which case this can be by professionals or amateurs: there is presumably no need to maintain the present structures of national heritage agencies, professional consultants, academic departments, and heritage officers in government positions; or
- heritage as a role of government? In which case we have no need of amateurs nor perhaps of academic departments: heritage training can be seen as a purely vocational exercise at the service of particular needs; or
- Heritage Studies as an academic discipline? In which case there will be no need for professionals or for involvement in government.
- or all of them, and others? In which case a mechanism for maintaining a diverse range of types of heritage work will need to be created.

Whatever the choices we make in answer to these options, what will be required for any of these to remain viable into the future will be the continued presence of material to be classed as heritage. This in turn depends upon whether we understand the heritage to be finite or renewable.
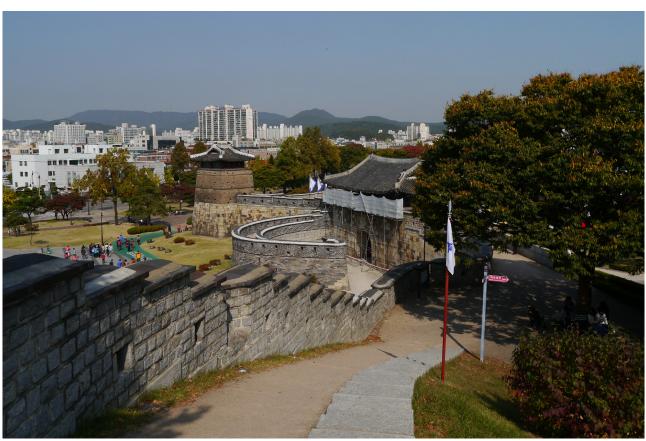
6. WHAT IS SUSTAINED BY HERITAGE WORK?

So what does this mean for those who work for heritage bodies?

Underpinning so much of what we engage in is a discourse of problems and their solution. We work on the principle that first you identify and define the problem, and from that we then work to derive its solution. But this is not the way the world actually works. We see this quite often in marketing campaigns: all those that offer you marketing or delivery of IT 'solutions' when you didn't even know they were a problem; and the 'solution' offered always lies in the area of expertise of the people offering it. In other words, the problem is defined in terms of its solution, not the other way around. Professional consultancies work on the same basis: the 'solution' they offer is always within the area of their knowledge and expertise and it is those terms that they define the problem they offer you as requiring solution. This realisation that the problem – solution relationship is in fact reversed is reflected in the work of Schwarz and Thompson (1990: 91-92). Their examination of energy policy-making resulted in the realisation that "policies are best understood as arguments for ways

Figure 2.
Preserving the fabric at Suwon fortress, South Korea .

of life, as rationalisations for different kinds of desired social arrangements…. [You] start with a socially induced predilection that leads you to favour the sort of social arrangements promised by one policy…. Having chosen [the policy] you then look around for justifications for it."

The same can be said of policy in any field. The 'solution' is derived first, and the problem defined to justify that solution. In our case, the solution is a continuing role for experts in heritage employed in various agencies. Therefore the problem is defined in terms of the way others perceive and act towards the thing in which we are expert – in our case, heritage.

Rather than seeking to identify problems which we can then 'solve', we perhaps should instead accept that there are not necessarily any problems in relation to heritage, but simply aspects of external reality. There are people who really do not care about heritage. They have no interest or concern for what we do. If we stopped it would not concern them in the least. And believe this or not, it is not a crime against humanity to think like that! The only people who worry are people like us because we have an interest in maintaining the particular social arrangements that provide us with status and income. People who do not care about heritage are a problem for us not because they are a danger to the universe, but because we cannot 'solve' them. Hence our concerns for the sustainability of heritage, community engagement, stakeholder involvement, and the like.

These serve our purposes and only our purposes. Maybe what we do ultimately does is only to offer us as a necessary component of social existence.

Figure 3
Preserving heritage practice: ongoing archaeological work in Lisbon, Portugal.

7. CONCLUSION

In short, our work is not about heritage as something independent of us that we care for, as we claim: it is about making us look important and needed. It seeks solutions to problems that only we define, and – lo and behold! – those solutions require us to lead on them. Our concern for sustainability of the historic environment and of heritage practices places us centre-stage: we are at once the problem and the solution. In other words, what we sustain in our search for sustainability is ourselves, our institutions and our practices. As so often, our search for sustainability is an exercise in trying to find a 'quick fix' to issues we – and ultimately only we – find troublesome. But there is no quick fix: because the problems are not problems, merely the kinds of things we find in the world.

If we are to progress our discussions – about the nature of heritage, about how to do our work, about how to proceed sustainably – we need to have a clear understanding of our place in the world. That means a solid understanding of what we do does; and to ascertain that requires a solid dose of three combined elements: honesty, courage and humility. We need honesty to look the world in the face and see it as it really is, and us as we really are. We need courage because we may not like what we see there. And we need humility to recognise that most – if not all – of the time the world's concerns are not about us. If our avowed concern with sustainability is really a concern for ourselves, then we can at least be honest about it, courageous in admitting it to the world, and humble in accepting the world's judgment upon us.

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