HERITAGE, POLICIES OF MEMORY AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CULTURE

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Abstract

In this paper there is discussion of the ways that the policies of conservation and rehabilitation of historic areas are defined in Latin-American cities and particularly in Quito. At the same time, a comparison is made between these specific cases with what has happened in European cities such as Barcelona. According to the text, discussion on Heritage policies has increasingly been converted into a subject for ‘experts’ concerned with applying models; while most of the social actors affected by such policies have been excluded from the discussions (in the paper the case of the Guild of Construction Workers in Quito is taken up). The second stage of the paper shows the relationship between Heritage, the society of the spectacle and the globalization of culture. In the context of a growing process of hybridization, Heritage policies contribute to reinventing the mechanisms for the distinction and separation between High culture and folklore, as well as for essaying new forms of cultural extirpation.

Key-words: Historic centres, urban culture, heritage, citizenship, turning culture into a spectacle

1.0 Introduction

Interventions in historic centres form a successful model. Unlike other state actions, these are produced rapidly and efficiently, and also act both on the spaces and on the economy, on everyday life and people’s imaginations.

Anyone who visits Lima, Bogotá, Guayaquil or Quito will have the feeling of passing through surroundings under construction. For example, many of Quito’s streets have been regulated in a rushed way to give room to the majestic beauty spots, converted into our visiting card vis-a-vis the world of globalization and conceived as a spectacle; but something akin to this has also taken place in Guayaquil, Lima or Bogotá in similar circumstances. The model is that of advancing from “rehabilitated” or “salvaged” landmarks (true advances of conquest) on the basis of which urban renovation has continued to be undertaken. Sometimes it is a question of advertising campaigns or modifications to façades, as is the case of the pier and promenade and the Santa Ana hill in Guayaquil, but capable of bringing about changes in the representation systems, which in turn lead to modifications in everyday relationships and in the use and value of the
land. In general, it is a question of parallel processes related to modernization or to the
dazzle which modernization produces.

Heritage, conceived in spatial rather than social terms, has come to form a badge of
identity as well as a shop-window or postcard addressed to the international market of
“opportunities”. If until a short time ago, the old districts were perceived as areas
abandoned to their fate, run down and dangerous, today they are presented as controlled,
clean and ordered spaces. In this conceptio, it is alleged that these interventions try to
return to the public, the spaces which have been privatized by informal commerce or
demonstrations and public protests (with regard to this, see the rehabilitation plan for the
historic centre of Lima) but moreover there is an interest, not always explicit, in increasing
the profitability of the central zones and of deriving benefit from urban speculation and
the potentialities of tourism. News items about Lima which appear in the daily
newspaper *El Comercio* are classified according to two types of images, that of dangerous
Lima, in ruins, which is waiting to be rehabilitated both spatially and socially, and those
of the new Lima, modern, and striking.

This is about a renovation process which brings with it an apparent paradox: this is
related to the past and to the administration of the past but its parameters are defined
starting with the economic dynamics and the economic calculation, as well as with a
notion of urban order: what is at stake is something more than a mere nostalgic feeling for
the past.

Furthermore, the problem of historic centres has been converted into a subject for experts.
They have not only defined the intervention policies but have also guided the advertising
campaigns and actions aimed at creating a “heritage culture”. The changes in heritage
policies brought about by municipal authorities and by international bodies involved
with the topic have been important. However, there is an aspect which has generally been
overlooked and it is that the point of departure prior to any discussion on policies would
be to know from where and how these policies are generated. If we assume the original
sense of what constitutes the ambit of politicians, it is logical to ask about the form in
which policies are defined. Or if one prefers: the play of interests which is behind each
policy (although it presents itself as a disinterested action, in this case related to heritage
and culture, and therefore as not being political). This is not something straightforward
since it is precisely this relationship to politicians which in general escapes institutions
and people charged with drawing up policies. The action of experts is presented as
eminently technical and therefore as politically neutral, that is, it defines policies, but it is
shown as not contaminated by politicians.

There is even a prior question and it is the one related to the conditions for making the
discussion itself possible. It would be interesting to know in what way the concerns in this
field are defined and in function of what practical needs. What would also have to be
examined is what converts those who intervene in discussions like this into legitimate
locutors, and what actors are placed outside it. Finally questions are put about the
mechanisms through which an “authorized” opinion is defined on culture, historic
centres, heritage, and what the relationship is between between the problems thus set out
and other spaces, like those of the media and their broadcast out of which so-called
“public opinion” is guided, as well as with less noble activities like those related to
funding and the business of heritage and to its “polity”.

All this I put forward in a tone of provocation, taking politics to be a project which is
defined in a public way, and which has to do with what is good and just for the *polis*
(Arendt, 1998). But there is something more that seems to me sensitive to this theme and it
is that for some time I have been trying to record the history of the guild of construction
workers of Quito, I have been investigating ranging from life stories of old construction workers whose work to a great extent played out in the historic district of the city which makes them the heirs of a set of knowledge related to old construction and conservation techniques, but also of other of the possible memories of the city. One of things that has been of most concern to the guild is for them to be regarded as legitimate interlocutors in the heritage field: their historical representatives (I refer to two of them, Nicolás Pichucho and Segundo Jacho) are engaged in transmitting their knowledge to the city with the aim of its not being lost (“nobody knows what’s up with the old houses, how to look after them, how to preserve them”), attend as listeners seminars and forums, take on the defence of the heritage and express opinions beginning with public servants. Historically, they have participated in building the centre together with architects, although they complain that their opinion is not listened to, does not form part of an authorized opinion.

As I say I am not taking up a demagogic position, but am putting forward a problem which has not always been taken into account: that of even when heritage is presented as something which belongs to everybody and therefore constitutes (or should constitute) a field for citizens to concern themselves about, in the discussion and definition of heritage policies not everyone has the possibility of taking part. Nicolás Pichucho has detailed knowledge of the historical centre of Quito. He fights for every house in disrepair. He questions each intervention in cultural and technical terms. He is, in his way, an expert. However, his opinion has no importance, or it is much listened to by way of curiosity or folklore. His point of departure is simple: if they were workmen who participated in building the centre, they are now the ones who have to grieve at its destruction. In their walks through the historical zones the members of the guild set out proposals which begin with their own life-long world, express opinions which generally have no channels in which they could be heard. They show concern for the heritage and for the social problematic linked to heritage, but in the context of a social and cultural society which excludes, their opinions do not gain legitimacy. Although the problematic of heritage belongs to everyone, the definition of its policies have increasingly been converted into a private question for experts. And what I say is not only valid for the construction workers but for other sectors related to the historic centres which are multiple and varied, to such an extent that they cannot be placed under a single denominator, including that of citizens.

What I am endeavouring to do, definitively, is to call attention to the conditions through which one type of opinion is legitimized and others are denied authority, or rather (following Bourdieu) the ways through which a legitimized and legitimizing authority in the field of heritage are formed. A discussion like this could be fruitful since there is the possibility of obtaining the thoughts which are generated at the margin, including the point of view of people.

2.0 From the juntas for urban embellishment to the population policies

The heritage question is not new but it has gained weight and significance in recent years, changing in good measure its direction. Let us think, for example, about the juntas for urban embellishment which functioned in some cities from the early years of the 20th century and were later converted into heritage institutes. Their concern was the recuperation of certain landmarks or monuments representative of the Spanish, the creole and the patrician, at times when the cities had begun to expand and to modernize and in which the same elites had abandoned the old districts, so leading to their decay. These were times of incipient modernity in which heritage was conceived as nostalgia or as lost,
as well as concern for the deterioration of certain civil and religious monuments with symbolic significance.

It is not that at that time there was a lack of institutions concerned about the population: about sanitary conditions or about carrying out actions aimed at protecting it (persecution of vagrants and dissolute people, rounding up orphans, old people and the mentally ill, racial clearing of the centre), but they were sporadic actions, on top of which there was separation between this type of action and those which had to do with the care and decorative art of the city, with the embellishment of given symbolic landmarks and the restoration of edifications. Or, in other words, there was separation between the city culture, conceived as heritage and high culture, and the actions directly related to the administration of city-dwellers, their polity and hygiene. Neither did urban planning, such as that which unfolded in the middle of the 20th century, occupy itself directly with city-dwellers; better said, it was conceived in exclusively spatial terms, such as ordering the territory which had expanded well beyond the old historic districts.

Now a concern of a distinct nature has been generated throughout the historic centres which includes not only the edifications but also the inhabitants. This is a question of technical bye-laws aimed at monitoring the social conditions of people: actions which come from the institutions and enterprises charged with administering the centre. Before each intervention, statistics, and surveys are drawn up, maps of the social and cultural uses of the spaces are made, which allow them to be classified according to the quality of the services, criteria of security, salubrity or possibilities for profitability. Campaigns are run aimed at the control of the centre as well as generating a heritage culture (conceived as the equivalent of city culture), plans of social sustainability and cultural reactivation are drawn up, actions are taken against sectors considered dangerous such as sexual workers, beggars, street-traders, those who guard cars, charlatans and popular artists. It seems to me that today there is a much more direct relationship between heritage and security, and between heritage and biopolitics.

Cultural actions are conceived as public actions aimed at rationalizing the cultural uses of people, to order them, and to “to potentialize them”. A good many of these programs are being directed at developing what has come to be called one “culture” and some “civic behaviours”. But who defines what is a civic behaviour? Both in Quito as in Bogota and Lima this task has, in large measure, been entrusted to the police (in a news item in the El Comercio of Quito of April 2003 police “supervisión” of the traders is spoken of; in another of the same period of “legal spaces for popular food”, so differentiating them from the illegal ones). This is a question of interventions on the public sphere but also of a type of action which has to do with the behaviours of people, with their senses of taste and which in one way or the other are inscribed in their bodies (on the promenade at Guayaquil, for example, it is forbidden to kiss or to use certain clothes; it is rule to listen to “environmental” music, perceived as cultured, in opposition to non-cultured, popular or juvenile music).

How is this possible in circumstances in which, to the contrary, there is a generalized tendency towards abandoning all public sense? This type of action starts from the supposed ideal that the centre constitutes a privileged space because of its symbolic

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1 See in this regard my book La ciudad y los otros. Quito, 1860-1940. Higienismo, ornato y policía, FLACSO-Ecuador/U. Rovira i Virgili, Quito.

2 In a recent announcement (El Universo daily newspaper, 30 July 2004) the zonal administrador of the historic centre of Quito declared that the Metropolitan Police is controlling the street-traders, but “it is difficult to account for them and avoid their presence in the streets”.

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significance, in which it is possible to reconstruct the public space. If one sets out from the idea that the city is an organism which has a centre or axis from which one can be re-orientated. At bottom one is dealing with a technocratic illusion that the city can be ordered, that a rationality can be imprinted on it which covers all fields, including that of culture, that a culture of rationality can be imprinted (an apparently modern culture through which it goes on to be the heir of the idea of high culture) from an organized central nucleus. It deals with levels of social and cultural organization of the centre, under conditions in which the cities have been chaotic, disorderly unmanageable and in which the notion of culture as an essence has not had any sense.

It could be argued that one is dealing with experimental actions and that these have been seen to be favored by the inversions which have been taking place in certain zones of the old districts. Why is experimentation being carried out, how and to what end?

It would be worth the effort to track the distinct economic, social and cultural proposals laid down for the historic centres and to take them up in a critical and integral way. Methodologically, we would have to relate these proposals to the actions that are produced in other spheres, like for example inside the media and mass culture (which constantly manufacture images of the centre, reinventing their meanings and guiding people’s opinion as an antecedent of the inversions), the policies of public and private inversions (directed at imposing criteria of profitability and to change the uses of the land), the relations between heritage and tourism and the interest placed by international tourist business in building theme parks, or all these actions related to what on an equally provocative note I dare to call “heritage polity” (evictions, relocations, security and social and ethnic cleansing of the historical areas). This gives me the impression that all these institutional practices apparently alien to what is conceived as the ambit of culture are changing, imperceptibly, the sense and the meaning of the historical centres.

3.0 The culture of heritage and the administration of the population

What is the relationship between culture and heritage? One is dealing with a historical relationship. On the one hand, we are witnessing a process of legitimization of a heritage sense of culture, on the other, a discourse and a practice oriented to incorporating other cultural forms under an apparently democratic discourse of diversity. The first is oriented towards putting into play the mechanisms of distinction between high and low culture starting with the differentiation of certain spaces and publics which are considered educated, (which includes both theatres and concert halls as well as restaurants, discotheques, and cafes of an exclusive and excluding character) of the non-educated and massive ones (local handcraft and food markets directed to low-income groups), as well as the generation of controlled civilized and civilizing spaces. The second is related to the conversion of popular parades into merchandise or spectacle, outside any process of participation by the people themselves which is not that of mere spectators. In the context of the new forms of government of the population implemented by global agendas, this can take the form of “festivals of diversity” (theatrical representations of Indian myths,

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3 I insist that one is dealing with attempts at intervention which are taking place in certain areas and which aim to accomplish a control of delinquency but also of the poor. Part of this has to do with the actions aimed at removing beggars and sexual workers from the centre or, even, as in the case of Brazil, the elimination of street-children. I am not saying by this that in all cities things are unfolding in the same way. There are repressive models as in Lima and Guayaquil and others which aim at generating a “citizens’ consensus” as in Quito, but in all of them heritage is related to forms of administration and control of the population. Moreover, one is dealing with actions which are not discussed, which are pre-defined by experts.
stylized handicrafts, folklore ballets). One could speak of a banalization and institutionalization of the difference, which hides new forms of racism.

When speaking to the old construction workers of Quito I was able to reconstruct the image of the centre as a space of baroque religiosity and festivity in which the guild of construction workers, like other groupings such as those of carpenters, food sellers, and tailors, took part (“we took part in all the parties (fiestas) with our standards, musicians, dancers”). I myself conserve the image of places like 24 de Mayo Avenue, in which a strong social and cultural interchange was played out and which place was converted – thanks to the policies of indiscriminate expulsion of popular activities – into a space full of delinquency. To what extent could it be said that our cities have undergone broad processes of cultural expropriation or of loss of meanings? Through historical investigation one has achieved recovery of this memory. We are not dealing, however, with something remote in time. In the external spaces of the Church of St Francisco of Quito a short while ago a whole public world was organized related to a rich, popular imaginary one, but today this world has been reduced to the old baths of the church, and converted somehow into a sub-world. The very imagery has been affected by these circumstances, as well as the cultural space (processions, altars, beliefs, imaginary worlds) related to the production and circulation of images. In other cases what has taken place is what Gabriel Salazar calls an “incarceration” of the popular: the fairs, the markets, the parks. The historic zones themselves are conceived as safe zones in opposition to the unsafe ones (the rest of the city) but they only manage to be sustained by using practices of surveillance and social separation.

Is there a problem of our experts not being sensitive with regard to these issues or are we dealing with something which responds to an internacional tendency, that is proper to the society of the spectacle consisting of making merchandising out of heritage and culture? Could it be that we are witnessing an attempt at cultural institutionalization and formalization, and with it a withering away of its contents? This would be about the imposition of a snapshot, even if it is presented as a “way of looking open to the other” or as an “action at the service of the other”, aimed at the majority or to give them this potential. This snapshot sets out to be organized by being a new civilizing model, proper to the society of the spectacle, without the agents having the possibility of at least participating in the negotiated construction of their own images. Apparently a weight is being given to culture and even to cultural diversity and multiculturalism. In reality it is about a process of cultural impoverishment about all of which we are not aware, and which tends to be confused with a supposed construction of democracy and citizenship. Culture, and even in the plural, cultures, have been converted into a synonym of spectacle, devoid of questioning and of content. Catalan anthropologists speak of city-businesses and of the production of brand names, the Barcelona-brand, but we could also have the Bogota-brand, the Guayaquil-brand, and the Quito-brand.

In commenting on an exhibition of “tribal” objects in the Museum of Modern Art of New York, James Clifford questions the taste of modern society for appropriating to itself or for redeeming alterity, for organizing the non-western arts in its own image, as well as with the tendency to decontextualize this production, to discover in them universal and ahistorical “human” capacities, to neutralize their own values (Clifford 1995: 223). Something similar could be said with regard to historic centres. In this specific case I am calling for discussion of the practices of promotion or of “revitalization” of the popular, the black, the Indian, by means of staging a caricature of folklore (or of a “forum of the cultures”, something which has been questioned in the case of Barcelona) in conditions
in which their living forms (their daily cultural expressions) are expelled (or tend to be expelled, since this is about a medium-term policy) from public spaces.

On the one hand there are the failed processes of conversion of historic centres into museum-like spaces, scenarios emptied of vital content, as Paulo Ormindo de Azevedo (2004) has shown for the case of Salvador Bahia. On the other hand there are the practices of domesticating the popular, carnival, the sacred, the organization of rites without ritual effectiveness, symbols without symbolic effectiveness (Delgado 2001:64), undermining their vitality in this way, instead of making way for the revitalization of the cultures (something which moreover would permit a better quality of tourist to benefit from it).

It seems to me, however, that this is not about something definitively worked out, due to the very character of our modernity and post-modernity and to the capacity for getting away from it all of the population. By this I am not setting out the possibility of developing pure cultural actions, at the margins of the market, tourism or of the mass culture itself, unless in making way for the creative potentialities of people, without intervening to guide them. On the one hand one has to trust in the immense capacity of peoples to re-define their imaginary lives and their daily practices, even in the context of of the globalized world and of a new “polity of culture”. Furthermore, passive consumers of culture do not exist, except for the diverse “tactics of the consumer” about which Michel De Certau speaks. On the other hand, tourism, commerce and the cultural production of the media also adjust themselves to local trajectories. As Arjun Appadurai shows in relation to India, tourism takes to the beaten track of religious pilgrimages, in such a way that in the cultural field this is about a relationship of to-ing and fro-ing.

4.0 Heritage and memory policies

Heritage is conceived in terms of memory and identity. But, who defines the identity of a city and from where? Can one speak, perhaps, of a legitimate way and of others which are not? Let us take as an example the case of the re-invention of a patrician tradition in Guayaquil, a creole one in Lima or the “cultured” one in Bogotá and Quito. In working on the production of these types of memory through public ceremonies, museography, publicity and historiographic production guided by advertisers, are not other possible memories being left aside such as those of the construction workers, women, the guilds of artisans? At the same time, are not political meanings being attributed to memory which respond to contemporary hegemony requirements?

“In the ambit of heritage one speaks of `choice which society makes` (...) But who is this society? Who represents or directs the representation, who smooths the mirror and determines the more or less subtle curvature of the crystal, who thinks up and develops the discourse?, who effects the choice? Who decides what to show in the shop window?” (Prats,1997: 33)

We have been witnessing the construction of a selective and excluding memory: like the identification of heritage with some supposed origins or essences related to the “Lima-esque”, “Quito-esque” or “Guayaquil-esque”, to a domestication and to making memory a thing. If it is like this, the problem is not so much rooted in the value that it is given or

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4 It is, moreover, a question of an orientation which is being questioned and in the face of which there have been attempts to present alternatives. If museums fulfil a function in the representation of the culture of a nation, today they have been obviously obliged to develop non-formal interactive strategies, for decentralizing memory and relating museological activity to the conscious production of of meanings which have to do with the life, needs and concerns of the population (I am thinking, for example, about the need to generate a culture that respects differences).
that is allowed to be given to a zone, a building, a square, or a fundamental act, without knowing in what way certain meanings are converted into hegemonic ones; this supposes conceiving heritage and memory as cultural constructions which unfold within the social, ethnic and gender fields.

We understand by “denaturalization” of the heritage, actions aimed at unveiling its origins, dis-assembling its suppositions, de-institutionalizing it, showing what lies beyond an architecture, establishing the relationship between some origins and a set of current interests and needs or according to Foucault- ones that are less noble. There is, as we know, a material and symbolic economy which defines what is important or not in terms of heritage at each moment, it places to the forefront certain landmarks, zones, monuments, works of art, leaving aside and even devaluing others.

This is not about a purely technical problem (which could be reduced to a difference between schools of conservationists, integrationists, etc.) but rather a dispute of wider outreach for the social and cultural uses of the centre, and, about their meanings, even prior to the very idea of heritage. This dispute takes us back to the end of the colonial period when enlightened despotism attempted to put an end to the baroque imaginary, such as it had been given in America, consummating a divorce between the Indian and popular devotions and the institutionally legitimized practices and cerimonies. This was about, in the terminology of Gruzinzki (1994), a true “war of the images” the problematics of which have been prolonged until today.

As to early modernity, at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, this dispute about symbolic resources was marked by the idea of progress, and was expressed in the attempt to expel “non-civilized” parades from the centre (and in a particular manner regarding those related to the Indian, black, oriental and popular world), as well as in the densification of the social spaces. As Ramón (1999) points out with regard to Lima, in a society in which the elites were the heirs of a tradition of privilege it was inadmissible to accept the presence of a “foreign population” like that of the Chinese (on whom, paradoxically, it depended economically as a workforce). Something similar followed in the remaining Latin-American cities in which early urbanization produced a dispute for the spaces. The street is, according to Sarlo (1996:187), “the place, among all others, in which different groups carried out their battles of symbolic occupation”. The increase in the population, as a result of migrations and the expansion of the cities, in the following decades, and the cultural shocks generated in their midst, provoked the abandonment of the historic districts by the elites and their becoming run-down, as well as the parallel development of conservationist criteria. When they were first modernized, a good part of the historic centres of Latin América Latina were abandoned to their fate, without by doing so failing to attribute to them a symbolic meaning related to an Iberian tradition.

This has been about moments prior to current ones but which, in one way or another, have marked what has followed today since much of their content related to the return to some supposed origins have been re-signified. I cannot dally in each one of those moments; there is ample in the literature with respect to Latin America and what should be undertaken is reading from the present5.

What is there in the context of globalization, urban renovation and modernization that such importance is given to the heritage? Is it enough that conditions determined as being spaces, facts, monuments, come to be sacred, converted into resources for the re-

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5 History, like anthropology, can give us a series of clues and elements of comparison to understand what has been happening to the historic centres.
invention of a tradition. But what do we have to further understand by tradition in the context of the formation of post-national societies in which, paradoxically, an attempt is being made to define the destiny of our countries and its people by global hegemonic strategies?

The achievements of the interventions in the historic centres of Quito, Lima or Bogotá cannot be denied in terms of rehabilitating certain spaces. But what is in discussion is the political, social and cultural sense of these interventions. The idea of heritage is a result of a symbolic economy related to the “policies of memory” but it depends, moreover, on strategies aimed at making the centre profitable as a function of certain interests, mainly related to the tourist industry and real estate business. Although it is a question of fields which respond to distinct forms of logic they are mutually conditioned. Thus, very often the so-called defence of the heritage (rooted in cultural terms) constitutes a resource applied for urban renovation. On other occasions, the discourse on culture or identity can be traced back to international tourist agendas. In general, what there is or what there is not in historic centres is closely related to the images generated by the media and is to do with what, starting with the common institutional sense, is conceived as decent and indecent, educated or vulgar, civilized or non-civilized. The actions in the historic centres are defined in terms of city culture (this is why they are capable of generating a consensus), but are not strange to strategies of inversion in fields like tourism and real estate business.

Let us not forget, however, that at the same time a struggle is developing, often invisible and made invisible, over the uses of the spaces or over the “decentralization of the tradition of memory”, which responds to the development of identities distinct from those of institutional culture, as is the case of women, black and Indian people, or of certain urban popular leaders who have been the victims of political or social violence, sexual minorities, displaced people. This is about a dispute for scarce assets: the central spaces, the streets, the squares, the use of buildings, the possibility of conjugating distinct memories, as well as for a democratic sense and one that includes the public. A dispute which sets free, above all, in practical terms and from the margins and which is related, moreover, to what in Bourdieu’s terms we could call the social sense of taste. In this ambit what has come to be questioned is the confusion between heritage and the construction of thematic parks as well as the need to approach the theme of diversity as overcoming racism and inequality and not as merchandising.

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