

Ruptures and continuities in the preservation of international cultural heritage: an interview with Peter Burke

Rupturas e continuidades na preservação do patrimônio cultural internacional: uma entrevista com Peter Burke

Rupturas y continuidades en la preservación del patrimonio cultural internacional: una entrevista con Peter Burke

Rodrigo Christofoletti*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6346-6890>

Maria Leonor Botelho**

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2981-0694>

How to cite this interview:

Christofoletti, Rodrigo; Botelho, Maria Leonor. “Ruptures and continuities in the preservation of international cultural heritage: an interview with Peter Burke”. *Locus: Revista de História*, 26, n. 2 (2020): 506-514.

* Professor of Cultural Heritage in the History course at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF) and works in the Postgraduate Program in History. Member of COMPPAC - Municipal Council for the Preservation of the Historic Heritage of Juiz de Fora. Leader of the research group Heritage and International Relations (CNPq). Collaborator at the Center for Transdisciplinary Research “Culture, Space and Memory” (CITCEM) of the University of Letters of Porto (ULP). Doctor in History, Politics and Cultural Property by Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV). Acts at the interface between History and International Relations with a focus on cultural heritage. E-mail: r.christofoletti@uol.com.br

** Assistant Professor in the Department of Science and Techniques of Heritage at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto and Director of the Master’s Course in History of Art, Heritage and Visual Culture. Researcher at the Transdisciplinary Research Center “Culture, Space and Memory” (CITCEM / FLUP). With Prof. Lúcia Rosas and Prof. Mário Barroca, coordinates the Encyclopedia of the Romanesque in Portugal (2018-2021), within the scope of the collaboration protocol signed between FLUP and Fundación Santa María la Real del Patrimonio Histórico, a project from Castilla and Leon. Her research interests are heritage management, world heritage, digital heritage, urban history and the historiography of Romanesque architecture. E-mail: mlbotelho@letras.up.pt

In the historiography produced on Cultural History, he is one of its greatest exponents. In the past two or three decades, anyone who has graduated in history, or been motivated to understand the history of culture, certainly knows our interviewee. His name ended up becoming a synonym of rigor and versatility. Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge, England, Peter Burke, gently interrupted his routine in the United Kingdom to talk to us about the impact that the subject of this Dossier brings to contemporary times. He went through complex themes that help to understand the role of the historian of the present in the fields of cultural heritage and international relations.

The historian who helped to popularize the history of culture among his peers is today one of the most well-known foreign intellectuals in Brazil and in Portuguese-speaking countries, due to his editorial production, almost all of which was translated into Portuguese. A specialist on several fronts, ranging from the Renaissance and the Absolute Monarchies to the history of ideas and culture, he pendulates between modern European history and the understanding of the present time, combining good verve and shrewdness. Burke accepted the challenge of discussing a topic on which he claims to be only a “curious observer”. His historiographical production remains a relevant contribution, capable of dealing with broad and diverse interests.

A historian who interrogates his time, without ever losing the historical backing that enshrined him, Burke was generous and restrained, a profile proper to great intellectuals. At the height of his 83 years, he remains active, especially during this period of quarantine, when he confided to us that he had more time to write and research. Between quick walks in the park next to his house and the endless hours in front of books, notes and his computer, he found time to record a series of authorial impressions.

This interview summarizes general topics discussed throughout this dossier and, although our interviewee warns that this is a narrative by a non-specialist, the accuracy of his observations helps us to understand issues underlying the lines of cultural heritage in times of transition. Faced with this new era, facing the unknowns of a pandemic time, questions and answers are often confused in a given common narrative.

How will the future look like for the preservation of heritage internationally? How to seek an understanding in the face of this frantic strobe that became the present time? Questions like these, underlying those asked in this interview, motivated Peter Burke to elaborate possible signs.

The result of this conversation the reader now has in his hands.

Good reading.

- **Due to its character of “thematic novelty”, there are so far few systematised studies in the field of the intersection between heritage and international relations, and there is currently no consensus on its definition. In a world scene interconnected by information flow, this theme presents itself as one of the domains to be debated. How do you see the growing concern about heritage preservation as key to the maintenance of tradition in times that moves between the generalized forgetting and the overproduction of memories?**

I agree with you that we need to explain the rise of heritage (local, national, global, institutionalized in museums, books, courses and foundations). I think that this is a response to the acceleration of social change, making even the people who remain at home feel uprooted as they grow older and also of migration (perceived as a threat to local and national traditions).

- **The news of catastrophes recently reported, such as the fires of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro or the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the floods in Venice and the iconoclastic actions carried out in Bamiyan or Mosul, have given a new place to Heritage on the scale of international relations. How can we think about issues of identity and memory when heritage is destroyed in the event of a conflict or natural disaster? How do you see the wave of destruction recorded in recent years and how can society and academia act to curb or minimize such damage?**

First of all, I would distinguish between deliberate destruction (Mosul) and accidental (Rio, Venice), bearing in mind that the Brazilian government, for instance, was responsible because money for the conservation of the museum was not provided – a case of culpable negligence. Deliberate destruction is not new, Da’esh is following a long tradition of iconoclasm, smashing images that are perceived as idols. The tradition is paradoxically one of opposition to other traditions – venerating images, venerating political leaders (down with Louis XIV, Stalin, Lenin, Saddam, Franco etc), or displaying representations of naked women in public (in the age of the suffragettes, a feminist attacked a painting by Velazquez in the National Gallery of London). The defense against iconoclasm in museums is to have guards or cameras in the rooms and to protect some items with bullet-proof glass, as in the case of two famous icons, the Mona Lisa and the Virgin of Guadalupe (in both cases after unsuccessful attacks had taken place).

- **Or, assuming another perspective (more provocative, perhaps), how can we understand these events, that we watch “live”, in the light of art history and heritage studies, when we know that the first records of intentional destruction date back to Antiquity? Are we, the society of the present times, the ones who seek to add new layers to these events?**
-

Yes, but the ‘we’ is only a group, probably (and hopefully) a small one, that succeeds by surprise, a surprise that is increasingly replaced by caution.

- **As the new century shows itself, the scanning of the power relations reveals new actors, sites and representations. Considering the understanding of the contemporary world between “practices and representations”, which examples of soft power can you name that could comprise such a widening of the radiography of power relations? Does heritage (above all, the one recognized as “world heritage”) is strong enough to be the fuel of social and political change?**

The obvious answer to your first question about soft power is the new medium of the Internet, which has led to new practices, going online, and new forms of representation, especially in social media such as Facebook. One obvious novelty is the rapid response of viewers who ‘like’ or dislike what they see. None of this need be political, but politicians and their advisers as well as media ‘magnates’ are all too well aware of the new opportunities to influence elections, distribute fake news, etc. As for the second question, it seems paradoxical to view heritage as a force (or even fuel) for change. I see heritage as part of the resistance to change, or when this fails, a psychological compensation for changes that are seen as losses – of old buildings, customs, songs, etc.

- **Cultural heritage has become an increasingly important actor in multilateral dialogue and, as such, is part of the broadening of the actions in the domain of international relations. From there come other objects of study, only slightly incorporated in the topic until now, such as the growing presence of themes that approach “Africanities”, “Asianities”, “Latinities” and the “Orientalisms” (still largely unexplored). How do you see this process?**

I am happy to see an increasing interest in the study of different cultures, but unhappy about their reification and their harnessing to support nationalisms and super-nationalisms (not to say racisms). I hope that the studies will help undermine the –isms, although they do not seem to be doing so at the moment. Take the case of the reputation of Gilberto Freyre in Brazil. In the 1930s he was attacked by white Brazilians for suggesting that interbreeding was not a bad thing. Now he is attacked by black Brazilians for the same reason!

- **How do you see the local/global dichotomy in preserving world heritage sites? What examples can be given between the globalization of heritage and the need for it to be locally preserved? What is the hierarchy we should assume when we defend and communicate heritage?**

Sites are local by definition, although global organizations such as UNESCO can help preserve them. What is problematic, apart from the impact of tourism, below, is selecting what to

preserve and deciding how much to restore (the walls of Carcassonne are now a monument not so much to the Middle Ages, when they were originally built, as to 19th-century ideas of restoration!)

- ***Tourism is terrorism.* The sentence written on the wall next to the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Italy, registered in January of this year, represents a very critical perception of the predatory touristic exploitation of sites that have been suffering its negative impact. How do you see the binomial tourism/world heritage and how, in your view, have we behaved recently regarding this matter?**

I understand the anger behind the graffito but think that it is better to approach the problem without moralizing. Tourists are not wicked, some of them have a genuine desire for knowledge and new experiences and do not wish to get in the way of the locals. The real problem is that of their numbers and the inevitable destruction, by tourism, of the objects of tourism. Half a century ago Daniel Boorstin quoted the example of Washington's house, and the collapse of the stairs after so many visitors had gone up and down. Rationing visits is a partial solution and so is guiding them (as in the case of Giotto's frescos in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua, where tourists wait in an anteroom to be 'purified' so that their sweat does not damage the paintings). But we have to accept that artefacts will be damaged. They would survive longer if no one visited them but in that case, why keep them at all?

- **What place do you envisage for World Heritage sites in the face of touristification? And how should we manage the increase in the number of sites inscribed on the World Heritage List (as of today, 1121)? Can this willingness on the part of States Parties to obtain the UNESCO brand not only be a risk to heritage management on an international scale, but also national and ultimately locally?**

Increase can be part of the solution as well as creating new problems – spreading the tourists thinner as well as making someone responsible for noticing and so far as possible repairing the damage.

- **Exactly ten years ago, in a column written for the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper, you wrote a text entitled *Treasure Hunt*, in which you outlined your understanding of the repatriation of historical objects. In this text, you stated that repatriation could fragment the collections of great museums and impoverish the world. The increase in requests for repatriation is occurring at a time when there is growing concern among UNESCO, national governments, museums and the general public about what is known today as "cultural heritage". In the text you ask important questions: Should each object of cultural heritage that was taken from its original environment in the past - either donated, bought or stolen - be returned? If so, to whom should it be returned? Do modern countries have the right of ownership over something that was produced in the past in a territory that is now theirs? These issues remain**
-

highly controversial, involving governments, museums, lawyers and *marchands*. According to the text, the world would be impoverished, if everything would be returned. For you, some objects should be returned, but not all of them. Immense international collections such as that of the British Museum and the Louvre should not be fragmented. What is your current opinion on this matter? How do you see the relationship between the illicit traffic of cultural goods and museums?

I continue to see two sides to the questions. On one side, the negative, the uprooting of artefacts from their original context (a point already made by Quatremere de Quincy in 1815), taking them from a place where they are understood and venerated to one where they are a few items among many. Add to this the storage of many items in museum basements where virtually no one sees them except curators and restorers. On the other side, the positive value of a few big museums in big cities showing many kinds of artefact to many kinds of people – tourists, and schoolchildren as well as the general public - keeping them (relatively) safe, and hiring a professional staff to catalogue, conserve, explain what is there. Compromise is both essential and possible. Some artefacts are so essential to the identity of a people that they should be repatriated, as the Danes gave the manuscripts of the sagas back to Iceland (I would include the Elgin Marbles here!). Others are not essential – I do not see why the British Government forbids the export of items of the so-called national heritage such as Italian paintings brought back by ‘tourists’ (aristocrats on the Grand Tour) as souvenirs. The important thing, in any case, is giving the artefacts a safe home and making them accessible to the public. Museums like auction rooms are responsible for investigating the provenance of objects they acquire or help to sell. I am in no position to say which ones act on or neglect this responsibility.

- **In 2020 we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps. Again, the binomial pain/forgetting and memory/reparation that are re-edited from time to time in our society, come back to the surface. Those who visit the musealisation built in the concentration camps on the Holocaust narrative ask themselves what memories and stories are effectively preserved in places like these. In *Bark*, the French historian Georges Didi-Huberman wonders to what extent the cathartic pilgrimage of visitors to these sites, now recognized as world heritage sites, helps in the perpetuation of the messages contained in their material heritage. What is your opinion of the use of places considered to be traumatic, such as Auschwitz, Hiroshima or the Valongo Pier, for the preservation of world heritage sites?**

The world’s cultural heritage includes the memory and history of many traumatic events. ‘Lest we forget’, the display of relics of these events in museums offers a kind of education to all of us, not only the descendants of the parties involved (Jews, Germans, but also Hindus, Muslims, or Serbs, Bosnians, etc).

- **People taking selfies in front of the Birkenau concentration camp, or even inside the crematorium exposed at the site, post their photos with words absolutely devoid of historical consciousness. It is the “picnic of dis-consciousness”, which alerts us that regarding the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes there is not only the danger of negationism, but also of trivialization. What can we learn from this behavior?**

The need for better education. An anteroom (as in Padua) might be an idea – a compulsory 5-minute wait in a room with ample seating and a pamphlet on each seat explaining what is being commemorated. I believe that the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel encourages each visitor to identify with a particular victim and find out about him or her.

- **Heritage massification, due to the urge to know the places with the UNESCO brand, led to ask what we can call the “commercialization of heritage”, which consequently arises to the emptying of its meaning. What role should the various actors at international (and local) level play to reverse this situation? How can we make heritage sites places of knowledge building? How can we make them physically and intellectually accessible?**

To combat commercialization and disneyfication, heritage sites should be managed by non-profit-making bodies with the aim of informing and educating visitors (native or foreign, adults or children). This already happens in many places. It can be made fun, as in the case of the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, where the display reaches the noses as well as the eyes and ears of visitors!

- **To what extent could this lead to the “unpatrimonialisation” of sites? Are we already moving towards a time of “post-heritage”? What are the new stakeholders in a post-patrimonial context? What instruments can we use to create and safeguard new heritage in such a context?**

I can't answer the questions unless you define the terms in inverted commas. They make me think of the futurist movement in Italy, the hope of destroying museums for the sake of the future, a failed enterprise leading to the paradox that there are now museums of futurism! But the irresistible rise of new items of heritage (as new events require commemoration, and everyday items become obsolete) poses a problem for heritage managers, analogous to the flood of new books in the case of librarians!

- **The line: “Today we know more and more about less and less, and less and less about more and more” seems to summarize the universe of heritage preservation. Enjoying and preserving are everyday verbs in a time that suffers the effects of a kind of “heritage inflation”. How can the historian of the present understand this pendulum reality?**
-

That line summarizes much more than the mini-universe of heritage preservation! It isn't hard to understand, but it is a problem for all of us to live with today, and in the future as well as in the past, especially the last 500 years or so!

- **Do you believe that international relations in general, and linked to the preservation of heritage in particular, will change in a post-pandemic world? Of course, it is not an exercise in futurology, but can a historian who is used to studying changes and permanences be able to prospect what awaits us in the future?**

I look like a minority here, since the historians I respect are saying that a future history of the world will be divided into 2 periods, b.C. (before Corona) and a.C. (after Corona). I put more emphasis on continuity. In some ways, the world will recover in a very short period, 5 to 10 years. Museums will be reopened, such as restaurants, bars and universities, people's lives, in short, although the organization of their spaces is modified. In other respects, there will be structural changes. I think, for example, airlines will radically reduce their size, because in this case, the short-term closure coincides with a long-term reaction against air travel, due to the threat of global warming. I must add that, in the long-term perspective, according to pandemics, this year's crisis is mild. 50 million people died worldwide in the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. 50 million people died in Europe and the Middle East in 1349, when the world population was much smaller (60% of Europeans died in just over a year). Now THAT is what I call a crisis!

- **By the way, what do you think of this iconoclastic wave of destruction of monuments linked to the so-called dark side of the past?**

About the statues. 1) In a few cases, notably those of dictators who had statues of themselves erected (Stalin, Franco, Saddam...), I am happy with their removal. 2) In other cases, where a group in the past wanted to honor someone, I am generally in favor of keeping them. They are an expression of the memories of a community, for example the separatists of Rio Grande do Sul whose statues, if I remember rightly, are still prominent in the streets of Porto Alegre! If a given statue is genuinely offensive to a particular group, it may be placed in a museum or, still better, a second inscription added to it. Let me tell you a story. After the British defeated the rebels in what was known at the time as the 'Indian Mutiny', they erected a monument in Delhi to the memory of the soldiers who had fought on the British side. After 1947, with Indian independence, one might have thought that the monument would have been demolished, or at least removed to a 'statue park', as happened to many statues of Queen Victoria. But the Indian government simply added a second inscription to include the other side, describing them as

‘martyrs’ in the struggle for independence! This manner of reconciling conflicts deserves to be remembered itself, indeed taken as an example to follow elsewhere.