

## Out of the bubble: Heritage professionals in times of increasing polarization

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In our globalizing world, identity politics seems to be gaining momentum. How can heritage professionals respond? Is it their job to select tangible or intangible heritage items and use them to create attractive and collective narratives, with the aim of establishing a strong sense of group identity? Should they support initiatives towards the establishment of fixed heritage repertoires, linked to a fixed set of standards and values, hoping that all citizens can identify with those, behave in accordance with them, convey them, and, in doing so, feeling part of a collective, a community?

Embarking on identity politics may make some heritage professionals feel uncomfortable, since it inevitably implies exclusion. Collectives can bring about solidarity and a sense of pride; they can empower, offer the possibility to claim rights on behalf of the group, but at the same time they are rigid: collective identities do not always match personal identities, solidarity remains confined to one group, and the leaders of the collectives become the “representatives” of the group (McCarry and Jasper 2015, 3).

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In his book *Liquid Times* (2007), sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes “the paradox of an increasingly local politics in a world increasingly shaped and reshaped by global processes”. He notes that “the more [people] ‘stick to themselves’, the more ‘defenceless against the global whirlwind’ they tend to become, and so also less capable of deciding, let alone asserting, the local, ostensibly their own, meanings and identities – to the great joy of global operators, who have no reason to fear the defenceless” (Bauman 2012, 113). Bauman is referring here to the “local identity politics” deployed to stay on top of the global whirlwind, but one can argue that *national* identity politics springs from a similar need. The outcome is a getting together of like minds.

According to sociologist Richard Sennett, the desire to resemble each other is people's way of avoiding the necessity to get to know each other. But, Sennett says, there is hope. As it happens, people have the talent to observe, to listen, and to imagine other people's points of view. We sort of neglected this talent, but the problem can be fixed: with the right guidance, it can be developed (Sennett 2013). One may wonder if appealing to a past as a form of identity politics is the solution. By using an appeal to the past to establish the essence of the collective in the present, one creates the notion that there would be something like a people, a

tribe, with descendants sharing a past through inheritance. This notion may appeal to those who (wish to) consider themselves descendants, but what if we want to get rid of the idea of such a tribe? We need a different approach; one that enforces the breaking of bubbles.

To enforce the breaking of bubbles, one could argue for an active quest for alternative voices (to be confronted with each other in conversation) and the visualization of these different voices. This comes down to addressing the different views, interests and emotions existing and arising around a heritage item. Heritage is a hallmark attributed in an interplay of forces involving a diversity of interests and emotions. Heritage is not a given. It comes about whenever it is advanced, rooting in a desire for collectivity and continuity. People turn things into heritage by labelling them as monuments, housing them in museums or putting them on inventories – looking to the future with reference to the past. The selection process does not take place without a struggle, and the result is in no way neutral. If only the like-minded are gathered around a heritage item, it is impossible to gain insight in any latent conflicts. Given the fact that heritage professionals are among the participating parties, they cannot operate without a profound understanding of the dynamic character of the above mentioned interplay of forces concerning interests and emotions, and the context-bound nature (time, place, group) of the result.

But heritage professionals can do more than that. They can help other people to develop such an understanding. How?

The Amsterdam based organisation Imagine IC\* and the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts) started researching the notion of “emotion networks” – the fickle, emotional constellations surrounding heritage items. We made steps towards the development of a tool that shows how people – by getting out of their “bubble”, and exchanging thoughts about heritage items in varied company – can change their positions, and, who knows, even get nearer to each other. In the present phase, we aim for visualization, imagination, mirroring, displaying the multitude of voices and the shifts that might occur in people's positions (Dibbitts and Willemsen 2014; Rana, Dibbitts and Willemsen under revision). In addition, we investigate how the multi-voice and multi-time approaches could be combined, making museal collections and archives accessible in a multi-voice way, in retroaction.

One of our main aims is to help developing heritage skills, which we consider to be part of a form of critical heritage education with lessons about heritage formation, including people's roles and responsibilities. Is this a complicated process? Not necessarily so. Inviting people to think about heritage making as a process, almost any heritage item can function as a case, as long as one takes a the multi-voice approach. Projects can be limited in size: it keeps things workable. It offers the possibility to gradually move towards a cooperation with others who

work from a similar critical perspective. It seems obvious to think of the arts sector here, but other sectors might also provide interesting opportunities for cooperation. By cooperatively investing in critical heritage education, heritage professionals may help to stop polarization and this, in the end, is what we aim for.

### Literature

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\* Imagine IC "pioneers the heritage of contemporary living together". It is based in Amsterdam Southeast, a 1960s metropolitan extension. Upon the Surinamese independence in 1975, considerable numbers of people of Surinamese background came to inhabit the area. Until today, it has daily received new people from all over the world. In the house that Imagine IC shares with the local branch of the Amsterdam public library, young people from the neighbourhood and the city challenge concepts of who "we" are.