

European cultural heritage and the politics of decolonisation

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In the past years, I have been asked numerous times what I research. The standard answer – European cultural heritage – always sparks a lively discussion. It is a topic that almost everyone can relate to: a memory of a trip to Greece, a love for French cuisine, a passion for Italian renaissance paintings. My research, of course, rarely deals at all with the topics that people list. Partly because the common understanding of heritage and the different meanings we as academics posit for it are often at odds.

When I mention the second key component – the European Union – there is often a hint of uncertainty in my companion's eyes. What does the EU have to do with heritage? Although it is often not acknowledged, the EU has been very active in heritage in the past decades. The idea of European cultural heritage is used to promote a cultural dimension of the Union: to highlight historical connections that exist between different member states; to commemorate celebrated key events in the history of Europe; to express shared cultural customs; to make citizens of the Union feel connected to Europe and the multitudes of histories and cultures that it contains. In other words, to build a sense of community¹.

This community building is also the aim of the European Heritage Label (EHL), the EU action I have focused on in my thesis. The EHL has been particularly designed to promote belonging and intercultural dialogue within Europe. It is a crucial factor in determining what values Europe represents and who are considered to be its legitimate citizens. For the EU, the promotion of European cultural heritage is ultimately about identity politics.

1 e.g. Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Viktorija L. A. Čeginskas, Sigrid Kaasik-Krogerus, Katja Mäkinen & Johanna Turunen, *Creating and Governing Cultural Heritage in the European Union: The European Heritage Label* (London: Routledge, 2020); Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Katja Mäkinen, Viktorija L. A. Čeginskas & Sigrid Kaasik-Krogerus, *Europe from Below: Notions of Europe and the European among Participants in EU Cultural Initiatives*. (Brill, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449800>).

When I mention the last component of my research, colonialism, or its more contemporary critical cousin decoloniality, I often lose at least most of the non-academics in the conversation, perhaps even a few academic ones. Although decoloniality has become central to academic discussions, museum work and contemporary social movements² in public debates, terms like 'decolonial' or 'postcolonial' are often seen as codewords for complex, difficult, theoretical, overtly political, and uncomfortable debates. Decolonial work is indeed political, and unlike many other academic disciplines, it is openly so. It seeks societal change. Especially for people who have been accustomed to certain privileges – be they material or cultural – decoloniality forces us to consider questions that are often very uncomfortable. Is my culture more important than some other culture? Am I more worthy than someone else? Is the way I see the world right or even fair to others?

These questions drill into our very core and force us to reflect on issues we often try our best to ignore. They challenge us to reconsider our position in the world and see the harmful effects our privileges have on those who are less fortunate than we are. In the end, this has very little to do with luck and everything to do with the unequal way power and wealth are distributed in this world.

At its core, decoloniality – the process of undoing the effects of colonialism – is not difficult to understand. Highlighting the complexity of decoloniality merely diverts the discussion away from its key aim. This aim is the right of all people, irrespective of their background, to have

2 e.g. Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial & Kerem Nisanciolu, *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Walter D. Mignolo & Catherine E. Walsh, *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018; Britta Timm Knudsen, John Oldfield, Elizabeth Buettner & Elvan Zabunyan, *Decolonizing colonial heritage. New agendas, actors and practices in and beyond Europe* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022).

their culture and history acknowledged and respected; to live their life in accordance with their own cultural values without discrimination, appropriation, forced assimilation, ridicule, or violence. In addition to the humans around us, this freedom from violence applies to other species and nature at large.

Although contemporary global power dynamics – that largely stem from the time when Europe ruled the world through its empires – make the aim of decolonisation challenging to achieve, the principle itself is relatively simple. In a word, decoloniality means respect. Much like racism can never be addressed by simply focusing on its victims, decolonisation should not be reduced to something to be done by, about, and for people of colour.³ Although the voices and experiences of people who have been marginalised should be at its centre, decolonisation requires systemic change. It demands actions from everyone.

Of course, when we move from principles to practice, things tend to become more complex. For the remainder of this talk, I will try to explain the connection between heritage and decoloniality. In critical heritage studies, the discipline in which I work, researchers do not aim to answer the practical questions of how to best manage or preserve cultural heritage. Instead, they seek to understand what heritage does for a society or rather, what different actors engaged with herit-

age try to do through it.⁴ As I argue in my thesis⁵ this work takes place in three dimensions.

First, there is the actual heritage – the objects, statues, memorials, buildings, and a wide variety of cultural products, customs, and traditions. These elements are not inherently heritage; they have been made so. In a process of selection, these objects – not a wide variety of other ones – were chosen to carry a specific meaning for our society.

Secondly, there is a narrative dimension – the multitudes of ways we talk about this heritage, the names we give to it, the stories we tell. This, too, is about selecting whose stories we tell as part of our shared heritage. When approached from the colonial context, deciding who gets to have a voice becomes even more important.

Finally, there is what I call the cultural archive.⁶ This archive is not a physical place. It is the manifestation of the values, stereotypes, and sentiments that societies hold. It is also where the intangible heritage of colonialism lives on. The cultural archive includes the learned behaviours we repeat without realising their harmful nature. Our cultural heritage – the selected collection of objects, traditions, and customs that we have learned to cherish and the stories we repeat in association with them – is a crucial way the coloniality of this archive is reproduced and kept alive.

3 Johanna Turunen, "Decolonising European Minds through Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26 No. 10 (2020): 1013–1028; Johanna Turunen & Mari Viita-aho, "Kriittisen museon mahdottomuus? Gallen-Kallelan Afrikka-kokoelman uudelleentulkinnat 2000-luvulla," in *Marginaalista museoihin*, edited by Leila Koivunen & Anna Rastas (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2021), 94–115.

4 e.g., Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Lähdesmäki et al. *Creating and Governing*.

5 Johanna Turunen, *Unlearning narratives of privilege: A decolonial reading of the European Heritage Label*. PhD thesis. JyU Dissertations 427 (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2021).

6 See Wendy James, *The listening ebony: Moral knowledge, religion, and power among the Uduk of Sudan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin. Penguin Classics, 2003); Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Although I talk about selecting, of course, we do not all select individually. Experts who work in different museums and heritage sites do the choosing. However, even they do not necessarily make this choice knowingly. As many researchers have argued, some tendencies that have harmful, exclusionary, or even racist effects are just part of the ways museums and heritage have always worked. Heritage was invented partly to meet the need to create and regulate the difference between Europe and the world it colonised or the differences between different European nations. Although the world around heritage has changed, heritage keeps performing this same duty. It keeps separating cultures – and people – from each other and positioning them in different cultural hierarchies.

Luckily, heritage can be much more than a way to create distinctions. I would like to argue that it can be used to break them. Instead of being just a collection of dead objects, heritage is alive. It is a continuous cultural negotiation to define what elements we collectively cherish and a reminder of the difficulties we as a community have overcome. Heritage teaches societies how to deal with complicated and contested histories. It allows us to remember, express solidarity and empathy, or even mourn, together.

In the EU context, the desire to mourn together applies especially to the two World Wars and the Holocaust, which are often considered definitive in creating contemporary Europe. With the Eastern enlargement of the EU, the trauma of Soviet occupation was taken into this canon of things we have collectively overcome. Heritage, in this context, is part of the negotiation of our positions in relation to these difficult histories, personally and collectively. It is not just about deciding who the victims were and who should take responsibility. It is also about a critical assessment of that past, and its effects on the present.

In Europe, we have yet to start a similar critical conversation on the effects of European coloni-

alism or slavery. This negotiation – the critical assessment of colonial history and its contemporary impact – provides an opportunity to start decolonising European heritage. The recent Black Lives Matter protests have sparked debates in the museum and heritage sector, so it seems this process has gained some momentum. However, as the right-wing counter-protests have shown, it will not be easy.

Like heritage itself, the process of decolonising it has three dimensions. First, it has the material dimension. Here decolonisation means discussions about ownership of cultural heritage and repatriation of objects that have been forcefully or illegally obtained. It entails a broader debate on what to do with the physical reminders of our colonial past, like street names, statues, and other monuments in our public spaces.

Secondly, decolonialising heritage is about narrations. How do we talk about colonialism and slavery in the media, schools, or museums? Is colonialism remembered with pride and nostalgia, as a time of European success and technological advancements? Do we tell this story only through the experiences of white Europeans – as in some of the EU heritage actions I have analysed? In a globalised world, we cannot tell only one side of the story. Colonialism was also a time of violence and greed, a period we have a moral obligation to re-assess, apologise, and atone for. Not as individuals, but as a community and a society. We need to learn from this period, or at least remember it. Much like the Holocaust is remembered, so that such violence could never ever happen again.

Many European museums have taken on this challenge of adding the other side of the colonial story. In their exhibitions, they have tried to be more honest about the manner in which they have amassed their collections. They work hard to change the way they speak about colonialism. They give voice and visibility to racialised communities. They try to show how colonialism lives

on in contemporary racism and discrimination in Europe and the way colonial-era values and arguments live on in anti-immigration debates and far-right populism. Many museums are taking on this work of decolonisation with pride and courage. Yet, for every museum that does so, several are yet to take up that challenge.

This brings me to my last point: the third dimension of decolonisation. As I explained, heritage maintains cultural norms and values in a society through the cultural archive. Decolonising this third dimension of heritage is perhaps the hardest because it is not just about colonial heritage. As a collection of societal norms, values, and cultural instincts, the cultural archive affects every aspect of our lives. It lives on in our daily interactions. It is hard to detect and therefore hard to resist or undo. Because of this archive, it is often stated that decolonisation entails adopting new attitudes.⁷ It demands we change the way we think.

For many of us living in Europe, decolonialisation requires a step back. We need to unlearn⁸ the history we have made through centuries of telling a specific story about ourselves and the world. In this story, we – White Europeans – have always been on the top. Perhaps not as individuals or nation-states, but as a continent or, as those who support White supremacy would say, as a civilisation among other uncivilised peoples.

Although museums cannot do this alone, heritage in a broader sense is a tool we can use to learn new attitudes and to take collective responsibility for our history. To tell new stories that promote new values. To encourage a willingness

to let go of some of the cultural privileges we have got used to having.

Approaching the decolonisation of heritage as a process of unlearning cultural privilege brings us back to the European Union and identity politics. Although it hopes to promote belonging and intercultural dialogue, I believe the EU is failing in its identity political mission. Or rather, it is failing *because* it has such a mission. In a globalised world where we are all increasingly defined by mixed loyalties, the EU is still trying to use cultural heritage to create an idea of a ‘European people’. It does this without acknowledging the history of violence Europe collectively has posed on the ancestors of an increasing number of its own citizens. Having a critical discussion about this past and how it affects our present society starts with decolonisation. It is a step towards healing. It is a step towards respect.

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7 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Frantz Fanon and the Decolonial Turn in Psychology: From Modern/Colonial Methods to the Decolonial Attitude," *South African Journal of Psychology* 47, No. 4 (2017): 432–441.

8 Madina Tlostanova & Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).