

ON THINGS PAST

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Abstract

This essay considers two approaches at looking into our past. It inclines to support the view that what we know about our past comes not from vague notions of ‘tradition’ or ‘faithful memory’ or even ‘history’ but rather a matter of power position. The use of history by the dominant and the disenfranchised, represented here as the state and the revisionist narrative shows that history is a contemporary production and manifestation of power and contest.

The term ‘heritage’ has certain idiosyncrasies to it. It resists definition, claiming it may restrict imagination and the wide ranging potentials of its application, “thereby kill it stone dead” (Carmen & Sorenson 2009: 12). On the other hand, ‘heritage’ relies on the certainty of a collective notion of a ‘past’ almost to the point of consecrating it by elevating a certain monument or practice or even a landscape into a national honour, a reminder of the glory and the romantic sense of shared tradition that must be immortalised for the future reference.

It is in the space between the indeterminacy of the term and the locked spirit of the past that gives the context, the subject-matter and the controversies for the Heritage Studies. As its proponents wished to claim as a “distinct set of academic practices”, (Carmen & Sorenson 2009: 11)

it is an emerging field that came into picture in the 1980s. The claim for its individuality as against the more entrenched fields it has affiliated with like archaeology and anthropology rests on the new sciences and practices of heritage management that has evolved into something institutional and professional. The United Nation Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) might be the earliest attempt at both institutionalisation and internationalisation of the idea related to ‘heritage’. UNESCO has taken the tasks to assist at identifying, protecting and preserving things deemed to possess “outstanding value for humanity”, thereby establishes them as “world heritage”. Similar effort at identifying and preserving ‘heritage’ is also pursued at the nation-state level. In Malaysia, a National Heritage Department was formed in 1 March 2006. Its mission was to identify, preserve, research and document national heritage, both tangible and in non-tangible forms. Malaysia is also interested to become the signatory for the UN Convention on Intangible Heritage in order to get the world body’s recognition for its own (Utusan Malaysia, 16 February 2012). It is remarkable in our times how ‘heritage’ becomes an obligation for international organisations and nation-states, in the process, creating an apparatus of bureaucrats, scholars and policies designed to achieve the pursuit for novelty.

Since ‘heritage’ refers to the identification and preservation of a significant objects related to the past, it is interesting to note that the theorisation of the ‘past’ by the proponents and the practitioners of the field have been scant. The ‘past’, arguably, is seen and presented unproblematic. The common view, as adopted by the UN and the state policy, was that ‘heritage’ represented the idea of an accessible and retrievable past. Critical theorisation of the term argued otherwise. Studies by Hobsbawm (1983) and Bhabha (1994) argued for a perspective of a past that was recent, interrupted and disjointed, an assemblage of multiple sources, not always archaic or indigenous rather more often involves “a process of formalisation and ritualisation” (Hobsbawm 1983, 4). The recognition of a site or a monument or a