

Notre-Dame: Heritage Emotions

An interview with Nathalie Heinich

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Flames, disbelief, dread. A cathedral burns and tears flow. But why does our architectural heritage and its disappearance move us so greatly? The sociologist Nathalie Heinich offers some answers.

Nathalie Heinich is a sociologist and research director at the CNRS. Her work deals with the sociology of art, value, and heritage. On this topic, she has notably published *La Fabrique du patrimoine. De la cathédrale à la petite cuillère* (Making Heritage: From Cathedrals to Little Spoons) (Paris, 2009).

A collective loss

Books & Ideas: Why does the destruction of a monument trigger such vivid emotion?

Nathalie Heinich: What is happening with the Notre-Dame fire is a typical example of what the anthropologist Daniel Fabre has called a “heritage emotion” (“*émotion patrimoniale*”, in French)—a theme that he chose in the late 1990s to bring together a team of researchers at the center he founded (called Lahic: Laboratoire d’anthropologie et d’histoire sur l’institution de la culture, or Center for the Anthropological and Historical Study of the Institution of Culture). The goal was to study collectively a number of popular mobilizations in favor of heritage sites that were seen as threatened by projects to modernize surrounding areas (as with the Saint-André church in Carcassonne) or by accidental destruction (as with the Parliament of Brittany building in 1994, the Château de Lunéville in 2003, or the trees in the park at Versailles following the 1999 storm). How, why, with what actors and resources, and according to what

temporalities do these expressions of collective emotion—instances of public mobilizations that have been studied by sociologists in other domains—unfold?

What makes heritage emotions specific is, of course, the fact that they relate to buildings or objects that are deemed to belong to a common heritage—that is, a category of objects that, according to the anthropologist Maurice Godelier, a community must preserve in order to pass them on and which it is thus forbidden to give away or exchange. Heritage status results from the fact that an object has been attributed exceptional value, as evidenced not by a high price, but by value judgments (“magnificent,” “monumental,” “sublime,” and so on) and, most importantly, by attachments, expressed in words or attitudes (silence, stillness, contemplation, and appreciative observation) and bodily expressions (exclamations, tears, etc.). Even the specialized researchers that I have seen at work cannot prevent themselves, at times, from being moved by these objects, despite the high degree of detachment, rationality, and analytical distance their scholarly work requires. This is because emotion is, very often, a physiological response to a feeling of value or, more often still, to its transgression: the proof of heritage, one might say, is that we are moved by it.

Heritage emotions assume an even more collective dimension when their objects have been embraced affectively by large numbers of people: a family’s heritage concerns only those to whom it belongs, in contrast to local, national, and global heritage—to which Notre-Dame belongs, not only because it is officially registered as part of humanity’s heritage, but also and especially due to its status as a major center of international tourism. Finally, the positive and appreciative emotion elicited by age, beauty, monumentality, technical skill, and the religious or symbolic charge of a heritage object can take the form of a negative emotion, filled with anger and indignation, when the object is threatened, and intense pain if it is damaged or destroyed.

These different components are found in all the cases analyzed in the seminar founded by Daniel Fabre and the edited volume published in 2013 (see below). These cases are mainly focused on France, but they can be easily applied to New York’s Twin Towers, the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, and, more recently, Syria’s Palmyra ruins. In these places, the pain resulting from powerlessness and loss goes hand-in-hand with anger at the criminal character of these attacks on heritage, which splits humanity in two: those who respect and those who profane sacralized objects—that is, objects that are deemed untouchable and non-appropriable. In the case of Notre-Dame, anger and indignation can only be aimed—for now, at least, given the current state of the investigation—at the inadequacy of security measures and the resources assigned to the preservation of historical monuments.

Books & Ideas: The case of Notre-Dame goes much further in terms of the effusion of feeling. What makes it specific?

Nathalie Heinich: The Notre-Dame fire could, of course, be connected to the issue of heritage emotions—except for the fact that this line of research has been closed and Daniel Fabre died prematurely. Compared to the cases that were previously studied, the emotion elicited by this catastrophe strikes me as having two specificities: on the one hand, the fact that its character was immediately seen as international (a symptom of its de facto status as belonging to “humanity’s heritage”) and, on the other hand, an acceleration of emotional sharing thanks to social media—a phenomenon that did not yet exist when this research began. But social media, in my view, simply expands spatially and accelerates temporally the need to share that is characteristic of all emotional events: I do not think (though this must be confirmed by research) that they alter their tenor in qualitative terms. Just as Facebook and Twitter simply extend gossiping to the planetary scale, similarly, when it comes to collective emotion, they simply lead to feelings being more widely and immediately shared—at the same time that they create greater distances, since, when you’re in front of your computer, tablet, or smartphone, you can’t cry in someone’s arms.

The Value of Heritage

Books & Ideas: What is the origin of the value given to heritage objects?

Nathalie Heinich: The intensity of the emotions that are felt at the loss of these objects is explained not only by the aesthetic, technical, symbolic, and religious qualities to which they owe their heritage status, but also by the characteristics of this status. To be invested with a “heritage function,” an object must satisfy two hypotheses: on the one hand, the hypothesis of the community to which it belongs, insofar as it constitutes a shared good (whether at the private level of a family or at the far more general level of a nation or even humanity); and, on the other, the hypothesis of permanent value (it must arise from the past—as a bearer of memory—and be transmittable to future generations).

These two values—universality and permanence—are “value amplifiers” which, along with rarity and novelty, possess a special status in the “axiological grammar” that orders our value judgments. For heritage objects, the values thus amplified include, primarily, authenticity, beauty (to which monumentality belongs), and significance. In heritage management, beauty is primarily the concern of historical monuments services, while significance belongs primarily to inventory services. Authenticity, however, is a fundamental value because it is found in every link of the heritage chain, insofar as it establishes a continuous link between an object’s current and original state—a continuity that is, of course, subject to all kinds of vagaries, which are passionately debated by specialists, as we have been reminded in recent days by references to Viollet-le-Duc and the restoration choices he made in the nineteenth century.

Finally, the distinctive nature of an object that has been “heritagized” is that it is subject to a twofold constraint: the constraint of irreplaceability, which is shared by all “person-objects” (fetishes, relics, and works of art), and the constraint of inalienability, which governs all works belonging to museum collections. This is what confers on them a very particular status, combining, on the one hand, extreme valorization (due to its uniqueness: a work cannot be replaced by another, even an apparently similar one, contrary to ordinary objects) and, on the other, non-marketability (a heritage object cannot be sold, except under very restrictive conditions). This is precisely what is meant by the common expression: “it is priceless”: the value is too great to be measured and it is too alien to the laws of the market to be valued in monetary terms (This is why, by the way, heritage objects are magnificent challenges to economic reductionism: the highest of values, in our society, is to have no price).

Notre-Dame, of course, illustrates magnificently all the properties of a heritage good: its status is completely out of the ordinary, it is irreplaceable, it is associated with highly esteemed values (notably, but not exclusively, due to its religious value), and it connects us spatially to a community that extends to the planetary level and temporally to our ancestors and descendants. Indeed, there is much to cry over.

Books & Ideas: Many people say they cried upon hearing the news or seeing Notre-Dame’s spire collapse. How does the connection between intimate pain and collective suffering occur?

Nathalie Heinich: I do not think the individual can, in this instance, be separated from the “social”: the latter is nothing more than the aggregation at a large scale of personal experiences, supported and stabilized by mental frameworks as well as technical resources, institutions, and routines. Everyone experiences the emotion of loss individually, and experiences the need to share (a phenomena characteristic of all emotions) and, moreover, experiences it at the same times as millions of other individuals, thanks to information technology: in this way, collective experience is produced on a mass scale and is of very brief duration—this dual condition of spatial extension and temporal restriction being characteristic of any event. It is, in other words, what we call “social,” which is not a cause but rather an effect, as Norbert Elias explains in *The Society of Individuals*. One sees in this way how the experience of emotion, at the individual level, and the need to share it in interactions with those close to us and contemplating the same images at the same time contributes to a tightening of bonds, a reactivation networks, a shortening of distances (like others, I received many messages from other countries, often from people I had not heard from in a long time), and to the appeasement of certain tensions (“Let’s not engage in politics at this tragic time,” politicians questioned in the media ceaselessly repeated). This is a way of producing “the social,” in other words, what allows us to create a shared world.

Books & Ideas: Do some monuments lend themselves to heritage emotions more than others?

Nathalie Heinich: The answer lies in the nature and number of the values—in the sense of shared principles of attachment and judgment—to which a monument gives access, and thus to the plurality of “value registers”—that is, of categories with a “family resemblance,” as Wittgenstein would say. In this instance, Notre-Dame’s great age amplifies the value of connection to our predecessors and of familiarity with a way of life (the domestic register), religious values (the mystical register), architectural skill (the technical register), beauty and monumentality (the aesthetic register), the symbolic value insofar as Notre-Dame refers to French history and western civilization (the hermeneutic register), the patriotic value of a symbol of the French nation (the civic register), and the sentimental value for “Paris lovers” (the affective register). In short, Notre-Dame checks off most of the boxes one could imagine in the value repertory of our culture.

A Transfer of Sacredness

Books & Ideas: Is this emotional regime specific to our age?

Nathalie Heinich: “Heritage inflation” has been in evidence throughout Europe since the 1970s, resulting, beginning in the 1980s, in the banalization of the term “heritage” (“*patrimoine*” in French) which, previously, had rarely been used in its current sense (one spoke, rather, of “France’s monuments and artistic richness”). Incidentally, it was at this time that Pierre Nora developed his *Realms of Memory* project, devoted to objects and places (including, obvious, Notre-Dame) that physically inscribe in present reality the traces of a common past, which can be referred to collectively even in a temporal mindset marked by “presentism” (as François Hartog has described it). So yes, of course, the passion for heritage is tied to a particular context, notably that of the rapid destruction of objects from the past resulting from technological innovation and modernization associated with the postwar economic expansion (known in France as the *Trente glorieuses*, or “thirty glorious years”), just as, following the French Revolution, the concept of “historical monument” and the administrations that go with it emerged as a result of acts of iconoclastic destruction.

I should add that this passion possesses the atypical property of bringing together a right-wing sensibility and a left-wing sensibility: on the one hand are the chateau owners, who are attached to preserving their property (which for a long time led the left to criticize the idea of heritage as inherently conservative); on the other are activists opposed to real estate developers and, occasionally, their accomplices in local government (for example, the scandal following the destruction of the old central markets in Paris in 1971 made it possible save, in the nick of time, the Orsay train station). In both cases, the concepts of the “public good” and the “public interest” benefited from their association with heritage: property-owners were prepared to open their chateaus to visitors in order to preserve them, while activists opposed the privatization of public space by particular interests. Hence, beyond its emotional character, the highly political

nature of the heritage question—a further reason why there is so much emotional investment in it.

Books & Ideas: In this context, exactly what is Notre-Dame’s political significance?

Nathalie Heinich: Notre-Dame is a perfect example of what Daniel Fabre—to return once again to him—called “transfers of sacredness”: a building constructed to glorify Catholicism and still venerated as such by the faithful has been gradually embraced by many people who are completely detached from Christianity and even of religious feelings altogether. Logically, Christianity’s loss of influence and the decline in religious practice should have resulted in a loss of interest in Notre-Dame—but this is not what happened. To the contrary, it attracts crowds, not of the faithful, but of tourists, because the sacredness initially attached to it has shifted to its status as a heritage object, with its conditions of irreplaceability and inalienability and its values of universality and permanence. In this way, a cathedral became a symbol not of a religion, but of a nation and furthermore, a nation that is a secular republic! This means that all the non-Catholics who will donate money for its restoration will, whether intentionally or not, engage in a political act: one that expresses a feeling of belonging and being attached to the nation that this masterpiece symbolizes, and, beyond that, the civilization that made possible its creation and—for better or for worse—its preservation.

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Further reading:

- Nathalie Heinich, *La Fabrique du patrimoine. De la cathédrale à la petite cuillère*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, collection “Ethnologie de la France,” 2009.
- Nathalie Heinich, *Des valeurs. Une approche sociologique*, Paris, Gallimard, collection “Bibliothèque des sciences humaines,” 2017.
- Daniel Fabre, ed., *Émotions patrimoniales*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, collection, “Ethnologie de la France,” 2013 (<https://books.openedition.org/editionsmsmh/3580?lang=fr>).
- “Patrimoine, une histoire politique,” special issue organized by Pascale Goetschel, Vincent Lemire, and Yann Potin, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, n° 137, 2018/1 (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-vingtieme-siecle-revue-d-histoire-2018-1.htm>).