

Palgrave Studies in Cultural Heritage and Conflict

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Editors

Cultural Contestation

Heritage, Identity and the Role of Government

Foreword by
Marc Howard Ross

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FOREWORD

I am pleased and honored to have been asked to write the Foreword to this book, whose subject has been the major topic my own research for more than three decades. Over this time, the vastness of the analysis of the concepts of culture and heritage have meant that I managed to investigate questions about culture and political conflict in a wide range of settings and using a variety of methods of data collection and analysis. The chapters in this book are important in expanding both what we know about the importance of heritage to people and societies, and how cultural contestation challenges our ability to live in a diverse and peaceful world.

Culturally defined expressions and enactments form the content of cultural heritage linking people who share an identity across time and space. Threats to cultural heritage are at the core of cultural contestation. These threats can variously engage a long-established group in a society that feels its heritage and identity are at risk and/or a minority (often one that is newly arrived) in a state that feels it is not getting the respect and recognition it deserves. As cultural contestation intensifies around cultural heritage, it becomes especially difficult to mitigate because the parties in these conflicts often do not readily view identity and heritage as divisible or negotiable.

In recent decades, the combination of increased migration in the world and greater mobilization around minority rights in states with a history in which a single-identity group dominated for a long time has increased cultural contestation in most of the world and has been

particularly apparent in Western Europe, the North America, and much of Asia that are the focus of the chapters in this book. Central to understanding cultural contestation around heritage is recognizing that they are fundamentally about inclusion and exclusion in a society and its symbolic landscape which are expressed in the narratives groups recount about themselves, the cultural expressions and enactments they use to do this, and the presence or absence of recognition of a group's heritage on a society's symbolic landscape.

The contributors to this volume examine cultural contestation arising from heritage issues within, and between, a wide range of societies and states, showing how widespread and diverse the forms of cultural contestation around heritage politics are in the world. Indeed, it makes sense from my perspective to see these conflicts as virtually universal in the contemporary world, while at the same time recognizing that there is great variation in the forms and contents of the individual cultural conflicts described in my own work and in the chapters of this book. Variation in the issues around which the contestation occurs and the actions participants undertake vary a good deal and the cases described here provide a wide range of examples of the roles that states play, sometimes as direct participants including as initiators of contestation, and at other times in working toward their mitigation. States play diverse roles in cultural heritage disputes in great part depending upon who controls the state, and because cultural group boundaries are rarely coterminous with those of a state and cross-border issues can greatly affect the positions states adopt, and the actions they take, in a conflict. The reality that states in the world today include multiple cultural groups and most people from most of these live in more than one state makes cultural contestation more widespread and more intense than in the past.

It would be a mistake, moreover, to view cultural groups as stable. Rather, cultural identities are social constructions whose boundaries and defining characteristics can, and do, shift over time. As Donald Horwitz and others have explained, new more inclusive groups can form where once distinctive groups come together around a broader cultural identity, and at other times a larger group can subdivide leaving smaller, distinct entities in its place. This is all very consistent with the perspective of most scholars who widely accept the constructed and changing nature of cultural identities. Yet, at the same time, we should be aware that most people and groups involved in cultural contestation see group identities

in essentialist terms and rarely acknowledge or are aware of the ways that these identities shift becoming more inclusive or exclusive over time.

Anthropologists and sociologists have puzzled about the nature and behavior of cultural identity groups for a long time examining their constructed and changing character in a wide variety of societies. Their work has often paid attention to cultural expressions such as festivals, social rituals, monuments, and the importance of group narratives. The work of anthropologists Max Gluckman, Victor Turner, Abner Cohen, and David Kertzer has always been particularly important to me in thinking about these questions as has that of sociologists going back to Emile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs, and Joseph Gusfield.

It has taken political scientists longer to recognize the importance of culture in politics. This is probably because, like historians, their predominant focus for a long time was almost exclusively on the structures of government (the state), the policy options political leaders and administrators considered, and the personalities and beliefs of competing political elites. This was not universally the case, however, and there were invariably voices that adopted a broader perspective than the mainstream. Some examples include people interested in political socialization such as David Easton, Fred Greenstein, and especially Richard Merelman, a student of Murray Edelman who initiated the study of symbolic politics and then broadened his work to include the influence of art on political life. Then as the field of political psychology evolved in recent decades, recognition of the importance of narratives, rituals, and political ceremonies in political life became more widespread.

My own investigations led me to recognize that intense cultural contestation often revolves around issues that have little material significance. Examples include intense conflicts over clothing (most often worn by women), flag displays, religious beliefs, monuments and memorials, parades, place names, public holidays, and control over public spaces. The trivial material value of many culturally valued objects such as headscarves and flags obliges us to give significant emphasis, at times, to non-material explanations for the intensity of conflicts around these objects and their connection to threatened identities. In the contestation that occurs, I have learned that attention to what I have called the public and symbolic landscape is especially important in understanding the dynamics of cultural contestation and heritage politics. The public landscape refers to the lands that include the streets, parks, museums, former

battlefields, and other areas that ordinary citizens use and view in the course of their daily lives.

A society's symbolic landscape contains both real and imagined space. It includes specific places used by the public as well as abstract (and imagined) spaces associated with heritage and how people understand the past. Visits to specific physical sites often are experienced as emotionally special and are generally associated with narratives and rituals that connect people who see themselves sharing a common past and reinforce feelings of group identity. These places are sacred to in-group members and have an emotional significance for people because of events and people associated with them and these connections are expressed through memorials, statues, and buildings that mark significant historical events. Part of the sacred landscape also is found in cultural objects such as films, theater productions, music, books, religious practices, civic holidays, museum exhibits, paintings, statues, parades, family celebrations, religious practices, and festivals. Cultural contestation can become intense when any of these expressions associated with heritage and group identity become threats to that of another group and especially when they represent exclusion from a political community.

Outsiders often easily dismiss such conflicts as trivial and have trouble taking them seriously. But this is a mistake. What is more important is to consider why the people engaged in these cultural conflicts feel so intensely about them. A first step in doing this involves careful listening to what the parties engaged in cultural conflict say and do in order to better understand why the participants feel so strongly about them. While a common response is to dismiss statements and actions of participants in cultural contestations as foolish, self-serving or even irrational, this is not helpful for figuring out what is needed to mitigate a conflict's intensity. Without outsiders taking seriously what the participants feel and do, movement toward the lowering of tensions will be far more difficult to achieve.

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, US

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