The Making of Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT How does an artefact enter the corpus of national cultural heritage? The answer to this question offers a pragmatic understanding of the reasons why the expansion of national corpuses has been so widespread, generation after generation and especially during the last one. Of course, there are also more general "societal" or "cultural" reasons for such a worldwide phenomenon: a number of explanations have already been proposed by philosophers, historians, sociologists, anthropologists. However, one should not underestimate the effects of the inventorial techniques and methods of description used by the specialists of heritage, in that they tend to elevate the level of precision and of specialisation, hence to enlarge the criteria and to increase the number of artefacts worth entering their corpus. A close study of these actual criteria, through a survey conducted according to what is now called "pragmatic sociology" in France, allows us a deeper understanding of what defines cultural heritage, and of the effective values on which it relies: that is, the axiology of cultural heritage. Switching from "why" to "how" thus opens up for renewed insight into the meanings of cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS Sociology of the arts, cultural heritage, preservation, cultural values, patrimonial function

When embarking on my survey of the making of national cultural heritage in France a few years ago, I thought I would be working mainly on the aesthetics of a new field, which would allow me to broaden and develop my inquiries into the sociology of arts, however, surprisingly, I found out that aesthetics was but marginal in this context. I also guessed that it had to do with environment, since the heritage at stake – "patrimoine," as we call it in France – concerns *in situ* artefacts, mainly buildings, including their relationship to their site. But what I found out was somehow disturbing in light of these expectations: art and aesthetics seem to be very marginal issues for the specialists of "patrimoine," whereas other values appear to be much more relevant – some of them being also central in environment issues. This is the topic of the following paper.

No doubt this paper will disappoint those of you who might expect big theoretical outcomes often appearing in a congress on sociology, such as "culture," "national identity," "post-modernism," or "the social": all notions too often mythified by a metaphysical conception of sociology searching for a transcendental principle. Neither would I intend to demonstrate that heritage is not an essence but a "socially constructed" phenomenon (which, for any sociologist, should never be a final outcome but only an obvious starting point from which to explore how a phenomenon is created, transformed and sustained by humans). No: I will simply try to

describe a particular kind of experience: that is, the patrimonial experience, from the point of view of the values it implements, and with the methods of the empirical, pragmatic and value-free sociology of values I am currently developing.

However, I will address this patrimonial experience not through the eyes of those who visit monuments or admire old paintings hanging in churches, but through the eyes of those who "make" heritage: that is, the professional art historians appointed by the Ministry of Culture in order to decide whether or not a building or an object should be included in the corpus of national heritage. In France, they belong to a special administration created during the 1960's, called the "Inventaire général" – General Inventory Service. I presume that most European countries have similar services.

Before describing the criteria and value systems used by those specialists who decide whether an artefact deserves to be considered part of national heritage, I have to say a few words about the dramatic growth of the corpus, and some of its possible reasons.

1. The dramatic growth of national cultural heritage, and some of its possible reasons

The corpus of national heritage has been dramatically enlarged, generation after generation, especially during the last one. In France, more than 43 000 monuments were protected as part of the "Historical Monuments" ("Monuments historiques") in 2007, and about 140 are "classified" as such every year, whereas from 1836 to 1840, during the first years following the creation of this administration, only 13 had been classified. This phenomenon is not specifically French, of course, neither is it specifically European: in the course of the 20th century, the protection of "historical monuments" or "national heritage" has proved still more of a necessity at an international level.

Probably, some general "societal" or "cultural" reasons exist for such a worldwide phenomenon: a number of explanations have already been proposed by philosophers, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Some historians, for instance, explained the emergence of the very notion of the historical monument in France as a reaction to revolutionary destructions. As for sociologists, a similar hypothesis appeared in the 1980s, together with the last big patrimonial wave: interest in heritage would grow with destructions, not any more due to revolutionary violence than to industrial modernisation, especially after the Second World War. Let us also quote here the French anthropologist Maurice

Godelier; according to him, every society distinguishes between three categories of things: those to be sold, those to be given, and those to be kept; then the modern cult of heritage would result from a transfer of sacredness: patrimonial artefacts would take the place of previous "treasures," be they religious or royal, in the symbolic system of modern societies confronted with the "disenchantment process."

But rather than trying to explain the causes of our patrimonial inflation, my aim is to describe and understand its modalities from the inside. In such a perspective, the "how" will replace the "why," and comprehensive sociology will replace explicative sociology.

2. The actions of those in charge to "make" heritage?

What about the actions of those in charge to "make" heritage? That is, the selection of an artefact in order to include it in the corpus?

My point is that the inventorial techniques and methods of description used by the specialists of heritage tend to become more and more precise and specialised, expanding the criteria of selection and thus increasing the number of artefacts worth entering their corpus.

My survey on the French heritage administration, conducted in 2004 according to ethnographical methods, helps addressing this issue in a renewed perspective, grounded in the close observation of actions within a precise context: what we now call "pragmatic sociology," based on observations in actual situations, focusing on the actors' actions. I want to emphasize that in my eyes, this methodological approach refers not so much to "pragmatic" philosophy as to linguistic "pragmatism," which focuses on the actual, concrete uses of language rather than its abstract principles. The pragmatic approach considers both objects and subjects in terms of their actions, instead of treating them as passive supports of projections – be they projections of social categories or of collective representations, etc.

Using this pragmatic method, I followed a dozen specialists "on the ground" ("sur le terrain"), when they were in the process of observing all of the buildings in a given area, in order to decide which ones would be worth listing, describing, selecting, or maybe studying. I asked them to explicate the problems they encountered and the criteria they used. About forty hours of interviews were collected, accompanied by a number of photographs and documents. The interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis. The results have been published in a number of articles and, finally, a book, *La Fabrique du patrimoine*.

3. The criteria actually used

As an outcome of this survey, I was able to illuminate the actual criteria used by the specialists of heritage, and confront these specialists with the norms they are expected to implement in their work.

These criteria rely on a number of what James Gibson would have called "affordances" (for instance, the shape of a window). As for the *criteria* (for instance: the date of the building), some of them are officially prescribed (that is, listed in the methodological guide edited by the direction of this administration), whereas others are not, because they are considered marginal or too problematic. On another level some of them are univocal (they are always positive, in any context: this is the case of ancientness), whereas some of them are ambivalent (they may be positive or negative depending on the context: for instance, rarity).

Four categories of criteria could thus be listed, by comparing their proximity to "official" norms or prescriptions, on the one hand; and their vulnerability to contextual variations on the other. The first axis thus opposes prescribed to unauthorized criteria; the second axis opposes univocal to ambivalent criteria. When crossing these two axes, we obtain four main categories of criteria:

(1)   prescribed and univocal criteria (mainly: state of conservation and age);
(2)   prescribed and ambivalent criteria (mainly: rarity of similar items);
(3)   latent criteria (for instance: material accessibility of a building);
(4)   one proscribed criterion: beauty, since it is considered too subjective to sustain a scientific treatment of the heritage corpus. However, words pertaining to the aesthetic vocabulary ("beautiful," "ugly" and so on) sometimes appeared in the commentaries of the researchers I observed, but always mid-voice or with a laughter, betraying the illegitimate status of such a criteria in this context.

About *twenty criteria* have been discerned through this survey, belonging to these four categories. This was the *first step* of the analysis. I will not develop this list of criteria here, because I want to insist on the next step, that is, the values underlying those criteria. By "values" I simply mean the *principles governing value judgements.*

4. Underlying fundamental values

The second step revealed a small number of *fundamental values* as underlying these criteria. These *five basic values* are:

(1)   the value of *authenticity*, referring to the integrity of the bond between the present state of the object and its origin. This value is an absolute condition, present in any case: it may be considered the very core of heritage;

(2)   the value of *ancientness*, referring to the length of the bond to the origin: absolutely relevant for a more traditional or common-sensical conception, relatively relevant for a more scientific conception;

(3)   the value of *rarity*, referring to the small number of items existing in the same category: more relevant for a traditional or common-sensical conception, whereas the scientific approach may value an item for its belonging to a series;

(4)   the value of *beauty*, whatever its criteria: harmony, symmetry, elegance, sophisticated adornment etc. (relevant for a traditional or commonsensical conception); or typicality, perfect matching with the properties of the category (relevant for a scientific approach);

(5)   the value of *signification*, referring to the capacity to convey a meaning, to symbolize something, to accept commentaries, interpretations etc.: more relevant for a scientific approach.

Except for the value of authenticity, which is always present, these values vary according to the different conceptions of heritage: between the traditional or commonsensical conception, at one end of the chain, and the more scientific conception, at the other – the latter being the very scope of my survey.

5. Families of values

The third step of the analysis showed how these five values may be related to *more general "value registers"* – that is, more general *families of values*, which are relevant in many other contexts of social life: from contemporary art to bullfighting, from politics to scientific life, from religion to sports. Out of several surveys I have been completing on various situations of value judgements, a set of a dozen "value registers" have been established until today: ethical, aesthetic, aesthesical, hermeneutic, civic, juridical, economic, domestic, functional, reputational, purificatory.

As for the issue of national heritage, the relevant repertoire of value registers allows us to refer the value of *ancientness* to the register called "domestic," following here the model of "justification" topics explicated by two French sociologists, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. In their model, the "domestic" register fosters respect for the elders, familial

belonging, confidence, care for transmission: all these requirements are obviously present in the very notion of heritage, be it familial or national.

As for the value of *authenticity*, it pertains to what I call the "purificatory" register, concerning all the values akin to integrity and, in particular, integrity of the bond with origins – a reason why it includes as well authenticity as hygiene or ecology. Here is a strong bond between heritage and environment: both rely on a requirement for purity, which may result as well in the value of authenticity as in the value of "ecological correctness."

As for the value of *signification*, it pertains to the "hermeneutic" register, fostering the search for a meaning, interpretative activity, symbolism. It is central in the more scientific approach of heritage – that of the specialists of the Inventaire I observed – whereas it seems to be replaced by the value of beauty for less specialized and more common sense or profane relationship to heritage.

This value of *beauty* pertains to the "aesthetic" register, dealing with the notions of art and beauty. It is essential here to notice that this register is far from being the central one governing the relationship to heritage. In particular, it would be heavily misleading to confuse this aesthetic register with the purity register or with the hermeneutic register: requirement for authenticity or for meaning does not necessarily entail a requirement for beauty. Contemporary art, as I tried to describe it in my previous research, is an obvious example of this necessary distinction between beauty, authenticity and meaning. Heritage is another case.

But what about the value of rarity I mentioned earlier? It does not pertain to any "value register," but to another and more general kind of category, that I propose to call a "value realm," as I will now explain.

6. The two value realms

At the fourth and final step of the analysis, two "value realms" have been discerned, at a very general level. This high level of generality allows comparisons with other value systems in different contexts. The two realms are the "singularity realm" ("régime de singularité") and the "community realm" ("régime de communauté").

To understand what they mean, let us go back to this value of *rarity*. You may have noticed that I did not relate this value to the "value registers" I just mentioned. The reason is that rarity possesses a somehow special status. It is an ambivalent value, since it may be positive or negative: positive according to the traditional conception of heritage, focusing on a few

master works ("chefs-d'oeuvres"); but negative according to a more scientific approach, trying to discern series and types, to construct typologies, to produce statistics. More specifically, the value of rarity does not stand on the same level as the other ones: rather, it is an index, a mark bestowed on any value, be it negatively or positively. For instance, beauty may be defined by conformity to the accepted rules (community realm) or, on the contrary, by originality (singularity realm); authenticity may be found in series (community realm) or in individuals (singularity realms); signification may be valorised in that it is accessible to all (community realm) or, on the contrary, in that it is esoteric (singularity realm).

This is why rarity, together with its contrary, multiplicity, are what could be called "orthogonal values," which encompass all the others, either to reinforce them or to weaken them. Thus they pertain to a more general order than the "value registers": what I call a "regime" ("realm") of qualification – "qualification" meaning both "definition" and "valorisation." In this perspective, the "singularity realm" valorises all that is rare, out of the ordinary, unique; whereas its opposite, the "community realm," valorises the many, the standard, the conventional. Let us notice by the way that the notion of monument is strongly bound to the "singularity realm" (since its pattern is the "chef-d'oeuvre," the exceptional artefact), whereas the notion of heritage pertains to the "community realm" (since it belongs to a community). This double axiological status of national heritage, or "patrimoine," is probably one of the reasons why such an issue is so rich and powerful, for sociologists as well as for the actors: it may fulfil expectancies of both singularity as well as expectancies of community.

This whole set of affordances, criteria, values, value registers and value realms constitutes what might be called *the "axiology of cultural heritage"*: in other words, the system of values proper to this very special domain of our common culture. Here a new road opens up to the sociology of values I am proposing – a non-essentialist, pragmatic, empirical and axiologically neutral sociology, as announced in my introduction.

And here, a possible answer to the question I raised at the beginning of my paper emerges: The main reason why the corpus of national heritage grew so fast during the last generation is probably not to be found in issues of "identity," "culture," "post-modern society" or the like: rather, the reason lies in the introduction of more scientific methods of selection in the administration of culture, which tend to minimize the place of beauty while extending the borders of ancientness, fostering the value of signification, and adding the value of typicality to the more traditional value of rarity.

Let me conclude with one last remark about the definition of heritage. After having observed how national heritage is made by its specialists, one may ask the question: what is, after all, a "patrimonial" object?

7. From heritage to "patrimonial function"

No doubt you will have understood that I am not trying to give any kind of ontological, *a priori* definition of heritage: according to the nominalistic turn, what is at stake here is to understand what actors mean when they use this term, or when they act in order to bestow such a qualification on an object. This is why, rather than "heritage" or "patrimoine," I prefer to speak of a "patrimonial function": just as Michel Foucault spoke of "author function," or as I myself spoke of "person function" ("fonction-personne") when referring to some categories of objects characterized by their substitutability – be they relics, fetish or art works. In this perspective, heritage or "patrimoine" appears as nothing more than the peculiar state resulting from some objects being submitted to certain kinds of operations, through gestures, writings, words, laws, financial exchanges, etc. These objects may be either artefacts (as in the case of historical monuments) or natural objects (as in the case of sites or landscapes); they may even be immaterial, according to the UNESCO's new category of "immaterial heritage."

According to such a perspective, this *patrimonial function* may be defined as the whole set of *actions* intended to *conserve* objects that satisfy a *double condition*: first, the condition that *they belong to the community*, being considered as a common good (even if they remain a private property on a juridical level); and second, the condition that *their value will last forever*; this everlasting value itself originates from four main axiological principles, in other words four values: authenticity (pertaining to the purity register), ancientness (pertaining to the domestic register), signification (pertaining to the hermeneutic register) and beauty (pertaining to the aesthetic register). These four values may be more or less enhanced by a fifth one: rarity (pertaining to the singularity realm).

The first of these two conditions – belonging to the community – is tied to a *spatial* grandness in that it extends the number of the concerned beings; without it, nothing would distinguish a patrimonial artefact from a simple familial commodity, such as the picture in my living room. As for the second condition – everlasting value – it is tied to a *time-related* grandness in that it extends duration; without it, nothing would distinguish the patrimonial artefact from a simple common good, such as a road sign or a telephone pole.

So the patrimonial function allows an object to shift from the state of a private good to that of a "common good," as defined by economists: that is, avoiding both exclusion – since its consumption is open to everyone – and rivalry – since this consumption does not diminish its available quantity. The patrimonial object thus escapes the destiny of becoming rubbish, as described by Michael Thompson, as well as that of a mere "thing," reducible to its materiality and its utility. It may then become what the historian Krystof Pomian called a "semiophor," invested with meanings, or even a "relics" or a "sacred object": one which may be neither sold nor given, but only conserved, as in Godelier's typology.

In other words, the status of national heritage is the same as the status of aesthetics, in that both of them are defined not by a substantial but by a relational property. As the French aesthetician Gérard Genette accurately stated: "It is not the object which makes the relation aesthetic, but it is the relation which makes the object aesthetic." Similarly, it is not the object which makes heritage, but it is the patrimonial function which makes a patrimonial good out of an object.

Finally, what should we call such a process, through which pre-existing qualifications are bestowed on some objects, so that they become attached to these objects in such a way that they appear to be part of them, defining their very nature? What is at stake here is neither to "discover" the value of the object (since the object does not "contain" this value, it does not possess it), nor to "invent" it from nothing, as if it had been arbitrarily bestowed (since the object more or less fosters or allows such or such a qualification). Let us rather say that value is "administrated" to the object: that is proposed, then attached to it, in a more or less efficient and long-lasting way according to the capacity of the object to accept such a qualification. We can then conclude that the mission of the patrimonial administration – that is, the department of the Ministry of Culture in charge of historical monuments – is indeed to "administrate" – that is, to take care of – the heritage artefacts that have been listed by specialists; but its mission is also to "administrate" – that is, to bestow – the value of authenticity on those objects that are to be listed. This is why the department in charge of historical monuments may be defined, in the double sense of the term, as the *administration of authenticity*.

Administrating authenticity: these two words summarize, as a conclusion, what is at stake with national cultural heritage. I will let you decide whether they also appropriately describe what is at stake with environment.

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