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Cultural Politics and World Heritage

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Historians might say such and such monument has historical value, whereas art historians might say certain monuments have aesthetic value. But sociologists must ask themselves other types of questions – why does society preserve its cultural heritage? How have we come to think that ancient monuments are worthy of being preserved?

These questions arise from Georg Simmel's question how is society possible? This is a fundamental question in sociology, according to him (Simmel 1908). In fact, the preservation of cultural heritage plays an undeniable role in the maintenance of society. But in some cases, it also provokes conflict. This paper focuses on the latter, citing the example of world heritage.

Political aspects of Inscription

The process of inscription on the World Heritage List presupposes a lengthy negotiation and it often provokes political debate. In the first phase of this process, ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a non-governmental international organization dedicated to the conservation of the world's monuments and sites, evaluates nomination dossiers in accordance with the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. In the second and last phase, the World Heritage Committee holds an ordinary session once a year and makes a final decision. The members of the Committee include many diplomats, although according to the Rule of Procedure, "States members of the Committee shall choose as their representatives persons qualified in the field of cultural or natural heritage." However, the Convention of the World Heritage Committee's 35th session designates that "the delegations are directed by diplomats who less and less frequently call upon their experts."¹⁾ It shows explicitly that

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1) <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2011/whc11-35com-INF9Ae.pdf>

decision-making depends not only on the academic point of view but also on diplomatic negotiation.

A Japanese diplomat Seiichi Kondô describes his experience of negotiation at the World Heritage Committee in 2013 when the Japanese government submitted the nomination dossiers of Mt. Fuji (Fujisan) (Kondô 2014). The site is composed of 25 components, including the Miho no Matsubara pine tree grove. It is located on a beach where travelers could view and appreciate Mt. Fuji. This landscape attracted, in the nineteenth century, famous artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige who drew Mt. Fuji, the sea face and the pine tree grove. However, ICOMOS suggested excluding Miho no Matsubara from the components of the World Heritage site. Faced with this decision, the Japanese delegation had two options. The first was to accept the suggestions of ICOMOS to avoid a potential source of conflict. The second option was to make ICOMOS understand the value of the pine grove so that it could be included in the components. Kondô chose the second option and tried to negotiate with the members of the World Heritage Committee, some of whom were diplomats he was familiar with. In his book, he highlighted the hegemony of European countries in decision-making. This was the reason he made contacts mainly with representatives of four European countries. Because of his negotiation skills, Miho no Matsubara was chosen at the Committee meeting as a component of the world heritage site, contrary to the recommendations of ICOMOS.

Following this anecdote, historians recorded several conflicts of varying levels. The first conflict is between experts and non-experts. Normally, experts possess the power of decision-making. But non-experts who represent the interests of their country intervene. Experts claim to respect the value they consider universal, while diplomats try to impose national interests. The second conflict arises among the experts insofar as not all experts share the same principle of heritage conservation. The third conflict takes place between different societies as the Miho no Matsubara incident shows. This paper aims to analyze these complex conflicts and strategies adopted by different stakeholders.

Capitalistic desire and Museological desire

Conflicts of different kinds concerning cultural heritage arise from the question of materiality. Since the nineteenth century, to be socially recognized, an object must acquire the status of a commodity or of a cultural heritage. An object can be a commodity in the capitalist system. It can also acquire cultural value in cultural heritage institutions. For example, an art object can be sold in the art market as a commodity. But when it becomes a part of a museum collection, it is transformed into a cultural heritage.

The capitalist system and cultural heritage institutions, thus, liberate the desire to understand the unknown and to appropriate what the stranger has produced. Consumers buy an item that someone else has produced. They do not have to know who has produced this item. This desire of consumers can be called *capitalistic desire*. Curators seek an object produced by a society to which they do not belong historically or geographically. Tourists visit a cultural heritage site that is not familiar to them. This desire shared by curators and tourists is called *museological desire*.

Capitalistic desire and museological desire are legitimated almost at the same time. These are essentially developed by the bourgeoisie. It is certain that the bourgeoisie is the main promoter of the capitalist system and as such, they have to develop capitalistic desire. At the same time, the bourgeoisie seeks to develop the desire for the property of kings and aristocracy on the one hand and that of so-called primitive societies on the other. The Louvre, the palace of Louis XVI was, thus, transformed into a museum after the French Revolution.

Once an object acquires the status of a commodity or cultural property, it should be exhibited in a public place. Merchandise should be exhibited in shops. In the same way, fine arts should be exhibited in museums and historical monuments be opened to the public. Another convergence between the capitalist system and cultural heritage institutions is authenticity and integrity. The notion of authenticity comes from the intention to make a clear distinction between true and false. Cartesian philosophy is the first to emphasize this distinction. According to Descartes, "I had always had an extreme desire to learn to distinguish true from false in order to see clearly into my own actions and to walk with safety in this life" (Descartes 1968). In the capitalist system, diamonds, Levi's jeans, or any merchandise should acquire a sign of legitimacy that they are authentic in one way or the other. It is the same for cultural heritage institutions. An art object should be authentic so that it is judged as having great artistic value. Authenticity is related to the concept of uniqueness. An authentic fine art object constitutes a unique existence and as such, is regarded as a reference. It is, thus, continually copied and reproduced. The notion of integrity also applies to both. A commodity must be by definition, integral. If it is defective, a new one should replace it. In the same way, cultural heritage has to remain intact.

Contrary to the elements of convergence like the desire of possessing what a stranger has produced, the need of exhibition and the value of authenticity, a difference between the two lies in the fact that cultural heritage institutions consist of preserving objects and monuments forever; as soon as an object is classified as cultural heritage, it should be regularly repaired and never destroyed. Cultural heritage is, thus, closer to a mummy, a favorite museum object. As part of

conservation efforts, all elements which pose a risk to cultural heritage should be avoided. The environment around the World Heritage site should, therefore, be clean, transparent, and safe. Any sign of violence must be eliminated. A World Heritage site thus becomes a symbol of eternity. Another difference resides in the question of value and price. The value of an item is evaluated by its price, while cultural heritage is priceless. When a picture is being sold in the market, it is a commodity. But when it is part of a museum collection, its value cannot be evaluated quantitatively by a price any more.

If cultural heritage should be preserved forever, it is because the capitalistic desire tends to deny the notion of continuity. The capitalist system seeks to produce and sell items as quickly as possible to make more profit. Speed becomes important and hence the duration is considered negative for production. This tendency is accentuated nowadays. According to Zygmunt Bauman, to be transient becomes a value and duration is less important (Bauman, 2005). In the same way, David Harvey designates the ephemerality as the dominant notion of time in consumer society (Harvey, 1989).

However, the absence of duration and the extension of temporal fluidity put social order in danger. To overcome this situation, in one way or the other, societies have to ensure stability, in order to absorb the risk of temporal fluidity. A space is considered stable if we can see the same landscape every day, and it is better if we can recognize a *centre* of our living place. In this circumstance, our identity of space is assured; the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, observed that a “sacred centre” defines the spaces where people spend their daily lives (Eliade 1969). The nation-state, defender of the capitalist system on one side, makes use of this mechanism to deal with the temporal fluidity caused by capitalism and to create a national identity by resorting to cultural heritage institutions. Les monuments as cultural heritage that symbolize national history become the foundation of the nation. Note that national identity is also defined in relation to the representation of other societies. Archeology and anthropology play a crucial role in the representation of other societies.

Question of authenticity and integrity

Museological desire is, as mentioned above, the desire to preserve. The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage that concluded in 1972 declared that cultural heritage and natural heritage are increasingly threatened by destruction not only due to traditional causes of decay, but also due to changing socio-economic conditions, which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction.²⁾ The Convention

focuses especially on the protection of cultural heritage. Preservation is more important than exhibition. If cultural heritage is opened to the public, the damage may be much faster. Therefore, in some cases, it is forbidden to provide access to the public.

Authenticity and integrity are the conditions *sine qua non* of preservation. The World Heritage institutions respect faithfully the principle of authenticity deriving from the net distinction between true and false. According to the *Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage sites means “cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.” And “as such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole.”²⁾ To be deemed to be of Outstanding Universal Value, a property must satisfy the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity and have an adequate protection and management system to ensure its safety. The Guidelines define strict conditions of authenticity such as form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions, techniques and management systems, location and setting, language, and other forms of intangible heritage, spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.

However, in the 1980s, these definitions of authenticity began to be questioned. To respect faithfully the guideline, it should be necessary to restore World Heritage sites in their original condition to the extent possible. But in fact, it is extremely difficult to fulfill all these conditions, insofar as all objects and architecture deteriorate and restorers cannot always obtain original materials. Take the example of the historic center of Warsaw. Indeed, the city of Warsaw was almost destroyed during the war and so it could not necessarily satisfy the conditions of authenticity. However, Warsaw’s restored historic district has been inscribed on the World Heritage List. Since this inscription, the conflict between the partisans for authenticity and the partisans for the revision of the classical conception of authenticity becomes explicit. Partisans for the classical concept of authenticity, including ICOMOS, are the majority. Sophia Labadi raises a larger problem that extends beyond specialists. She states that understandings of ICOMOS about authenticity do not take into account non-European approaches (Labadi 2010). Societies which do not share the same criteria as that of UNESCO and ICOMOS would have difficulty adapting to cultural values coming from outside.

2) <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

3) *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*
<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide13-en.pdf>

Nara document and immateriality

This situation changed when the Japanese parliament ratified the Convention in 1992. Himeji Castle and Horyu Temple, the oldest wooden constructions, were chosen as the first candidates for World Heritage site status. But Japanese specialists had not been sure that the castle and the temple would pass the conditions of authenticity required by the Guideline. The wooden structures like the castle and the temple are damaged faster than the stone edifice. It is thus necessary to replace the damaged parts more frequently, making it difficult to use the same material. Finally, the castle and the temple were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1993 without opposition. Nevertheless, they felt the need to show that there was another way of heritage conservation than that practiced in Europe. Their interests joined those of European experts who intended to modify the classical principle of authenticity.

Thus, in 1994, the Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention was held. Partisans for the revision of the principle of authenticity and Japanese experts took the initiative of the conference and the Nara document was adopted. It focuses on recognizing the “diversity of world cultures and its heritages.” It allows many “cultural traditions” to claim to be a World Heritage site.

The Nara document brings three consequences. The first consequence is the legitimization of the strategy of reproduction, which makes it possible to restore the cultural heritage in danger, and in certain cases the reproduction will substitute the original. It is thus opposed to the principle of preservation where respect is granted to the original. The second consequence resides in the fact that the value of materiality is relativized insofar as the principle of authenticity and integrity are no longer strictly enforced. This change brings the third consequence of the Nara conference. The relativization goes with the tendency of according more importance to the representation than the materiality. The discovery of cultural heritage in itself is less important than its representation and how to represent a site becomes imperative, which means the increased importance of the narrative in the strategy of registration. Selection criterion (iii) for the inscription for the World Heritage List becomes, then, more important (Yukimura 2017). According to selection criterion (iii), a world heritage site is “to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.”⁴⁾

4) The Nara document states in an abstract way that all judgments about values attributed to cultural properties as well as the credibility of related information sources may differ not only from culture to culture, but also within the same culture, and that it is thus not possible to base judgments of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. The document adds that on the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties be considered ↗

Therefore, it is enough to demonstrate that such a site is “a unique testimony to a cultural tradition.” Since diversity is valued in the Nara document, it becomes easier to make a narrative about such a site. In fact, since 1998, the selection frequency of criterion (iii) has increased.

Semantics of Inscription

As the story plays an important role, local and national governments try to constitute one convenient rule for the inscription. Gradually, certain semantics of the inscription are being developed. In Japan, two elements conduct the semantics of the inscription. First, the narrative for the inscription tends to evoke the notion of modernization and globalization. Among World Heritage sites that are registered relatively recently, at least four sites build upon this narrative based on the exchange with European civilization, which brought Christianity and industry-related ideas to science and technology. There are Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape (2007), Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites (2014), Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining (2015), and Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region (2018).

Especially, the Tomioka Silk Mill and the sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution are directly related to the industrial revolution and modernization. “Tomioka Silk Mill and its related sites became the centre of innovation for the production of raw silk and marked Japan’s entry into the modern, industrialized era, making it the world’s leading exporter of raw silk, notably to Europe and the United States.”⁵⁾ In this presentation of the site, two adjectives, “modern” and “industrialized,” are key words. They show the site is valuable because it symbolizes modernization and industrialization in Japan. Another important expression is “world’s leading exporter.” It shows how Japan became a major player in the world economy. In particular, it emphasizes Japan’s relationship with Europe and the United States. In the case of Tomioka Silk Mill, the exchange between France and Japan is particularly important. “The main buildings of Tomioka Silk Mill are those from the time of establishment, constructed between 1872 to 1875 that depict the technological exchange from France and Japan.”⁶⁾ We can often find the words “international exchange” like “international exchange and technological innovation in sericulture and silk-reeling.” Not a simple importation of foreign

↘ and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong. This idea of diversity regarding cultural values stated in the Nara document was finally expressed in the revised Guidelines of 2005.

5) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1449>

6) <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1449.pdf>, p.129.

technology but exchange with European countries or reciprocity is highlighted.

A characteristic of Tomioka Silk Mill and its related sites resides in “its related sites.” There are three related sites, successively, an experimental farm for production of cocoons, a school for the dissemination of sericulture knowledge and a cold-storage facility for silkworm eggs. In a way, these sites became components of World Heritage by chance.

The first site is an experimental farm for the production of cocoons. This is the residence of Yahei Tajima, who perfected a method of cocoon production. The house is not so attractive but is equipped with a thermal-powered system for temperature and humidity control named *Yagura*. When we visited the site in 2014, there were a few tourists despite being a weekend. In front of Yahei’s house, residents of the neighborhood had gathered and were talking while eating brined vegetables. The inscription on the World Heritage List made Yahei’s house a neighborhood center. This is a consequence of the *unexpected* inscription. The inhabitants had ignored the value of the house. Once it was inscribed on the World Heritage List, the house became a symbol of the region.

The situation is almost the same for a school for the dissemination of sericulture knowledge founded by Chôgorô Takayama. Chôgorô transformed his residence into a silkworm rearing room and imparted sericulture training to young apprentices. Like Yahei’s house, a few tourists visited the site. Some volunteers, all retired were standing at the entrance. One of them told us about his life. He was born in the neighborhood but lived in Tokyo for his work. After retirement, he came back to his hometown. After the inscription on the World Heritage List, he recognized the value of the site and decided to remain here as a volunteer guide.

The same characteristics apply to the cold-storage facility for silkworm eggs constructed at the Arahune wind hole. But another characteristic is noteworthy. It is the tendency to read meaning into nothingness or almost nothingness. Experts, local officials, and activists for the promotion of cultural heritage try to find meaning even in the smallest sample of old ruins where no such heritage, or very minimal components of heritage, exist. Precisely, buildings of the cold-storage facility no longer exist. It is just ruins. If we had not known the role he played in sericulture, we would not have recognized his worth. This example clearly states that the importance of inscription is more accorded to the representation of cultural heritage than its materiality itself.

The most typical and curious example is the Ebisugahana Shipyard, a component of the sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining, where nothing remains on the surface (Figure 1), because the site is “underground” and so, the shipyard is invisible. It has not been preserved in an integral way. It seems to oppose the Guideline whose integrity is a



Figure 1 Ebisugahara Shipyard, 2015 (Photo by the author)

prerequisite. But if the narrative is convincing enough, or better, deemed sufficient, a cultural property of nothingness can become a World Heritage site. Hagi city established a plan for substituting the invisible shipyard. The city will put planner markers indicating the location and the scale of the remains. Another option is to use a three-dimensional method.

Another narrative for registration refers to the origin of Japanese society. In 2019, Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan was inscribed on the World Heritage List and the Japanese government decided on the submission of Jomon Archeological Sites for World Heritage inscription the same year.

The Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group has been triggering conflicts between archaeologists and the Imperial Household Agency. Some *kofun*, which means old mounds, are called *ryobo*, especially by the Imperial Household Agency because they are considered imperial mausoleums and the Agency manages these mausoleums. On the contrary, archaeologists suggest the use of the term *kofun* for all mounds and to avoid the term *ryobo*. Therefore, some mounds have two different appellations. For example, the largest mound of Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group is called *Daisen kofun* by archaeologists and historians and Nintoku Tenno *Ryo* by the Imperial Household Agency; Nintoku Tenno is the name of an emperor recorded in *Kojiki*, the oldest Japanese chronicle edited in the eighteenth century. *Ryo* has the same meaning as *ryobo*. Naofumi Kishimoto, an archeologist and an expert on the subject, advanced the argument that this mound should not be attributed to Nintoku Tenno but to another one. Since the nineteenth century, each mausoleum is attributed to an emperor, Tenno, even though there was no evidence. So, there may be errors, and in any case the word Tenno did not exist when the mausoleums were built in the fifth century; the great king was called *Ôkimi* and it is

not obvious these *Ôkimi* were ancestors of the imperial family. This rediscovery of the mausoleums in the nineteenth century is closely linked to the rise of the imperial ideology that would establish the Meiji government. The imperial ideology stated that since the founding of Japan, the imperial family keeps the same and unique genealogy, *bansei ikkei*. The Meiji government had, thus, a strong interest in legitimizing the genealogy of the imperial family and used mausoleums to justify the ideology of a unique genealogy.

The Imperial Household Agency implicitly sticks to the mythology of the past even after the imperial ideology was denied and the status of the emperor has changed. The Agency refused to open mausoleums to the public. Therefore, archaeologists asked the Imperial Household Agency to conduct research inside mausoleums from 1976. Since 1978, the agency allows specialists to conduct a survey on one mausoleum every year but the specialists have access only to a part of the mausoleum on which they conduct research. The same situation continues after the inscription on the World Heritage List. The Agency for Cultural Affairs normally in charge of the World Heritage sites agrees that the Imperial Household Agency continues to assume the same responsibility for the mausoleums after the inscription. Therefore, archaeologists fear that the imperial agency will continue to keep the same closed attitude.

The narrative about Jomon Archeological Sites is also related to the origin of the Japanese society but it depicts another type of story. The representative of this story is Takeshi Umehara. According to Umehara, the Sannai-Maruyama ruins prove his hypothesis that the foundations of Japanese culture lie in the Jomon culture. The Sannai-Maruyama site shows that in the Jomon era (about 16,000 BC to 3000 BC), a very high-quality civilization with abundant food production existed. And his notes through a series of important discoveries in this site, reveal the mentality of the Japanese (Umehara et al., 1996).

In fact, local residents had known the existence of the ruins and some residents had collected earthenware pieces, which had retained their integrity. But when the construction of a baseball stadium began in 1992, it was discovered that the site was much larger than had been previously believed. After two years of research, in 1994, Aomori prefecture decided to cancel the construction project to preserve the site. Since then, the research on the site continues and Umehara's ideology seems attenuated. Nevertheless, his idea of Jomon culture as foundation of Japanese culture propelled the excavation of the ruins. And the site shows the beginning of the sedentary life and the emergence of villages. Graves were also discovered. These findings could prove the existence of "the first civilization in Japan."

Illusion of diversity

We have shown some aspects of conflict with regard to the inscription on the World Heritage List and strategies adopted to pass the selection without causing problems. The introduction of the concept of diversity with the Nara document is also an attempt to prevent the emergence of various conflicts. Diversity becomes, thus, a key word in cultural heritage institutions. This concept is expected to resolve conflicts that arise at different levels and between different stakeholders.

If so, can diversity always reconcile different groups in conflict? We suppose that diversity should meet, at least, two fundamental standards. First, the concept of diversity proposed in the Nara document cannot always marry up with culture that has no tradition of preservation of cultural heritage publicly. In Japan, for a long time, the protection of cultural heritage was left to private individuals and public authorities hardly intervened. Temples and shrines that own cultural properties only make them available to the public once a year for a limited period of time, refusing to lend their properties to public museums. In Imari city, renowned for its pottery, Imari-yaki, an enormous kiln used from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century was discovered. A ceramicist bought this kiln from the original owner of the land on which the kiln was discovered. At the time, Imari city was not interested in buying the kiln that was to be a heritage of the region. Therefore, the kiln belongs always to the same ceramicist and is not classified as cultural heritage. This type of culture that shows little interest in public cultural heritage preservation can be called *culture of secrecy*. Collectors of ceramics only share their high-value pieces with a limited group of close friends. World Heritage institutions radically transform this culture of secrecy. Diversity cannot approve this culture of secrecy because it presupposes that World Heritage sites are open to the public within the framework of World Heritage institutions. Local governments and communities reject the culture of secrecy and make efforts to have their heritage inscribed onto the World Heritage list. In doing so, the culture of secrecy will disappear.

Moreover, in Japan traditionally, there exists a belief that used objects have a bad spirit which should be exorcized in one way or the other. *Hari kuyō*, a sort of requiem service for broken needles, is a typical example of the exorcism. Diversity cannot give a place for the act of forgetting or culture of oblivion.

Another problem facing diversity is the contradiction between diversity and universal value. The Guidelines insists on the outstanding value, which is transcendental for all humanity. As such, World Heritage sites should be passed on to for future generations. But in fact, what does it mean “all humanity?” The concept of all humanity presupposes the existence of a transcendental value system that the international community can share as a whole. Does this value system

common to all people really exist? Do all societies share the same value? And in particular, the concept of universal value can contradict the concept of diversity insofar as diversity presupposes the right to be different. It means diversity accepts those who do not share a so-called universal value. But diversity is accepted only within the framework of world heritage institutions. There is no room for *archaic* desires that are neither capitalistic nor museological.

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