Motherlands and Museum Pieces

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It was not what the Prime Minister said that became a news item in the past month, so much as the words with which he said it.[1] The subject was a set of ancient marble sculptures removed from the Acropolis of Athens by a former Earl of Elgin, when Athens was part of the Ottoman Empire and Lord Elgin was a British diplomat; these sculptures have resided in the British Museum since the early part of the Nineteenth Century. The question was whether, as the now-independent Greek state has long urged, the sculptures should be returned to Greece. The Prime Minister's answer was an acceptance of the long-established status quo (and of the modern British state's generally arms-length relations with the arts and culture). Since the substance of his comment on the sculptures was so hardly novel, attention turned to the commonplace name by which he referred to them: the Elgin Marbles.

'It is perhaps astonishing... that Cameron is so unaware of the sensitivities of the issue that he does not refer to the architectural sculptures removed from the Parthenon in a more appropriate way,' commented David Gill, Professor of Archaeological Heritage at University Campus Suffolk.[2] Yet a story like this risks baffling members of the public who have not laboured to familiarise themselves with these sensitivities.[3] (If you believe that you own something, you probably think you can call it what you please; if you believe an item has been stolen, you probably don't care what name the burglar gives to it.) The deaccessioning policies of the British Museum are not a question on which the next election will turn; and a politician who comments on migration and the blending of cultures is unlikely to say much about the movement of *antiquities* across national borders. Nevertheless, as the reactions to Cameron demonstrate, there is a politics of antiquities and other heritage objects, and it is connected to the politics of cultural sensitivity. Celebrated cases such as the Marbles' are only part of the debates about 'who owns the past', about the role of museums, and about how the fate of material objects is linked to cultural identity.

In this article, I summarise some of the difficulties that arise when there are no uncontroversial criteria for linking cultural identity to an object. Debates about where heritage objects should rightfully be, and who should own and control and have access to them, typically have many facets: for example, of legality, of aesthetic integrity, of the legacies of imperialism, and so on. I lack the space to do justice to these; even a term like 'heritage object' is a convenient shorthand for something complex and hard to define. Of particular note is that I say little about the clandestine 'looting' of antiquities in modern times: about the ongoing problem of illicit excavation in which objects find their way from the soil to the antiquities market without being recorded by archaeologists, so that knowledge about the sites from which they came is lost forever. This phenomenon helps to explain why there is support for a regulated market in antiquities, and why that regulation tends to favour export controls on the part of 'source nations'. It does not explain why a national government might seek the return of objects removed in earlier times; and an archaeologist supportive of measures to counter looting may still have reservations about 'the chauvinism which besets many national governments'.[4] To understand the politics of the matter we must look elsewhere.

1 **http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21623965** (retrieved 7th March 2013).

2 **http://lootingmatters.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/cameron-on-parthenon-marbles.html** (retrieved 10th March 2013).

3 It is not obvious that the terms 'Elgin Marbles' and 'Parthenon Marbles' should be logically interchangeable. Not all the sculptures Elgin took were from the Parthenon, and he did not obtain the entire (surviving) Parthenon frieze; indeed, the Greek government has made much of the museum which now houses the part which remains in Athens, close to the monument itself. (The sculptures cannot be replaced on the Parthenon because of damaging air pollution.)

4 Renfrew, Colin. (2000) *Loot, Legitimacy and Ownership* (London: Duckworth), p. 62.

A controversial account of the role of national governments is offered by James Cuno, until recently President and Director of the Art Institute of Chicago and now President and C.E.O. of the J. Paul Getty Trust. In Cuno's judgment, governments pursue 'nationalist retentionist'[5] policies because it is in governments' interest to indulge in national myth-making.[6] Policies of this sort are therefore folded into domestic political narratives and directed towards solidifying support for the political status quo by presenting modern regimes as the legitimate inheritors of ancient cultures.[7]

The cost of this, in Cuno's view, is borne particularly by a certain kind of public institution: the 'encyclopaedic' or 'universal' museum, in which objects from across the breadth of the world's cultures can be exhibited comparatively and appreciated in relation to one another. When the tendency is to treat the places where objects originated as their proper homes, and to call for displaced objects to be returned to the places from which they came, the result is not merely inconvenience for the footsore traveller, but a reduction in opportunities for what Kwame Anthony Appiah has called a cosmopolitan aesthetic experience. A favourite mode of argument for Cuno is to take as his example an object familiar to him from professional experience, and to lay out the twists and turns of its history: how it passed from its place of origin through different hands, different places, different uses and different ways of being appreciated. The point is to cast doubt on any notion that such an object has 'a "patria", a homeland, a nation to which, and in which, it belongs';[8] indeed, to render it doubtful that such an object can be comprehensively appreciated in any environment which emphasises its place of origin at the expense of other and likewise important aspects. Hence both the significance of the universal museum and the short-sightedness of a less cosmopolitan, more nationalistic way of thinking about where objects might best be housed.

It is no doubt true that national governments are motivated more often by strategic self-interest than by a purely noble concern for the cultural heritages of their nations. Still, it may at the same time be true that the marble sculptures from the Acropolis are in some sense 'the soul of the Greek people';[9] it may be true that the Rosetta Stone (also in the British Museum, having originally been found in Egypt by Napoleon's expedition) is 'an icon of... Egyptian identity'.[10] Unlike people, objects voice no opinion of their own about their cultural or geographical ties; their significance is what we discover in them or project onto them. It is consequently easy for such significance to become and to remain contested.

Whether or not modern nation-states find it useful to pose as the successors of ancient political communities, it is often to them that we have to look if we desire to see heritage objects on their territories preserved from damage and decay, and protected from looting or neglect. Some of these, such as Stonehenge in the United Kingdom or the Pyramids in Egypt, are simply not portable; whether they are owned by individuals (as Stonehenge used to be) or by institutions of the state, if they are to enjoy protection then this must be with the acquiescence or active blessing of the political authorities. Accordingly, it has frequently been under the auspices of the United *Nations* Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization that ideas have developed of 'world heritage', of a 'common heritage of mankind' which is a good we all share and which it is every people's responsibility to preserve.

5 Cuno, James. (2008) *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press), p. xxxii.

6 Ibid, pp. 9–13.

7 Cuno, James. (2009) 'Introduction', in *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press), p. 28.

8 Merryman, John Henry. (1990) '"Protection" of the Cultural "Heritage"?' in *American Journal of Comparative Law* 38 Supplement 'U.S. Law In an Era of Democratization', p. 521.

9 Quoted in Evans, James Allan. (2001) 'The Parthenon Marbles—Past and Future', in *Contemporary Review* 279:1629, p. 218.

10 Quoted in Bradley, Matt. (2009) 'Indiana Jones, But In Reverse', in *The National*, 19th December 2009. **http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091219/WEEKENDER/712189768/1041/OPINION** (retrieved 25th January 2010).

Thus we see nation-states at work both in debates about when a national government should be able to reclaim objects taken from its territories, even before those *were* its territories, and at the same time in developing perhaps the most cosmopolitan vision of heritage ever witnessed. The Acropolis of Athens, cited in heated debates about where 'the soul of the Greek people' should reside, is inscribed on the World Heritage List as a site 'forming part of the cultural and natural heritage which the World Heritage Committee considers as having outstanding universal value'.[11] And this is another judgment which may be true.

A nation-state cannot ignore material traces of the past on its territories, or abandon them to the whims of private owners, if it wishes to avoid condemnation.[12] Yet neither can it act as though present political leadership conferred straightforward authority over the legacies of much older cultures. In a widely quoted passage, Appiah writes that we do not know whether ancient Nok sculptures 'were commissioned by kings or commoners; we don't know whether the people who made them and the people who paid for them thought of them as belonging to the kingdom, to a man, to a lineage, or to the gods. One thing we know for sure, however, is that they didn't make them for Nigeria.'[13]

In consequence we have a situation in which it is widely thought that nations ought to accept some measure of responsibility for 'their' national heritage, but there is sometimes scant agreement about when a heritage object has ceased to belong exclusively, or even predominantly, in the place from which it came. An object which is the product of one culture may find different uses in another culture, and enjoy different aesthetic appreciation in a third. This, however, does not immediately tell us a great deal about what now should best be done with it, and by whom, and for whose benefit. It is therefore no wonder that national regulatory regimes, themselves manifestations of national cultures, do not always ease the way to international agreement. The British system, fairly liberal in its reluctance to interfere with property, tends to confine itself to imposing restrictions on what owners may do with historic items such as 'listed buildings',[14] or export bans which are often temporary measures to see whether enough purchasing funds can be raised to 'save' items 'for the nation'.[15] It is not a system which readily makes much sense of 'the soul of the Greek people' or 'an icon of Egyptian identity'. It may be that no such system could, and no market in which heritage objects can be traded as commodities at all.

The result is that we are faced with which questions which are inescapably political, but with which it can sometimes prove hard to advance beyond a politics of sensitivity. Heritage objects attract concern because of their role as manifestations of culture; and cultures 'do differ, but they differ in a way which is much more like that of climatic regions or ecosystems than it is like the frontiers drawn with a pen between nation states'.[16] If there can be people whose identity is cross-cultural, then the same is plausibly true of objects. Acknowledging this possibility, however, still leaves us short of ready answers.

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11 **http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/** (retrieved 11th March 2013).

12 By a happy coincidence, the B.B.C. is currently broadcasting a documentary series on the development of ideas about 'heritage' and how it came to be seen in British politics as a legitimate object of state interference in private property. **http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p014fxzv** (retrieved 11th March 2013).

13 Appiah, Kwame Anthony. (2009) 'Whose Culture Is It?' in *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 74.

14 These can include sites which are historically important purely because they exemplify what has largely disappeared.

15 It is worth noting that this applies to artworks and other 'cultural goods' generally, not just those which have much of a conspicuous connection to Britain besides their location. For a short explanation see **http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3090175.stm** (retrieved 11th March 2013).

16 Midgley, Mary. (1991) *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* (Bristol: The Bristol Press), p. 84.