

EUROPEAN CITIES IN THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING AND TRANSMITTING OF THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE. INTERNATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR UNDERGRADUATE AND MASTER STUDENTS.



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In heritage studies we want to understand how people and communities relate to their past, how they want to interpret it and what representations of it they create. We focus on practices of commemoration, such as rituals and on transformation of public space conducted in a way it serves collective memory. We analyse museums: their collections and their activities developed to tell stories about the past. Just like with inheritance, we look at heritage in a way it is an important social phenomenon, helping to interpret our identities with regard to what we think is important about the past but also about what we would rather forget. Heritage both as a source of pride and as a burden to carry are researched in heritage studies.

There are several key concepts used in heritage studies. Below we will look at some of them trying to see how they help to interpret heritage.

Group practice 1

Mind maps

In groups create mind maps of the following concepts. Remember, that in mind maps we are looking at free associations of images and ideas in order to map them so that their connections (often unexpected and surprising) will reveal new meanings given to the central concept. Think of everything that comes to your mind and may be related to the central concept: songs, pictures, symbols, proverbs... anything that could enrich our shared understanding of a term.

The main goal of mind maps is to stretch understanding of what often seems too familiar (or too abstract) to be focused on effectively.

1. Memory
2. Representation
3. Experience
4. Ritual
5. Identity
6. Interpretation

Group practice 2

After you have worked with mind maps, present them to other groups. When presenting the results of your work, please try to give an overview of your central concept. Try to show what it is connected with and how one can find links between various elements of your mind map. In the end of your presentation try to give a working definition of the term.

Group practice 3

After you have presented your mind maps and listened to other mind maps, please see where your concepts overlap: what is similar to all of them, what words and ideas seem to be coming up in more than one. Are there any unique associations, applicable only to one of the concepts?

What did you discover about heritage during mind mapping, presentations and discussions? Did anything surprise you?

Heritage studies allow to look at areas that are traditionally regarded as historical and as such worth remembering. This is why it is not rare to study museums, churches and other temples, cemeteries or other "heritage sites". In this course we are closely looking at cities as spaces that can teach us about heritage: both official and non-dominant one. To see the dynamics of heritage we will be studying cities as significant spaces where heritage is born, interpreted, presented and sometimes commercialised.

Official heritage

Cities are among those collectives who would like to be liked and respected for what they stand for. This is why they often invest in city museums, where they would present their own stories. Usually they would tell about their legendary origins, then how the city structures were established, what the structure of power was or who were famous rulers of the city. Often cities would present themselves as participating in transnational networks, such as trade routes or religious networks. They would describe their uniqueness with regional and local produce to be found here, with famous citizens and landmark buildings.

In city museums they would be represented with exhibits such as: acts of city location, maps and plans, official documents, paintings, objects of prestige, coins or artifacts of rare beauty. In this way cities narrate their long history, as continuous and meaningful. They refer to the exhibits because they intend to justify the version of history with the use of authentic objects. Usually city museums will aim at telling this story as neutral and objective.

Do you have a city museum? What story does it tell? What image of the city can be deduced from the exhibition?

Non-official heritage

When you visit a city museum you will probably notice that not only a history of the city is told. There are also some stories about its inhabitants. Now see who gets represented in those stories? Are they narratives about the wealthy, usually male inhabitants? If this is so, this is nothing surprising: usually poorer people did not invest in their commemoration nor they participated in official council gatherings. Official documents are a very important historical source, but they are not the only representation of the past to testify it.

To understand it run a short experiment. Think about today as of diversity of experiences you have already had: what have you been doing? Who have you met? What did you feel? What emotions did you experience? What thoughts did you have? It's been more than one or two things... now think about the diversity of human lives in a city's perspective. Whose stories get highlighted, and who gets excluded in processes of heritage formation?

There are many stories which cannot be summarised to the official heritage, like the one presented in traditional city museums. Some of stories just do not fit the image cities want to have, while others

are not told because there are no exhibits that could represent some aspects of the past. But some people still remember them and for some cities it becomes important to include those stories in general city narratives.

Multi- narrativity

Now when we talked about different experiences and perspectives within heritage, it is time to see if the problem of representation could be overcome. It would be good if all the stories, testimonies and objects, defined by various people could be somehow included in heritage. In its ideal form heritage would be democratic, inclusive platform promoting diversity of experiences and stories. But, on one hand this would be hard to achieve, and on the other hand... would you really like to listen to all stories?

It is probably best (and feasible) if we tell same stories seen from various perspectives. For instance a story of a castle could go beyond king's and queen's story. What other perspectives could be included in a narrative (exhibition) about "Life in a castle"?

Once we design what marginalized voices could be included in the story, we realise there are not too many objects to illustrate and represent such past. And even if there are, sometimes it is really challenging to reconstruct the story when you have, say, a medieval shoe or a prehistoric weapon... these are invaluable remains of the past, but in order to reveal their potential, they need to be interpreted. Interpretation helps to find meaning in objects, it also provides contexts for heritage so that visitors can connect with it and maybe even establish personal links with it discovering something new about themselves.

Representation vs experience

We know it is hard to represent any diversity with an object or even with an image. Sometimes poetry can do it better than objects. But objects and their groups (that we call collections) are important testimonies to the past, so they are commonly valued as witnesses to what had happened.

In heritage studies we look closely at representations of the past: we realize it consists of many elements that are and were experienced by people, who have their feelings and emotions, fears and hopes... which all influence the experiences. We may look at heritage as at domain where the diversity of the past gets represented, so that it can become a shared space for thought and reflection. It is not easy to find representation for complex phenomena, but many museums and other heritage institutions try to be platforms for communication, spaces where communities could examine fragments of their identities.

Excercise

Think about yourself. Who are you? Where are you in life? What are your dreams and desires? What do you like? What can't you stand?

Now your task is to create a "Box of me". Think of three objects that represent you best. Now try to write their labels.

Was it easy? Why? How did you come to this?



Conclusions

Heritage is as much about the past as it is about the present. Cities are particular in this respect, as they have stored many elements of the past and have transformed and adapted them to life and present conditions. Heritage studies ask questions about ways of reappropriation of the past, its interpretations and other identity related issues. Different definitions of heritage are also at the centre of interest here. Next time, when you visit your city, see for yourself what questions you might pose in terms of heritage: what is there? Who decides about its shape? What does it mean? Heritage studies help to understand some of them.