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Seeds to Trees: Connecting the Means and Ends in Heritage Management. A Reply to Holtorf

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First I'd like to offer a sincere thank you to Cornelius Holtorf. It is rare in the academy to be able to continue a conversation with your peers post-publication. My article to which Holtorf is responding starts with a simple question: are heritage management decisions constructing a biased future history, particularly in regards to past political economies? Because of a tight word count, I limited my analysis to UNESCO World Heritage sites in North America and the Caribbean. Within this limitation, the answer is a clear yes. These sites are not representative of the wide diversity of past political economies (Borck 2019). When we create a past through our archaeological politics that allows only one effective political practice to be glorified, it becomes increasingly difficult for folks to see practical alternatives to strategies that rely on inequality and the hierarchical state.

Reading Holtorf's response, it is clear that while we have strong disagreements about the meaning of the research I published, we both are in equally strong agreement about the need for heritage management and the power of the archaeological past to create positive changes in the present and the future. We both are adamant that heritage be mobilized for beneficial outcomes, both for descendant communities whose heritage is being protected, as well as for the global community who looks to the past for lessons and for imaginative guidance. I think this is an incredible starting place and I hope this leads to longer and more sustained conversations, if not between us then at least between others with similar differences.

That being said, disagreements do abound. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on two. First, Holtorf's critique that this type of data-driven criticism of the actions made by a powerful governing body is resorting to what he has called identity politics. Second, I will discuss Holtorf's breakdown of UNESCO World Heritage Committee organization and their decision-making practices through the lens of anarchist and other anti-authoritarian perspectives' concern about the dangers of majority rule.

Briefly, Holtorf accuses me of reducing heritage "to primarily representing ancient social and political systems." It's an odd reversal to critique an article that demonstrated that the UNESCO World Heritage Committee's decisions were reducing the past by primarily preserving hierarchical social and political systems to argue that a critique of this practice is instead the reduction. My research question, of course, was whether there was equality in the representation of ancient politics as seen in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites program in North America and the Caribbean. There wasn't. While I wish the article could have gone further, this wasn't a comprehensive analysis, and suggesting otherwise simply moves the goal posts (Popper 2002 [1963]).

Further, Holtorf argues that by pointing out this implicit preservation bias towards hierarchical political economies I am essentializing and "promoting varieties of tribalism that may advance that idea of shared cultural distinction and group-specific values at the expense of civil liberties connected to universal human rights, including the notion of human equality irrespective of any collective affiliation." Holtorf leverages the supposed specter of identity politics to dismiss my critique of UNESCO World Heritage Sites practices in the Americas through the idea that identity politics lead to this "tribalism." To understand this critique, it is best to look at the origins of identity politics, which was first given voice in the 1970s by Black, queer, anarchistic feminists over the erasure of their concerns in the contemporary feminist and Black power movements (Combahee River Collective 1977). This was no minor statement either. In the same 1977 declaration where they defined identity politics, the women of the Combahee River Collective also laid the groundwork for intersectional feminism, which has revolutionized how scholars and activists analyze and understand the ways that identity and power intersect (Combahee River Collective 1977; see also Crenshaw 1989).

Importantly, identity politics are not about "creating divisions" and "essentializing" identity. Identity politics are about using lived experience to contest erasures happening *because of* the essentialization of identity; in this case white feminists and black male activists who focused solely on either gender or ethnic equality. Thus, identity politics was, and is, about trying to break down essentialisms and political divisions that already existed both within activist circles and society at large.

Holtorf's interpretation of the arguments in my article appears to arise because he leverages the liberal interpretation of identity politics that views radical criticisms of the liberal project as creating political schisms (i.e., Lilla 2018). Yet, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) wrote in the *Stanford Law Review*, the aim of identity politics is the exact opposite of what liberal critics suggest. Glen Coulthard, the prominent Yellowknives Dene professor, has perhaps argued this most concisely in his groundbreaking book, *Red Skin, White Masks*, when he states that the

mobilization of identity within political practice should not be viewed as either “productive or repressive” prior to considering the context of the histories, economies, and actors. Once you do that, you can “distinguish between [identity] “discourses that naturalize oppression and discourses that naturalize resistance.” (Coulthard 2014: 103; citing Tobin 1994: 131).

This is an important point, I think, since my article highlights UNESCO’s skewed protection of the past in North America and the Caribbean, particularly in how they have created a past that essentializes hierarchical political organizations. Suggesting that a call to stop heritage management practices that *erase* difference is “essentializing” or “tribalizing” recalls Coulthard’s claim that we need to examine which identity discourse naturalizes oppression or resistance.

UNESCO was founded as a liberal enterprise aimed at creating mutual tolerance and internationalism (i.e., UNESCO 1945; Meskell 2018). But as the recent Indigenous movements aimed at contesting liberalism (such as the NoDAPL protests in the Dakotas) have demonstrated, the liberal state’s goal of cosmopolitanism is often used as a mask for oppressive political and economic strategies that try to erase difference. As Anne Phillips (1994: 78) noted,

“[t]he classically liberal treatment of difference allows for private spaces within which people can get on with their own chosen affairs and a public realm ordered around a set of minimum shared presumptions. But . . . the shared presumptions that control the public world have proved less than evenhanded in their treatment of different groups.”

Thus, liberalism, while interested in internationalism, often falls far short of representation for those who do not fit these “minimum shared presumptions.” In the Americas, this often means that Indigenous and Black political values and cultural views, among many others, are not represented.

This complicated relationship between indigeneity and liberal state management leads to my final point. Holtorf summarizes some of the decision-making practices that underlie the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and help to create the World Heritage List. As he notes, the “World Heritage Convention has been signed and ratified by a current total of 193 states” and that the sites included on the List are decided by the World Heritage Committee consisting of “21 elected representatives of the Convention’s many State Parties” (see also UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1972). This in fact may get at the crux of the argument I was making in my article. While there is local involvement during portions of this process, the representatives deciding on inclusion are in fact state representatives. Current nation-states, some founded on principles of liberalism and others on a wide sweep of less republican ideals, are generally hierarchical institutions; either through authoritarian political practices, capitalism, centuries of colonialism, or, most realistically, a mix of the three. Regardless, apart from a few states that have some consensus-based decision-making practices (as in the majority Indigenous Nunavut province in Canada (e.g., O’Brien 2003) or in Holtorf’s own Sweden (Lewin 1998)), most states work on a more simple majority rule. This also means, then, that having a representative for a state with an Indigenous population does not mean that the interests of that population are represented at UNESCO. Mexico’s representative, particularly in a majority rule process, will represent not a consensus view of the past that incorporates all voices, but a majority view. Thus, the voices of, for example, the Maya, the Rarámuri, or the united Indigenous voices within the Zapatista movement are regularly excluded.

UNESCO seems to recognize this, and it may be why they added Community (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2007) to their previous four strategic objectives for the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2002). Yet UNESCO rules of procedure follow majority-rule processes for the state representatives (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2015). This type of state-based, majority-rule decision-making is something the self-declared anarchist Mahatma Gandhi, one of the more famous advocates for non-majority decision-making processes, strove against (Woodcock 1962: 21), in part owing to Gandhi’s friendship with and close reading of Tolstoy’s anarchist manual, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (Weber 2004). Gandhi’s formulation of these and other principles of inclusivity and anti-authoritarianism, would then influence Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States’ Civil Rights movement (King 2005: 231).

In particular, Gandhi argued that means and ends were inseparable (i.e. prefiguration) and that the parliamentary and Western democratic processes were “merely embodiments of slavery” (Gandhi 1997: 38) and “a superstition and an ungodly thing to believe that an act of a majority binds a minority” (Gandhi 1997: 92), respectively. Gandhi

fought hard to have decisions made through connected community consensus practices (Gandhi and Tolstoy 1987: 189). What's more, instead of serving their communities, majority-rule state representatives from Indigenous nations often replicate the interests and ideology of the colonizing agency (Coulthard 2014; Estes 2019). Majority-rule creates essentialism, particularly when a liberal view of society erases, or privatizes, differences that don't fit the "minimum shared presumptions."

One powerful step towards inhibiting this process whereby states have power and its citizens do not would be for a heritage committee to work directly with citizens in a consensus process that bypasses the state entirely. In fact, as advocates of prefiguration would see it, this is the only way for the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to achieve their fifth "C," Community. If the means create the ends, then Indigenous representatives with equal power to the state representatives would go a long way towards fulfilling this strategy. This is a complex approach in international politics but probably highlights one of the massive ironies of what archaeologists claim are complex societies. Representative decision-making systems are less complex than inclusive ones.

As Holtorf mentions, the inscription of sites is based on their merits, but this is a process that I called out as problematic in my original article (Borck 2019: 235). Inscribing site by site on the list creates an emergent structure, one that the data indicates is biased. UNESCO appears to be aware of this. They updated their Operational Guidelines two times in the 2000s to try to create a more representative list (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2002, 2007; see also Meskell 2018). While UNESCO appears to be aware of the problem to some degree, they seem to be struggling to overcome some of their more Eurocentric, or at least Western, ideologies.

Which, in the end, brings us back to my original thesis that means and ends are tied to one another (i.e. prefiguration). While I disagree with some of the ways that Holtorf characterizes my research, I do appreciate that he is listening as well as advocating so strongly for heritage and the future that heritage decisions are creating. As the goal for UNESCO is to create a world of peace, and since "[t]rue peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice" (King 1997: 207–208), and state representation and majority rule create unjust representation, this is an opportune moment to re-envision UNESCO World Heritage Committee practices to make this happen. I look forward to seeing the results.

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