Essentialized heritage seems to support and justify *essentialized borders*
Interview with David Charles Harvey

David Charles Harvey is Associate Professor of Critical Heritage Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark, and Honorary Professor of Historical Cultural Geography at the University of Exeter, UK. He is a prominent researcher of critical heritage studies, focusing on the processual nature of heritage and the relationship between heritage and landscape. He has recently edited two volumes - *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change* (2015), co-edited with Jim Perry, and *Commemorative Spaces of the First World War: Historical Geography at the Centenary* (2018), co-edited with James Wallis. He is a member of the editorial boards of Landscape History, the International Journal of Heritage Studies, Fennia: The Finnish Journal of Geography, and The Geographical Journal, and is co-editor of *Explorations in Heritage Studies*, published by Berghahn Books. Martina Bofulin spoke to him in December 2023 after his visit to Ljubljana, where he was the keynote speaker at the first conference of the Association for Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) - Central and Eastern European Section. The translated and abbreviated version of this interview has been published in Glasnik SED No. 63 in 2023.

Prof. Harvey, a few months ago you gave a keynote speech at the first conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies – Central and East European Chapter in Ljubljana. About a year ago, you attended the inaugural meeting of this chapter in Prague. It seems that you have a keen interest in these regions. Can you tell us how this came about and how you see the specifics of heritage studies and heritage phenomena in the CEE regions based on the two conferences you attended?

I guess that the prosaic answer to this is that Jiri Woitsch asked me out of the blue to come to Prague, and the date happened to coincide with my teaching commitments that autumn (2022); I liked the place and the people when I went to that first Chapter meeting, and so I became more invested in it. Perhaps the more interesting answer, however, is that while I receive many invitations to conferences and lectures, there was »something« about the idea of the CEE Chapter that drew me in.

Many of the ACHS 'Chapters' are based on nation states and/or languages, which I have always found somewhat disappointing and even limiting. So, when I read the material about the proposed idea of a Central and Eastern European (CEE) chapter, I was immediately interested. Apart from some shared experiences – not least the 'post-socialist' situation – I think there are also some similarities in method and outlook. It is sometimes difficult to put one's finger on it (and therefore my thoughts are rather anecdotal), but **while attending the workshops in Prague and Ljubljana these things came to light.**

Firstly, I think there is a strong 'ethnographic' backbone to heritage studies in CEE. As a historical cultural geographer who has always been interested in the 'small stories' and the hidden histories (*micro-histories*) of 'ordinary' people, this certainly appeals to me. I guess 'heritage studies' has a slightly different disciplinary flavour in different contexts – in the UK (and a little in Scandinavia), for instance, there is a very strong connection to 'archaeology', but in CEE I think the connection to folklore studies and ethnography is stronger. And that's not a bad thing. I thought more about this during the day or so that I spent in Ljubljana after

the conference – that the contributions were *methodologically* very coherent, regardless of whether they were talking about Slovenia, Bulgaria, Hungary, or other countries. I think I only realised this the day after the conference, when I was reflecting on the event, that there was a connection between the material presented and the way the discussion flowed. There was a lot of oral history material – lots of quotes from ordinary people, sometimes even played in the lecture hall for attendants to listen to. Perhaps reflecting recent trends in anthropological and ethnographic research, this 'style' was also evident in many of the papers; space was given to the literal 'voices' of the research participants.

And we must remember that this is a positive thing, as discussions about 'method' are not tied to 'geography'; someone from Brazil, Botswana, the UK, or Bali can learn something and take part in the at the conference. This was nice for an 'outsider' like me, and meant that (in practice) the lines between insiders and outsiders were blurred (*which works well with the 'margins' theme*).

Secondly, I think there is 'something' about the outlook or 'perspective' of CEE. Maybe it's a 'post-socialist' thing (?), but I think that it can perhaps be seen as a mixture of being very keen to be 'European', but somehow avoiding the hubris and arrogance of 'Eurocentrism' and European exceptionalism that perhaps comes through in western Europe – perhaps in a slightly different way, in both the UK and Scandinavia, for example. Again, it is difficult to generalise or even fully identify, but there was something 'different' about this conference, perhaps the ability to express *difference* without relying on a sense of (exceptionalist) *distinction*.

I had a great time in Prague; I liked the people and wanted to remain connected to these developments, which I think have something to share with wider heritage scholarship.

The title of the conference »Heritage on the margins?« intended to highlight a certain dynamic between centre(s) and margin(s) within heritage fields and studies. How do you see this relationship in the context of heritage?

This relates to the last point; 'heritage' and 'borders' usually seem to be a mutually supportive set of twins. *Essentialized heritage* seems to support and justify *essentialized borders*, and vice versa – it seems to answer questions and shut off debates. I think this relationship requires closer examination – even 're-theorizing' – with 'margins', perhaps a more open term… room for 'liminality', for 'border zones', for border crossings, blurring and movement, and I like that.

I think this came across very clearly throughout the conference as almost all the participants discussed how borders are crossed, blurred, shifted, or transgressed – by humans and non-humans, ideas and practices, food cultures and architectural styles. The result is not a so-called 'borderless world' of un undifferentiated 'global culture', but rather a world that is thoroughly 'located' through relational senses of place. A comment made during the screening of 'Museum of Madness' on the first evening sums things up very well in my opinion: »Is there anything in the world that is more insane than being *normal*«?

I think that while the definition of heritage as a 'process' has become largely accepted over the last 20 years, there is something at the back of everyone's mind that refuses to believe this and fails to act upon it consequently. It is not without a certain irony that people who join the ACHS because they want to break down barriers often join the various nation-based 'chapters' first. I can understand that; the way universities and funding schemes are organized, even the everyday desire to adhere to established friendship groups – but it's at the margins where the interesting things happen!

The question of where the 'centre' of heritage studies lies is a good one. For some time, I have been noticing how much Australian scholarship is driving much of the innovative thinking that is sometimes carried out by 'Australians' who are working from other parts of the world (such as Rodney Harrison, Emma Waterton, Lynn Meskell, Tim Winter). *And I don't know why that is?* Anecdotally, I feel that perhaps it has become a pathway through which strands of indigenous knowledge have seeped through? And this could be significant in that perhaps the (so-called) centre has adopted or even appropriated ways of thinking from marginalised people and turned it into knowledge 'from the centre'. This is anecdotal, but I think that when we cite the so-called 'big names' in heritage studies, we should perhaps bear in mind that most of these big ideas have probably been picked up elsewhere. *Thinking from the Margins* is the right place start thinking about these issues.

You are one of the founding members of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies and were present at the inaugural conference at the University of Gothenburg in 2012. What were the circumstances that lead to the founding of the Association? What did you, along with Laurajane Smith, Rodney Harrison, Tim Winter, and others want to achieve or change in terms of heritage studies? What were some of the key discussions? In Ljubljana, you pointed out that these initial discussions lacked representation from scientists in the non-Anglo-Saxon world. How do you see the Association developing after a decade of work and whether you see that there is now a more even representation – not only geographically but also in terms of approaches and traditions?

There is a longer story about this – I was invited to a workshop in Sydney in November 2010. Coming from a wealthy western European university, I was able to attend, and I remember that Laurajane Smith, Emma Waterton and others were very keen to shake up the heritage studies world. To be honest, I was quite surprised that my old paper from 2001 from *IJHS* had somehow been picked up and considered an 'important paper'. (In the intervening years I had largely pursued avenues other than 'heritage studies'.) I was very pleased to support this, as these people seemed to be pointing out some obvious paradoxes of the 'traditional' heritage approach of e.g., UNESCO etc. I remember there was some discussion that a new organization should not replicate the work that bodies like ICOMOS are already doing.

However, it's hard to ignore the fact that people have made careers out of capitalizing on these things – I don't intend to criticize anyone, but it helps if you make a big 'noise' about it (*it certainly helped me*).

There was a proposal for a conference in Gothenburg in 2012 – I am not sure what people were expecting, but I think most of us thought there would be (say) 60–80 papers and about

100 participants. In the end, we received around 800 entries, and we had to engage in extensive editorial work to get the numbers to the point where Gothenburg could host us. I think the enormity of it all surprised everyone. We suddenly found ourselves at the centre of a much larger organization and 'school of thought' than we had imagined.

I remember a conversation with Laurajane Smith in which I said, "Surely no one really thinks that heritage is something essential that is somehow inextricably linked to something called 'national culture'." And she responded, "You'd be surprised, David – most people just accept that and don't give it a second thought." I can see she was right about that. I just didn't see that anything I was saying was particularly controversial or 'new'.

I remember pointing out in one of the board discussions in Gothenburg how funny it was that our 'critical response' to what we are unhappy about was actually to replicate (for the most part) all the things we are unhappy about – fairly traditional conferences in very expensive cities; national chapters (etc.). I remember campaigning hard for there to be no membership fee (which we clung on to until 2018) and suggesting that the emphasis should not be so much on big conferences. I don't think I ever saw 'critical heritage studies' as a 'brand' with capital letters (CHS) – but the popularity that was evident in Gothenburg meant that the issue would soon be out of my hands.

I think that the conference, if held every two years, becomes the main purpose of the Association's existence, which is a shame. I campaigned hard for it to be held every three years at most, but that didn't get accepted. I also remember pointing out that pretty much everyone in the room (on the ACHS board) was from a western European, North American, or Australian university; that we needed to include more representatives from the Global South, for example. These things have changed for the better over the years– but the issue is still a central problem for the Association. Talking to archaeology colleagues, I think the ACHS has probably followed the path of the WAC (World Archaeology Congress), which started with big and ambitious ideas but succumbed to the politics and pragmatics of such large organizations. It's very difficult to avoid this – but I think the CEE Chapter is an opportunity to do/see things a little differently.

There are discussions about what »critical« in »Critical Heritage Studies« actually refers to. Some emphasize the critical deconstruction of existing heritage processes, focusing on the discursive aspect of heritage-making, including its use for political manipulation, its connection to identity formation, or commodification through tourism and leisure. Tim Winter, on the other hand, argued for critical heritage studies should focus on critical issues facing the world today, including the development of a post-Western understanding of culture, history, and heritage. What is your take on this and what does »critical« in heritage studies mean to you?

As I said before, I prefer the 'c' to be lowercase ('chs' instead of 'CHS'). I think that 'critically deconstructing the existing' (as you say) is certainly worthwhile and should always be one of the central tasks as an 'intellectual exercise', but it would be nice to do a bit more than that. I think that's partly the point Tim Winter is trying to make. Being 'critical' is good and worthwhile ;It can make people angry and make them feel outraged by current circumstances. But I think we should try to do a bit more than that. In a way, this echoes

and agrees with Winter ('real issues' we face in the world), and I think the most important thing about being 'more-than-critical', is the 'practice' –something I am not really trained for, even though I think it's absolutely necessary.

In my opinion, one of the weakest elements of the ACHS in its current form is that it has gotten a little caught up in 'academic' and intellectual criticism and is perhaps not engaged enough in day-to-day 'practice'. To put it bluntly, I wonder how many people in heritage organizations at the community level, museum curators, or those who use heritage for peacebuilding in post-conflict regions, for example, really read the findings of 'Critical Heritage Studies'. We can come up with clever scholarship on heritage as a 'dynamic and emergent process' and do intellectual work that deconstructs the world around us – but *most people, most of the time* still believe that 'heritage' is something to do with blood and soil and essentialized containers; that heritage is something that is stable and can be used to distinguish between 'us' and 'them'. We 'academics' can say what we want, but people are still killing (and being killed for) something they call 'heritage'.

So does 'heritage' even have the analytical power to participate in debates about the key issues of today's world and its future? And if so, how? Various scholars have lamented the fact that heritage has become »all things to all people« or that heritage is both an analytical category and an emic category. In your most cited article, Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies, you call on researchers to provide a longer historical analysis of heritage. Not to approach heritage as a modern or even postmodern phenomenon, but to locate it further back in history. To what extent does this contribute to heritage studies?

It is interesting to look back at the 2001 paper now... Thinking in terms of 'process' seemed to take off and get accepted, but the idea of seeing a longer temporal story (a long-term biography – perhaps it can be called a 'history of heritage') was largely side lined (albeit with several exceptions) The discussion about the relationship between 'heritage' and the 'future' serves as an example. If we accept 'heritage' as 'history', then we should recognize that heritage has long informed a desired sense of legacy or been involved in various actions of 'future-making'. So, while some scholars have now framed whole projects on 'heritage futures', this is essentially nothing new; they didn't invent the future. And as people continue to strive to understand the connections between the past and the future, they give us more and more insights into the present (whenever that 'present' is).

I am pretty open about my politics (I think). Something called 'heritage' is such a powerful resource or source of ammunition – people justify all sorts of horrible things around the world with their 'heritage' – and I think it is too important to keep quiet, or pretend I am 'apolitical' or neutral.

In one of your blog posts on your very interesting blog Geographies of Power, you write that ‘heritage studies’ often have a problem with notions of ‘peace’. In academia, contestation sells, and emphasising conflict can help win research awards.« You, on the other hand, propose a »pacific heritage«. Can you say something about this approach?

Just as with 'borders', heritage and conflict seem to go together; one justifies the other. Even when one is 'critical', it is usually about conflict and the role of heritage in various wars or acts of violence (e.g., war commemorations and remembrance). Along with some other scholars, I want to focus on what happens when we try to talk about the links between 'heritage' and 'peace'; be it the heritage of the peace movement or sites and groups associated with 'peace', rather than always talking about wars. ... I adopted the term 'pacific heritage' from colleagues in geography: There is a strong sub-discipline called 'Critical Geopolitics', which looks critically at the sorts of International Relations 'games' that you see in the world – they wanted to shift the debate a bit, so they coined the term 'Pacific Geopolitics', which has 'peace' and peacebuilding as its starting point. I think I am a 'geographer' at heart, so I picked this up as a useful ambition. Again, I 'hope' that such a perspective aims for practice rather than mere 'critique'.

We seem to be living in a world in which the geopolitical 'world order' is changing significantly– perhaps from a 'bipolar' geopolitical order to a multipolar order, with the rise of 'civilizational' narratives in China and India, for example, or the claim that Ukraine belongs to a supposedly 'Russian' sphere. Something called 'heritage' plays a central role in these developments, and I personally think that an investment in a clear commitment to 'pacific heritage' might be a good antidote to a simple commentary on how 'heritage conflicts' underpin geopolitical orders.

In your keynote speech in Ljubljana in November 2023, you spoke about the nexus between heritage and borders. You believe that heritage is too often used to support boundary working, be it in war-making or even in things as banal as the hygge concept. You write that »heritage too often acts as the cement by which walls can be built and maintained«. In this sense, what is the potential of »border-straddling heritage«?

In some ways it is similar to the way we talk about issues of 'scale' in heritage studies – everyone knows it is there, but people don't tend to talk about it, even though it has a huge impact on their ideas and assumptions about the world. The connection seems so obvious that no one talks about it, and people rarely bother to reflect on what borders *are* and what they *do*, and how 'heritage' intersects with borders in many interesting ways, some of which have great potential (and some of which are very scary).

I picked on 'Hygge' simply because I came to Denmark just as it was becoming a bit of a 'thing'... In many ways, it is very 'welcoming' and positive (most people like it), but in practice I think it often (even unconsciously) becomes an exclusionary tool. Since it is supposedly 'untranslatable', it is also unavailable to anyone else – I see it as somewhat symbolic of my own experiences in Denmark; as an 'outsider' I am meant to 'integrate' – I must fit in; I must do what 'the Danes' do; I must 'become Danish', but I will never *become Danish*. These things happen through assertions and performances of 'heritage practice', but the rules are constantly changing.

Ali Mozaffari and I have discussed a lot about whether 'border straddling heritage' is a good term or not. I think we can see that it has some immediate appeal and recognition, which is good, but I think we tend to talk about 'heritage-border complexes' more in the most recent drafts of our work on this topic.

You will be able to buy the book soon, but in short, we see the concept of 'heritage-border complexes' as an analytical lens through which to examine the intricate, mutual relationships between heritage and various territorial (or ideological) contact zones and the actors that create them – including, for example, the role of diaspora and migrant groups. We hope that the idea of the heritage-border complex will allow for a multifaceted and nuanced perspective to better understand the web of interactions that define our global cultural and power landscape, while recognizing the fluidity and interconnectedness of cultural narratives across geopolitical boundaries. We plan to further develop the concept (hopefully through a monograph in a year or two) so that the role of various intergovernmental or non-governmental organizations (e.g., UNESCO and various NGOs) and transborder communities in shaping and responding to emerging transnational relationships between culture and political ambitions can be explored.

Your more recent work also focuses on climate change and the sustainability of heritage sites. In this topic, where the scientific materialist approach and the specific techniques of conservation are at the forefront, you claim that »building a concrete wall around a World Heritage Site to protect it from rising sea levels is not a 'sustainable solution'!« You believe sustainability is not about 'dreams of stability', but rather about change. In her book Curated Decay, Caitlin DeSilvey described various approaches to working with natural processes rather than protecting against them, and in this way also accommodating decay. What are your thoughts on dealing with change in heritage processes?

The work I did on the Jurassic Coast (UNESCO WHS) was crucial to the development of my thinking in this regard. On the one hand, the most important OUV ('Outstanding Universal Value') of the site is about the need to preserve the erosion processes (the cliffs falling into the sea etc.), especially as it was through these processes that dinosaur bones were 'discovered' in the 1700s and lead to the *discovery* of 'deep time'. This means that we must 'preserve the processes of change'. Unlike most other World Heritage Sites such as Venice or the Taj Mahal (for example), we can visit the Jurassic Coast in 100,000 years' time and it will still exist (*it will only exist several hundred miles from its current location as* the processes of erosion will continue to change the site forever, barring some tectonic plate movement and perhaps a large asteroid landing). When you start thinking about timescales *this long*, you realize that so many 'dreams of stability' are not sustainable.

I like DeSilvey's work on 'curated decay' as it provides a much-needed alternative approach to the '*endless preservation'* which seems to be behind UNESCO's standard approach. I find it interesting that the Jurassic Coast (see above) is recognized by UNESCO because it is a 'natural' site, so its OUV is about 'evolution' – i.e., long-term *change* – which is something that 'cultural sites'(ICOMOS, etc.) struggle with.

If I am being a bit more searching, then, while I like DeSilvey's (etc.) ideas on these matters, where does that leave us on the political 'bread and butter' issues? It is all very well to talk about 'evolution' over 100,000 years, but most marginalized people in the world may not find much comfort in that. To be a little 'incendiary' on this point: If you look at a times frame of millions of years, then the Mediterranean Sea will disappear due to tectonic movements, but even in the time frame of hundreds of years (or a few decades), I do not

think the role of the Mediterranean as a 'southern border wall' to define Europe from the 'non-European' world is tenable.

Despite the investment in 'nations' (by UNESCO or the EU imaginations), Eurasia, for example, is already undergoing a shift towards multipolar 'civilisational' blocs (especially with the rise of China and India), and heritage narratives play a central role in these changes. A 'European civilisational bloc' has a lot of (colonial) baggage, to say the least. So, what can 'we' say to counter these geopolitical developments, and how can we intervene with a sense of social justice?

A few years ago, you moved from the University of Exeter in the UK to Aarhus University in Denmark. Do you see a difference between the continental and UK's understanding of heritage? What are some of the current heritage issues facing Denmark?

Denmark is a strange place... a left-of-centre nationalist/populist government; very centralised, and very effective, partly due to an exceptionally sound sense of self. My colleague Nick Shepherd always describes it as strongly 'tribal' – far more so than anything he has witnessed in southern Africa.

This situation was very impressive and useful during Covid; people do what they are told and ultimately, we cannot 'solve' a pandemic through 'authentic bottom-up community actions'; the central state and a strong sense of national community were excellent in these circumstances. In today's world, where one might feel threatened by communal upheaval and unrest in many parts of the world, Denmark feels very 'safe'. But this comes at a price – to go back to what I said earlier: that I am instructed to become a member of the tribe, even though I know that I will never actually be a member of the tribe.

Anecdotally, I find that the UK is far more accepting of people being 'different' (but these things are relative!). The UK is much more relaxed and accepting of the fact that it is a multicultural society. But perhaps the UK is also more likely to be a victim of social unrest and societal breakdown. When I am gloomy, I do sometimes wonder whether I might one day end up as a Danish 'refugee' in the UK or a British refugee in Denmark.

In academic terms, I have already touched on it earlier – heritage studies is in a different place in the UK and in Denmark, with a stronger assumption in Denmark that those involved in heritage studies are 'experts', who are there to 'look after and preserve' physical artefacts on behalf of the Danish National Community (capital letters and singular), rather than (in the UK), where those involved in heritage studies work with communities (small 'c' and plural) wo engage in various forms of heritage for all sorts of purposes (but that is a generalisation).

Together with Ali Mozaffari, you are the editors of the book series Explorations in Heritage Studies at Berghahn Books. Can you describe to our readers what the book series focuses on and what are some of the topics that interested you?

We are very open to ideas here. We did not want the label 'critical' (and certainly not with a capital letter; 'Critical') and using the word 'explorations' will (we hope) invite people to

engage with heritage in a way that they find useful and beneficial. If there is a general theme so far, I think it's 'multi-/inter-disciplinarity'. So, we have published a series of books that essentially deal with *'Heritage AND…'* (*law*, *religion*, *commemoration*, *social movements*, *texts*, etc.), which (I hope) means that scholars from all sorts of disciplines have participated. I'm very happy to talk more to the CEE Chapter about publishing something in the series!

Prof. Harvey, thank you for your time!