

NSF White Paper: A Call for a Social Science of the Past

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Abstract

The study of the past has long been relegated to the historiographical disciplines, e.g., archaeology and history. These fields will always be at the core of a contemporary study of the past. However, in the increasingly globalized world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is a growing need for the burgeoning field of “heritage studies”—the social scientific study of the past. What is the value of the past in contemporary society? How do we measure the value of heritage for such important societal issues as social cohesion and economic development? These are not only academically challenging questions—they also have real-world applications for communities, NGOs, and nations. This paper calls for a transdisciplinary research and graduate training effort at the national level, and identifies some of the key areas for a comprehensive research agenda. Such work involves fields that cross over and beyond NSF directorates: e.g., anthropology, ecology, economics, geography, history, landscape architecture, legal studies, political science, public health, public policy, psychology, regional and urban planning, sociology, and landscape architecture. Thus, NSF support and leadership for research in this area would fill an important niche in academic research, graduate training, and academic connections to praxis.

The Future of “the Past”

Heritage—an umbrella term for the relevance of the past in contemporary society—is a social phenomenon and material reality that is at once international, politically resonant, economically valuable, and deeply historical. The study of heritage, accordingly, is not centered on any one discipline or field; it spans many. Among the many aspects of heritage demanding greater understanding and research, its social, economic, and behavioral dimensions require the most attention in terms of both the building of theory and practical method.

In recent years, it has become clear that heritage preservation and interpretation have a critical role to play in the social and economic development of nations, regions,

and communities. Tourism is ascendant and is the largest economic sector in many countries; yet the benefits and depredations of tourism at heritage sites, for instance, can dramatically affect the coherence of traditional cultures. Heritage as a source of conflict is well known (e.g., Bamiyan, Mostar, Jerusalem); however, the use of heritage conservation to advance post-conflict reconciliation holds great promise. While the rigorous, empirical, and humanistic study of the past is the foundation of heritage activities, a change to a more holistic vision of the material remains of the past—as well as of intangible traditions—has begun to address these complex social conflicts and benefits. In fact, what is sorely needed in this increasingly globalized world is a “Social Science of the Past” that can encompass social, behavioral, and material dimensions of heritage. What do societies choose to remember? What do they choose to forget? Why does the past matter? And who gets to decide? Heritage can no longer simply be labeled as “local” or “national” or owned by a particular culture; heritage is increasingly global, shaped by flows of information and money, and actively contested. It is a significant part of the fabric of cultural change under globalization: “The recollection of history can be a major ally in the cultivation of toleration and celebration of diversity, and these are—directly and indirectly—among the most important features of development.”<sup>1</sup> In the coming decades, globalization processes and local restructuring of societies will proceed apace. As part and parcel of these processes, heritage will become even more prominent, more contested, and more highly valued. A dramatic shift such as this demands directed research efforts, requiring both international cooperation and a far-reaching transdisciplinary approach.

### Defining Heritage

Cultural heritage can best be defined as the full range of inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and living environments, and, most importantly, the range of contemporary activities, meanings, and behaviors that are drawn from them. It includes both tangible and intangible remains of the past (artifacts, buildings, ruins, crafts,

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<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen, “How Does Culture Matter?” in Culture and Public Action, eds. Rao and Walton. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, p.42.

languages), and the full range of contemporary activities associated with these remains, including preservation, purposeful destruction, commodification, commemoration, interpretation, repatriation, public education, policymaking, and tourism. A correspondingly wide range of social actors are involved in these processes: states, communal groups, individuals, and (in UNESCO's view) "mankind." Traditionally these different aspects of heritage have been studied separately by many fields of expertise: archaeology, history, cultural anthropology, planning, material conservation, etc. However, there is a growing need on the part of governments, NGOs, and communities, to deal explicitly with issues of cultural heritage and tie them to community revitalization, economic development, and social justice. Such an undertaking requires the building of new transdisciplinary approaches to the full range of heritage resources and heritage audiences. Therefore, the burgeoning field of cultural heritage provides both opportunities and challenges for educators and other professionals who wish to work across disciplinary, national, and institutional boundaries. To those of us working in the heritage field from various disciplinary bases, there is the sense of a growing but disparate academic literature—a lot of activity in need of a center or a framework.

### Scientific Strategy and Opportunities for Capacity Building

In the United States, the study of the past has been largely the domain of the historiographical fields of archaeology and history, and the application of these fields is found in historic preservation and cultural resource management. While these fields and applications will always be important to maintain, there is a critical need for the formulation of a scientific agenda and research capacity in the international, burgeoning field of "Heritage Studies," or what we are referring to here as the "Social Science of the Past." In particular, the following themes provide examples of some of the highest priority research areas both for both academic research and civil society:

- Identity—In what ways do the conservation and commemoration of heritage help foster a sense of modern identity among individuals and communities? Is heritage-inspired identity something imposed from the outside or does it nurture feelings that are already there? What is the demonstrable relationship between

feelings of heritage identity and modern behavior? Is it more likely to produce more productive educational, social, and economic behavior? What indicators can be used to evaluate this?

- Culture—To what extent do the present laws and policies of historic preservation reinforce or impose a “mainstream” or majority definition of heritage that excludes indigenous peoples, minorities, and immigrant groups? How can the commemoration of the past facilitate the coexistence of distinct cultures, rather than emphasize the historical and cultural boundaries between them? Can heritage initiatives actually help preserve the fabric of disintegrating cultures and communities?
- Economics—Are the monuments and traditions of the past viable resources for local economic development? Are the benefits of heritage tourism equitable—or even thoroughly understood? Is tourism the only index of economic benefit to be derived from heritage initiatives? What are its hidden costs to a community and does the investment-return ratio for heritage development really make sense? Can alternative economic activities and benchmarks for the benefits of heritage within the local community be identified?
- Ecology—How can the collective reflection on the past help maintain a balance between intergenerational rights and responsibilities? How do we maintain a sustainable balance between appreciation of the past and awareness of the challenges of the future? Is there a link between the guiding principles of the environmental movement and the prospects for a refashioned approach to Heritage? How do we finally dismantle the artificial partition between “Nature” and “Culture”? And what could be the social and environmental result?
- Civil Society—Can inclusive heritage policies, encouraging all sectors, stakeholders, and communities to participate in heritage planning and commemoration, have a positive social effect? Does the “democratization” of heritage participation also encourage democratic public discourse? How can policies and projects designed to enhance community identity, social cohesion, sustainable cultures, and local economies serve as tools for the wider cause of social development and positive social change? <sup>2</sup>

This research agenda must be addressed with participation from the fields of anthropology, ecology, economics, geography, legal studies, psychology, sociology, political science, public health, public policy, regional planning, and with area studies programs and the engaged historiographical disciplines of public archaeology and public history. The capacity building needs to move beyond interdisciplinary teams to the building of new transdisciplinary theory and method.

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<sup>2</sup> These five themes are being explored at an upcoming interdisciplinary and international conference organized by Elizabeth Chilton and Neil Silberman: <http://whydoesthepastmatter.org/>

The Role of the NSF in Positioning the U.S. as a Leader in World Heritage

The National Science Foundation could be a leader in funding research and graduate training in this transdisciplinary field of cultural heritage. Funding for this work in cultural heritage is challenging, because it often involves fields that cross over and beyond NSF directorates: anthropology, public health, urban planning, legal studies, history, and landscape architecture. Thus, NSF support of research in this area would fill an important niche in both graduate training and academic connections to praxis (i.e., training and research in connection with “real world” heritage projects). While there are several university programs and NGO-based centers in Europe that train students in this new burgeoning field of cultural heritage, in the United States most of the graduate training programs work primarily from within one academic discipline, and cast the field narrowly (e.g., archaeology, public history, planning, or historic preservation).<sup>3</sup> However, international governmental and non-governmental agencies are looking for post-doctoral professionals with training across disciplines and with the abilities to tackle the complexities of real-world heritage projects. Doctoral students in heritage-related fields need broad training in the full range of social-scientific methodologies, heritage law and ethics, organization and management of international multidisciplinary teams, engagement with community groups, the economics of heritage, the legal contexts of specific heritage preservation legislation, and the aspects of sociology, psychology, and anthropology that form the very cultural foundation for all of these activities and values.

The movement away from the heritage professional as omniscient, objective expert is a particularly exciting and challenging aspect of the nascent field of heritage-studies. Central to the notion of the “new heritage” is that communities and stakeholders should be engaged at all stages of work, and that in many cases questions and issues will emanate from non-professionals. This pushes social and behavioral research issues to the foreground, and there is little to draw upon. One could argue that the long-term goal of

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<sup>3</sup> Institutions that are attempting to break out of this mold include the Center for Heritage and Society at UMass Amherst ([www.umass.edu/chs](http://www.umass.edu/chs)), the Penn Cultural Heritage Center (<http://www.penn.museum/cultural-heritage/230-cultural-heritage-center.html>), and the Center for Heritage Resource Studies at the University of Maryland (<http://www.heritage.umd.edu/CHRSWeb/About%20CHRS/Staff/Shackel.htm>)

academics and researchers working internationally on cultural heritage is facilitating the modeling of a kind of “heritage ecology,” where towns, governments, experts, and community members frame heritage resources along the same lines that we ideally manage environmental resources in the U.S. in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—recognizing the ownership of, responsibility for and knowledge about this important “commons” is an issue of long-term, global significance.

Relevant Readings:

Ahmad, Yahaya (2006) The Scope and Definitions of Heritage: From Tangible to Intangible. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12(3):292-300.

Graham, Brian, G.J. Ashworth, and J.E. Tunbridge (2000) *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture, and Economy*. London: Arnold.

Grenville, Jane (2007) Conservation as Psychology: Ontological Security and the Built Environment. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 13(6):447-461.

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