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Editors:
Jaime Almansa Sánchez and Elena Papagiannopoulou

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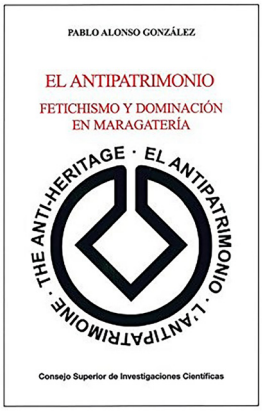

Nekbet CORPAS CÍVICOS

El Antipatrimonio. Fetichismo y dominación en Maragatería

[by Pablo Alonso González]

CSIC, 2017
ISBN: 978-84-00-10235-7
326 pages

Cultural Heritage has died— or at least this book argues that it has. It is part of a quite recent trend towards ethnographically exploring the effects of cultural heritage designation (e.g. Bendix et al. 2012; Brumann and Berliner 2016). Yet it tries to set itself apart by marking the beginning of critical studies *against* cultural heritage rather than *for*.

Throughout the thirteen chapters of this book, the author aims to delve into the emergence of heritage and its effects. This task is carried out by focusing on Maragateria, a mostly rural region situated on the north-western part of the Iberian Peninsula. This region was particularly selected as the initiatives around the development and rise of cultural heritage seem to be still in their infancy. It is noteworthy that the different case studies encountered in Maragateria are not officially designated as cultural heritage, but rather "could be considered" (p. 12) as such. Additionally, the author exhibits an impressive knowledge on this area gathered for over five years of ethnographic work on the ground.

The first two chapters of this book are key to understanding the rich analytical framework of the book. The remaining chapters

can be read almost independently as the overall book is affected by a lack of unifying structure. In addition to this, although the style adopted by the author (an ethnographic one) responds to a desire to give a situated description of his vast knowledge on the social relationships in Maragateria, it contributes to a feeling of constant repetition of several issues rather than advancement of the discourse.

One of the book's main ideas is the need for developing a critique of the *category* of cultural heritage. According to the author, until now critical heritage studies would have focused on the relationships between different agents and cultural heritage itself. This critical standpoint is what the author terms as the phenomenological critique. It "presupposes that non-official heritage is part of legitimate fights for recognition by subalterns [in this case, the original inhabitants of Maragatería] and that achieving such recognition is something positive" (p. 26). In other words, it accepts that heritage is something positive and the problem rests on who is controlling the process of heritagisation and heritage representation. In fact, for the author, this recognition entails that subalterns become incorporated into a fetishist and individualistic system of relationships— a typical system of capitalism. As such, the question is no longer *who is represented by heritage*? (phenomenological critique). But *what are the foundations needed for cultural heritage to emerge?* (category's critique).

For Alonso, both analytical approaches are required, hence the double title of the book: fetishism (category) and domination (phenomenological critique). Heritage emerges out of typical capitalist relationships and its emergence thus signals that a given social group/individuals disassociate a series of elements from their production and socialization contexts (p. 58). Particularly, this dissociation allows heritage to be appropriated and mobilised for the domination of different groups, representation fights and its commercialisation.

Looking for more participatory or empowering heritage management is no longer the way forward, according to the author. Since heritage is the result of fetishist relationships, the benefits resulting from managing it cannot be distributed in order to pursue social justice and maintain social relationships. In the

end, a fairer distribution of benefits just entails the continuous expansion of the same sort of fetishist relationships: "failure in questioning the fundamental categories of capitalism and merely proposing a different redistribution of benefits just promoted a system of fetishist relationships to which heritage belongs" (p.70) Consequently, heritage should not be improved but rather erased.

Chapter three deals with the essentialisation of the identity of maragatos (inhabitants of Maragateria). This identity is commercialised while maragatos become subalterns. This position results from the workings of what Alonso defines as the "heritage machine": a government device that reorganizes social relationships around heritage. It connects "material qualities and discourses, enabling the emergence of new meshworks that produce representations and subjectivities"(p.45). Pursuing more faithful representations of rural maragatos just strips maragatos of the products of their work and dismisses their lifestyles. Chapters four to six could be grouped together as they reflect on how the emergence of heritage allows disassociating the past from their wider socioeconomic contexts. Chapter five also shows this dissociation by focussing on several local celebrations and the local traditional organizations responsible for them. Finally, chapter six explores the fights around Mount Teleno, as some groups want it to be designated as a cultural heritage site while the army and other groups want it to be a natural heritage site which would keep the population out of it and maintain it as a military zone.

Chapters seven to twelve depict the different ways of socialization between communities and potential heritage elements particularly well. Yet, as already mentioned, all these issues are also addressed in the first group of chapters so these chapters simply reiterate and further exemplify the author's points without adding any new layers to the discussion. Chapter seven focuses on pseudoarchaeology and amateur archaeologists and the role of the latter in mediating between archaeologists and non-archaeologists. The Way of St. James is the focus of Chapter eight, the only example of officially designated cultural heritage in the book. Surrounding the Camino there are different groups understanding it quite differently: from a market logic to other groups pursuing a sense of community aside from these interests. Chapter nine also tackles

the issue of fetishism, as it describes a process of essentialisation of the rural life by former city dwellers while rural communities are dismissed as archaic. There is, in fact, a process of rural gentrification—an under-researched topic. Chapter eleven similarly reflects on the arrival by former city dwellers to rural life in order to talk about 'anti-heritage' types of relationships: people socialised in capitalist ways of relationships move to the countryside to feel part of a community. In particular, this chapter focuses on the Rainbow groups (part of the hippie movement) who try to escape from capitalist modes of relationship. Yet, the impossibility of this task is stated since these capitalist modes are included "within the psyche of the modern Western individual" (p. 258). Ultimately, this chapter suggests the impossibility to build communities through abstract ideas such as heritage.

Generally speaking, this book is an interesting reflection on the origins of cultural heritage and its effects as it tries to overcome the sound dichotomy created around cultural heritage studies: depicting all heritage as involving the 'good' (communities) and the 'bad' (institutions). Yet, it would have benefited from a clearer structure, thus helping the reader to grasp the impressive analytical framework in use. On a different note, to accept the idea that heritage, as an endeavour, must be stopped for the communities' own sake seem too categorical. In fact, as the author recognises: "the purpose of the analysis of category is not to 'protect heritage' or to 'expand the limits of what can be heritagised', but rather to problematise it in particular contexts and to highlight its relationship with fetishist sorts of relationships" (p. 290). One more time, "the role of the researcher must not be naïve: it is not about halting unstoppable heritagisation processes but to show what these processes entail and the actors controlling it" (Ibid). If, as the author himself recognises, heritagisation processes are unstoppable, is it enough for researchers to just spotlight these problems? Does heritage always fetishise relationships? Does giving *abandoned* historical buildings a second life (as cultural centres, offices, etc.) also entail dissociating the building from *existing* social relationships? Doing so may gloss over the past human relationships (phenomenological critique), but isn't it also creating new relationships? Controversy is served.

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Brumann, C. and Berliner, D. 2016. (ed) *World heritage on the ground. Ethnographic Perspectives.* New York: Berghahn Books.

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García Raso, D. Playing Prehistory with Far Cry Primal – 7 October

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Edited book

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Section in book

McEwan, C., Silva, M. I. and Hudson, Ch. 2006. Using the past to forge the future: the genesis of the community site museum at Aguablanca, Ecuador. In H. Silverman (ed.), *Archaeological site museums in Latin America*. Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 187-216.

Internet reference

United Nations 1992, *Agenda 21.* Retrieved on 29 January 2010 from WWW [http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/res_agenda21_00.shtml]

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Editors:
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Email: almansasanchez@gmail.com
Assistant editors:
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Edited by:
JAS Arqueología S.L.U.
Website: www.jasarqueologia.es
Email: jasarqueologia@gmail.com
Address: Plaza de Mondariz, 6, 28029 - Madrid (Spain)
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