

Cultural heritage and identity politics

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Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Preface: Heritage renaissance <i>Kristof Van Assche</i>	7
Chapter 1. Ibn Battuta: about the Islamic and Arabic foundation and contribution to present-day modern science <i>Sjoerd During</i>	13
Chapter 2. European heritage discourses, a matter of identity construction? <i>Roel During</i>	17
Chapter 3. The market of collective identities and legacy work <i>Itamar Even-Zohar</i>	31
Chapter 4. Landscape's silenced stories <i>Ralph Tangelder and Maaike Andela</i>	39
Chapter 5. Settlers, environmentalism and identity: Western Galilee 1949-1965 <i>Rakefet Sela-Sheffy</i>	49
Chapter 6. Symposium on cultural heritage and identity politics <i>Rosalie van Dam</i>	61
About the authors	63

Chapter 3.

The market of collective identities and legacy work⁵

Itamar Even-Zohar

Identity policy, the deliberate inculcation of a cluster of elements as inherently representative of a group, has been an indispensable procedure in group management since time immemorial.⁶ Dominant forces have been using quite consistently this procedure to rule efficiently. When this policy is successful, optimally every single member of the group takes that cluster of elements as their personal property. The group would then reject, individually and collectively, attempts at eliminating elements from the cluster, whether initiated from within or from without. Being in possession of a collective identity has evidently been a primary condition not only for keeping a group together, but also for legitimizing its existence as a separate entity, which allows it privileges and distinction from other groups: '[...] the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians' (Genesis 43: 32; KJV version).

An illustration for such a collective commitment was recently provided by the controversy over the crucifix in school classrooms in Italy. A lawsuit was brought to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg by an Italian citizen of Finnish origin and others⁷, who maintained that:

...the presence of crucifixes in State-school classrooms in Italy, [...] [is] incompatible with the obligation on the State, in the exercise of the functions which it assumed in relation to education and to teaching, to respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in accordance with their own religious and philosophical convictions. (Press Release by the Registrar of the Court, no. 234, 18/03/2011).

⁵ I am grateful to Rakefet Sela-Sheffy for her invaluable suggestions and comments.

⁶ For an extensive discussion of deliberate culture planning see Even-Zohar 2008.

⁷ Lautsi and Others v. Italy (application no. 30814/06).

The court ruled against the plaintiffs, thus confirming that Christianity is an indispensable component of the European identity. Italy's foreign minister, Franco Frattini, is quoted to have said: 'Oggi ha vinto il sentimento popolare dell'Europa. Perché la decisione interpreta soprattutto la voce dei cittadini in difesa dei propri valori e della propria identità' (*Corriere della Sera*, 18/03/2011).⁸ In the Vatican, reported *El Pais*, 'el presidente del Pontificio Consejo para la Cultura del Vaticano, el cardenal Gianfranco Ravasi, [...] ha recordado que "si Europa pierde la herencia cristiana" pierde también "su propio rostro"' (Miguel Mora, *El Pais*, 18/03/2011).⁹ This crucifix controversy is probably only the tip of the iceberg in nowadays conflicts within the European Union countries over who owns the culture, namely who has got the right to tell whom what to do. Certainly, the reluctance to accept countries with predominantly non-Christian population has been a major cause for not accepting such a country as Turkey as a member.

Similarly, refusing secession for a group is also frequently based on the belief that the group seeking secession has no legitimate claim for a distinct identity. The slogan used by the Quebec separatists, 'Nous sommes différents', amply vociferated during the 1995 referendum campaign by Quebec's Premier Jacques Parizeau, was rejected by the Anglophone members of the confederation. In a meeting held on October 9, 1991, Parizeau said:

Eux [the Anglophones] ont défini leur pays (sur la Charte canadienne des droits, laquelle est devenue [...] le symbole de l'identité canadienne). Nous sommes en train d'en définir un autre. Cela ne nous rend pas moins démocrates pour autant. [...]. Cela nous rend différents (Parizeau, 1997: 237-238)¹⁰.

'Being different,' that is having a different culture, and consequently a different identity, has thus been the major argument for justifying the separation of Quebec, or any other group for that matter in history, ancient or modern.

It is thus evident that the endeavors invested in the making, incultation and declaration of a cluster of elements which constitute a group's identity

⁸ 'Today has won the popular sentiment of Europe; because the decision interprets above all the voice of the citizens in defense of their proper values and their proper identity.'

⁹ 'The president of the Pontifical Council for Culture in the Vatican, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, [...] has maintained that 'if Europe loses the Christian heritage' it'll also lose "its proper face".'

¹⁰ 'They [the Anglophones] have defined their country (on the Canadian Charter of Rights [and Freedoms], which has become [...] the symbol of Canadian identity). We are in the course of defining another one. This does not make us less democratic as such. [...] This makes us different.'

has always had a double function: to achieve group cohesion as well as distinction on the basis of recognized assets.

Achieving group cohesion, and the creation of a sense of belonging, may entail demands for group loyalty and sacrifices from the group members. Without such individual dispositions, there can be no group agreements that are a fundamental condition for maintaining life among human beings. While in many periods in human history, such socially cementing elements have been created and diffused 'from below' by individuals or small groups, other times this kind of work was initiated and maintained 'from above', namely by rulers and leaders of groups. Ruling bodies do not necessarily cater for the interests of the population ruled by them, which in extreme cases may simply lead to cultural and political revolutions (that is, a drastic deliberate change of repertoire).

Evidently, whether in ancient Egypt or in modern Great Britain, beyond a certain level of discrepancies between the repertoire promoted by the population and the one imposed by dominant forces, the latter's tolerance can no longer be upheld. The ancient Egyptian state was engaged in a constant endeavor to harmonize the enormous variety of its population, as well as absorb the endless flux of migrants from all over the ancient world. In our own era, policies vary largely in different parts of the globe: some states, mostly totalitarian-ideological, would tolerate no such discrepancies, while other (Western democracies, for example) seem to allow certain latitude, even endorse 'multiculturalism'. However, outbursts of discontent take place even within those more liberal states. Recently, on February 2011, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, David Cameron, launched a fierce attack against what he considered to be an exaggerated tolerance towards what he believed to be unacceptable cultural repertoire. In his view, 'State multiculturalism is a wrong-headed doctrine that has had disastrous results. It has fostered difference between communities, and it has stopped us from strengthening our collective identity. Indeed, it has deliberately weakened it' (*The Guardian*, 6/2/2011).¹¹

¹¹ *The Guardian's* editorial, however, strongly criticized Cameron: "David Cameron had an opportunity this weekend to say something interesting and relevant about a subject important to anyone who lives in Britain: how hyper-diverse societies can not only cohere, but thrive. He flunked it. What the prime minister offered instead was a mix of clichés, tired thinking and some downright offensive terminology (*The Guardian*, 7/2/2011).

The function of collective identity as an asset, both endogenously and exogenously, makes it a symbolic capital that allows for the group's status claims, namely justifying its existence as a separate entity (political or otherwise) and the exclusion of others. In his study 'Icelandic nationality identity: from nationalism to tourism,' Gísli Sigurðsson (Sigurðsson, 1996) shows how valorized goods (such as the old Icelandic manuscripts) are shown to official foreign visitors to reinforce Iceland's cause. It is symptomatic that even though Iceland declared its independence in 1944, it was only in 1971, when the agreement with Denmark on the return of the manuscripts was signed, it was 'the final confirmation that Iceland had gained its independence from Denmark' (Sigurðsson, 1996: 60-61).

The valuation of identities is thus part of the everlasting intergroup competition over prestige and status, which in the final analysis means competition over access to resources. An intergroup stock-exchange of such assets has been determinative since antiquity in hierarchizing the various ethnic and political groups vis-à-vis each other, allowing some to have more say than others. To win the competition, 'better elements' always had to be shown as pertinent to the claimant group, and therefore the repertoires of elements quickly crystallized to encompass a variety of components: from impressive buildings, like pyramids, city gates, hanging gardens and temples, to claims about freedom, quality of life and wealth, more powerful gods, better justice, personal security, and any possessions or principles that happened to be highly valued at a time. This basic repertoire was providing powerful tools for groups to exercise identity formation. It has not changed much since ancient Egypt with its pyramids (or chariots, horses and ornaments) and its *Ma'at* ('justice') concept (Assmann, 1989),¹² or since rulers of big and small states in the ancient Fertile Crescent boasted about the high quality of life for everyone within the territories they ruled (Green, 2003).¹³

¹² I am grateful to Orly Goldwasser for her personal communication on *Ma'at* as a factor of culture planning.

¹³ Green summarizes the purpose of the boasting as follows: '[The boasted about] achievements cannot be divorced from the international competition for honor with friend and foe alike. Thus, they can be presented as the reversal of negative conditions--the destruction and desolation--created by the enemy. In this way, they are an extension of the king's victories over his enemies and so provide further evidence of his superiority over them. Domestic achievements were also used to demonstrate the king's superiority over other kings who were not regarded as enemies, e.g. fellow-vassals, and predecessors on the throne. They were also employed in a complex balance between the impulse to self-glorification and the recognition of the superiority of the king's suzerain.'

To enhance and facilitate the inculcation of identities, a variety of procedures has always been used, among which boasting about achievements in the form of rituals such as memorizing events and raising monuments have become to be the most popular.¹⁴ A collective memory indispensably had to become part of the repertoire shared by the relevant group. 'Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt' (Deuteronomy 25: 17; KJV), or the Passover Text (*Haggadah*) instruction 'and ye shall tell it to your son' (that is, the story of the exodus from Egypt) are two typical examples for memorizing rituals. No less symptomatic is the exhortation 'raccontiamone la storia ai nostri figli e ai nostri nipoti';¹⁵ in an article entitled 'Ritroviamo l'orgoglio dell'Unità' ('let's recover the pride of the Unity,' Aldo Cazzulo, *Corriere della Sera*, 17/3/2011). These memories, stories told from one generation to the next, thus become common legacies, patrimony, an indispensable baggage to never be forgotten. Monuments, whether constructions or sites – stelae, sculptures, paintings, buildings, artifacts – work on the one hand to inscribe events and persons as part of the group's identity, and to display the splendor of the group's assets on the other. 'Legacy work' may thus refer to the two aspects of identity work, namely the creation of cohesion and the display of valuable goods.

Attempts at inculcating repertoires without some sort of persuasion hardly hold for more than a limited time, or do not hold at all. Violence, coercion, terror, and other non-peaceful methods of dictation cannot create the necessary consent among a group, and are therefore more costly to rulers, even if well-intended. In such cases as Peter the First's, the Czar of Russia, or Muhammad Tughluq's, the Sultan of Delhi, both aimed at reforming the repertoires of culture and the collective identity of their states. Tughluq has been far less successful than Peter the First, because he even failed to recruit the small group of adepts to support his reforms, as did Peter. Ibn Battuta has told the story of Tughluq's abortive projects, which were intended as innovations on a grand scale. The reluctance of the people to accept his decisions has not made him understand what others along history seem to have known from the outset, namely that mere coercion does not pay. Typically for him (as for similar dictators), the opposition to his decisions was taken by him as just 'une résistance ignorante et malveillante d'un peuple récalcitrant et mal disposé face à la justesse des actes d'un souverain éclairé. Cette vision des choses donne à ce dernier le droit d'imposer ses vues par la force et de punir les insoumis. Ainsi les plus grandes injustices

¹⁴ For more about such procedures see During 2010.

¹⁵ 'Let us tell the story [of the unification of Italy] to our children and grandchildren.'

et les plus grandes cruautés se feront au nom de l'ordre, de la justice et des grands principes de gouvernement' (Yerasimos, 1982)

There is a steady ebb and flow movement in respect to which aspect of the identity work, and the creation of legacies as part of it, dominates in different points of time. Roughly, it would seem justified to maintain that when a group is unstable, whether in a state of emergence or in crisis, identity work and the creation of legacies become major tools for securing its maintenance. In contrast, when a group has achieved a high level of cohesion, or when it is not threatened by adversaries, identity work may lose its intensity, and legacy work is mostly reduced to commodification of the objects and images (including stories and memories) that are part of the already recognized repertoire. It seems that at least in the cases of Greece and the Netherlands discussed by During (2010) this is actually the case. In contrast, in Lithuania 'the underlying resistance of the inhabitants of Kaunas against the military history of the town' (ibid.: 115) obliterated legacy plans devised by policymakers, and similarly in Crete, where 'Cretan people didn't like heritage, because it reminded them of periods in history in which they were not free' (ibid.: 137).

Thus, in established countries of the European Union, those which no longer have to legitimize their existence or justify the value of their legacies, legacy work is already often detached from identity work, serving the purpose of reinforcing the value of the assets on display for sale. When there is an abundance of objects and images, the state institutions involved with the promotion of legacies often mostly only work to facilitate the physical access to such assets (like places and monuments, books and manuscripts) or duly promote them via publications, visiting deals, or the Internet (Sigurðsson, 1996). On the other hand, for areas little known or which need some economic injection, legacy objects and images may be dug from some imaginary or covert sources. In short, it would be justified to contend that heritage has become mostly a matter of competition about 'who has got the better goods for sale,' while for the majority of people in everyday life they carry very little meaning.

However, this is not an unchanging matter. As the unanticipated outburst of the British prime minister quoted above shows, what seems to be a stable situation may quickly change once people in the group sends a threat to their established identity. When this occurs, indifference makes room for heated engagement; identity clashes may splash seemingly out of the blue

over some forgotten, or until that moment unimportant objects, images, or memories stored in some obfuscated cache.

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