The Shattering of the Conventional

Cultural and Cultural Heritage in the (Armed) Conflicts of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Culture and cultural heritage are threatened by (armed) conflicts in the 21st century as never before in history. However, not only our understanding of culture, but also the nature of conflicts has changed dramatically in recent decades. Regionally limited symmetrical conflicts have been replaced by global asymmetrical conflicts in which everyone is involved in one way or another. In parallel to this development traditional exclusive and elitist imaginations of culture are increasingly being replaced by a contemporary understanding in which culture describes the symbolic systems of meaning and knowledge of specific social groups. In view of these phenomena, both international conventions and institutionalised cultural protection appear to be overstretched and barely capable of acting, so that they remain practically ineffective. The text traces these developments from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s to the terrorist attacks of the present day and discusses possible consequences for culture, cultural heritage and society.

From Bosnia to Ukraine – Western indifference to the "other".

If the past three decades have taught us one thing, it is that the means of severely damaging or even destroying culture and cultural heritage in (armed) conflicts are almost unlimited. Following the origin of the term from Latin (confligere, roughly: to clash, to fight, to be at odds), we want to understand conflict here in the broadest sense as a clash of opposing positions (views). Furthermore, we want to adhere to the knowledge-based concept of culture in contemporary cultural theories. According to this, "culture" refers to the "dimension of collective systems of meaning that guide action in the form of (symbolic) orders of knowledge".[1] Although (architectural) monuments are prominent projection surfaces for conflicts due to their publicity and symbolic representational power, they only make up a small part of the culture threatened in conflicts. Furthermore, we can only adequately comprehend the significance and fate of architectural monuments in conflicts in their overall cultural context.

Since the late 1990s, we have witnessed various forms of destruction of cultural artefacts. From the fall of the Berlin Wall and the far-reaching, inevitably conflict-laden changes in societies east of the "Iron Curtain", the toppling of monuments and radical restructuring of "collective systems of meaning", to the *Yugoslav Wars*[2], the conflicts in Iraq, in Syria, in Afghanistan[3] and ultimately in Ukraine, the so-called "war on terror" and the numerous terrorist attacks in European and overseas metropolises, through to the historicising reconstructions in major German cities: Depending on the type of conflict, the means of destruction encompass the entire spectrum of human action.

At first glance, we can observe a strange relationship here: Parallel to the growth of the "monument of discourse"[4], the conventions, declarations, memoranda, and agreements and finally the almost unmanageable number of scientific and journalistic publications on the subject, the destruction of

culture is also exceeding any measure. Never, it seems, has culture been threatened and destroyed to such an extent as in the century of conventions on cultural protection.[5] However, this relationship is only strange at first glance. On closer inspection two fundamental problems of current (institutional) cultural protection of Western European provenance in conflicts become clear: firstly, it is reactive and, as a result, often enough purely symbolic. The affected culture only "emerges" as an object of knowledge when it is destroyed.

Already the documentation of the destruction of culture in the course of the *Yugoslav Wars*[6] are first and foremost discoveries of their subject; they are full of errors and lacunae[7]; they refer explicitly or implicitly to the fundamental lack of knowledge about the region's culture and cultural heritage.

The problems of understanding began – quite literally – at a basic level: apart from the British art historian Marian Wenzel (1932–2002), who had already carried out research in Bosnia in the 1960s, none of the experts involved in the evaluation of destroyed cultural heritage had even a basic knowledge of one of the South Slavic dialects of the region.

They culminated in the treatment of what could be recognised as "high culture" according to an already antiquated understanding of culture and heritage at the time: While a large part of European society, including the circles of "experts", could still identify with the occidental heritage of the Croatian Adriatic coast, and the Serbian bombardment cities like Split, Šibenik and Dubrovnik provoked an outcry from Berlin to Washington, the destruction of the Islamic heritage of Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo, not to mention the mass destruction of vernacular architecture, went virtually unnoticed. The post-war reconstruction projects in turn largely ignored the social, cultural and political context and, moreover, remained purely symbolic.[8] The Balkans as "Europe's backyard"[9], as a "white spot" became a household word.

And in the 30 years since? How rich or saturated was the professional discourse on the Bamiyan Valley before the Buddha statues were blown up by the Taliban under Mullah Omar in 2001[10] (not to mention the rest of Afghanistan's culture), what about the mosques of Timbuktu, the shrines and mosques of the Shiites in Iraq before they were destroyed, or the culture of the Yazidis there before they were wiped out by the Islamic State? It is not surprising that the Ukraine Forum at the 36th German Art Historians'

Conference 2022 in Stuttgart was entitled *The Blind Spots of Art History? The example of Ukraine*[11]. Similarly, the editors of the *Osteuropa Journal of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde* note in their editorial to the issue *Widerstand – Ukrainische Kultur in Zeiten des Krieges* that Ukraine was a country "that has been ignored, forgotten, repressed (...) for decades in Germany – and not only here, but worldwide"[12]. Following this, art historian Ada Raev writes in the same issue: "For Western art history, Ukrainian art is a blind spot"[13].

Backwards into the future: anachronism in cultural protection

What is meant, however, when we talk about "institutionalised cultural protection of Western provenance" in the context of (armed) conflicts? In all due brevity, we want to understand by this the modern discourse of (scientific) theories, convictions, world views, practices and institutions, which has its theoretical foundations in the cultural concepts of the 18th and 19th centuries, initially emancipates itself as the exclusive subject area of monument preservation, a "child of historicism and (...) grandchild of the Enlightenment"[14], gains global significance through the two world wars in the first half of the 20th century, is institutionalised in supranational conventions with universal claims, develops a kind of global hegemony[15], and is being most recently increasingly scrutinised under the influence of the *cultural turn*, the transformation of cultural theories[16], but also through criticism of intellectual concepts (i. e. the so called "critical turn" in heritage studies)[17].

Far from forming a homogeneous whole, there are nevertheless constants, some of which are not unproblematic: On the one hand, cultural protection has been close to the political arena not only since the destruction in Ypres, Leuven and Reims, the *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*[18] and Paul Clemens' *Kunstschutz im Kriege*[19]. It is all the more so as questions of identity, historicity and legitimacy (and the claims to rule based on them), collective memory, (historical) guilt and responsibility and, finally, the commodification of culture and heritage have become central to many conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries. Cultural protection here becomes susceptible to corruption and partisanship, to "barter-like negotiations (and) ordinary haggling"[20]. Nevertheless, probably the most serious problem of cultural protection in the 21st century is its anachronism regarding the understanding of culture and conflict.

The human capacity to protect culture in conflict is fundamentally dependent on three things: i) our craft (technical) skills, ii) our understanding of culture and conflict, and finally iii) a conventional (juridical) framework. Let's leave craftsmanship aside for a moment and focus on conventions and understanding of culture. Firstly, it is noticeable that there is a glaring contradiction between universal aspirations and exclusive interests. Alongside the establishment of the United Nations itself (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the political superstructure of the European Union (1951) and finally the attempt to organise unrestricted world trade, the international protection of culture is one of the great universalist undertakings of the 20th century that emerged in the wake of two devastating wars. However, in conflicts, exclusive and concrete interests seem to regularly prevail over universal and abstract visions.

Furthermore, even a first superficial glance at the three paradigmatic documents of international cultural protection – the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, the Hague Convention of 1954 and finally the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 – raises the question of the extent to which sets of rules that emerged against the background of classically symmetrical conflicts of the first half of the 20th century can still be appropriate in the face of globalised asymmetrical conflicts[21] of the 21st century and a comprehensive transformation of cultural theories since the 1960s. Despite all subsequent additions (protocols, guidelines) the understanding of culture, which to a certain extent represents the determining measure of the entire building as a *modulus*, remains as exclusive as it is elitist.

We cannot go too far into a reflection on cultural theories at this point. However, let us look at the relevant wording of the conventions. The Geneva Convention (Additional Protocols 1977 I, II, Art. 53, 16) is very general and refers to the Hague Convention. Article 1 of the latter defines what is meant by cultural property worthy of protection. The list given here – "monuments of architecture, art or history (...) whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest" – does not only introduce intellectual concepts that have long been (or still are) unknown in those parts of the world that do (or did)

not fall within the sphere of influence of a Western educational canon. As "cultural property" it also only recognises artefacts of the functional (usually elitist) subsystems of culture as worth protection – not culture as "collective (...) systems of meaning, (...) in the form of (symbolic) orders of knowledge", as "human forms of life in general"[22]. It is only logical that the identification of objects worthy of protection in conflicts is again reserved for an elite of experts. Together with the "outstanding universal value", the core of the World Heritage Convention, and other "professional" criteria (authenticity, age value, etc.) such a strong filter is created that most of the culture threatened by conflict simply becomes "invisible".

In the 1990s, while the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was still ongoing, the Canadian art historian Colin Kaiser was commissioned by the Council of Europe and UNESCO to analyse the damage caused by the war, first to Croatian and later to Bosnian cultural heritage. Already the very first of his reports, Kaiser points to a problem that characterises the assessment of culture damaged or destroyed in conflict – the problematic definition of what was worthy of attention (let alone protection) in the first place:

> In this report the cultural heritage includes monuments, historic towns and districts, vernacular heritage, both rural and urban, art galleries and museums, libraries and archives. Listed heritage is obviously present, but neither age nor notoriety are determining factors. An Orthodox church built in the 1870s or a mosque built in the 1890s may be judged mediocre in terms of aesthetics and originality, but they are focal points of cultural identity. (…) Widespread destruction has the painful virtue of enlarging notions of the heritage to all objects in which a people see carried the values of their culture, however new or old, however outstanding or run-of-the-mill these objects are.[23]

In a further example, we want to contrast the normative concept of culture, as it is characteristic within the institutions of cultural protection (as in popular understanding) with the meaning- and knowledge-orientated concept of culture in contemporary cultural theories, in order to show the fundamental difference between the two ideas: During the 1425-day siege of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo by Serbian units, a large part of the social and cultural structure of the city and its inhabitants was destroyed. An average of 329 shells fell on the city every

day.[24] However, it was not only religious and historical buildings, museums and archives that were destroyed, but also cafés, markets, schools, restaurants, flats and all their contents, book shops and meeting points, families, human lives, relationships. This structure, however, regardless of the (minor) significance of its individual elements, forms the symbolic orders of knowledge that have an action-guiding effect according to contemporary cultural theories. Its particular shape has been handed down over generations – it is cultural heritage. Or rather: "cultural heritage" is the term for a special discourse of the European West that attempts to organise selected elements from structures of this kind according to certain criteria to take possession of them. These extremely complex structure in which individuals and objects mutually determine, signify, constitute, and stabilise each other can be imagined as a net-like structure that is essential for the stability and resilience of the specific social group.

In this context, the Egyptologist, religious and cultural scientist Jan Assmann speaks of the specific *cultural formation* of a society.[25] We could discuss the extent to which this complex network corresponds to Michel Foucault's idea of the *dispositif* (dispositive) of a discourse.[26] The social frames of memory (*Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*), as first described by the French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs in 1925[27], represent a similar network of objects, texts and individuals. The French sinologist and philosopher François Jullien in turn described the special relationships between individual objects of culture as the "cultural resources" of a society.[28] It is not primarily the destruction of individual objects that has a devastating effect here – the connections and interdependencies between objects and individuals and the traumatic destruction of a large part or the entire structure are decisive. Their destruction is tantamount to the destruction of the social group itself – even if the majority of its individuals physically survive.

Migrating conflicts and military urbanism

In this context, we want to take a look at the nature of conflicts in the 21st century and the fate of culture within them: We are used to thinking of war and peace as separate in terms of time, space and actors. Periods of war alternate with periods of peace. In between – as thresholds of an imagined order, so to speak – lie declarations of war and peace treaties, agreements, and memoranda. A war also has certain

venues – the "theatres of war" (Kriegstheater)[29], as the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz wrote in his work *Vom Kriege* (=On War) in the first half of the 19th century, a term that was adopted into NATO doctrine[30]. The "theatres of war", however, have one essential characteristic: they are not situated on the islands of peace. And ultimately: in wars fight combatants against each other – and only such, if it were up to the Geneva Conventions.[31] However, these ideas were already fragile at the time they emerged. With regard to current conflicts, they can almost be described as naïve: Hacker battalions from Moscow and Pyongyang are attacking critical infrastructure worldwide. With *Academi* of the *Constellis Holdings*, the USA and Russia with the Wagner Group both use civilian security companies that perform genuine military tasks; young men from all over the world are flocking to the battles for Mariupol, Lyman or Kiev; Czech citizens are collecting money for T-72 battle tanks for Ukraine[32]; in Washington, heavily armed right-wing militias storm the Congress building, and in Paris, terrorists open fire on passers-by with Kalashnikovs, which originate from the Balkans and were apparently already used in the post-Yugoslav wars.[33] To contain increasingly violent riots and combat terrorism, soldiers on foreign deployments train police skills (*Crowd and Riot Control, CRC*) and police officers at home are equipped with military equipment. The (armed) conflicts of the 21st century cannot be localised or limited in time; everyone is involved in them in one way or another. But what does this mean for culture and cultural heritage?

As far as we can see today, culture is affected in two ways – directly and indirectly. If we consider the numerous terrorist attacks and the rise in political extremism in Europe and overseas over the past decade – starting with the massacre in Paris on 13 November 2015, the attack on Breitscheidplatz in Berlin in 2016, further acts of terrorism in front of the Cathedral Notre-Dame de Paris, in front of the Louvre and on the Champs-Élysées in 2017, if we, furthermore, include the attack on the synagogue in Halle in 2019 as well as the worrying increase in violence against Jews and Jewish heritage in general, if we also take note of the annually recurring marches by neo-Nazis, for example against the historic backdrop of Dresden's Old Town, the storming of the US Congress on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 by heavily armed members of far-right militias and ex-military personnel – an iconoclasm par excellen-

ce – and if we finally consider that a significant part of the Kremlin's propaganda to justify the invasion of Ukraine is also based on cultural arguments – then we realise that in all these conflict scenarios, culture is made the target or the projection screen, used as a justification or is instrumentalised as a stage.

In 2010, the British urban researcher Stephen Graham first described a phenomenon that he called "new military urbanism". He summarised this as: i) the militarisation of urban security, ii) the synergy of foreign policy and domestic security operations, iii) the change in political economy, public discourse and urban thinking, iv) the particular threat to cities as infrastructural and cultural hubs and v) an urban popular culture that imitates the military sphere in clothing, entertainment (computer games, film), consumer electronics (drones) and the cult of martial off-road vehicles. Culture is also at the centre of Graham's depiction in every respect.[34] If Graham's observation is correct – and everything currently points to it – then we as scientists and members of the polis must ask ourselves to what extent this development is acceptable. What consequences do these developments have for the liberal-democratic constitutions of the free world, which also represent a not insignificant cultural heritage?

Endnotes

1   Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien,* Weilerswist 2012, p. 84.

2   On destruction of culture during the Yugoslav Wars: Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory. Architecture at War,* London 2006; Andrew Herscher, *Violence Taking Place. The Architecture of the Kosovo Conflict.* Stanford 2010; Helen Walasek et al., *Bosnia and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage,* Farnham 2015; Tobias Strahl, *Kultur, Erbe, Konflikt. Kulturgutzerstörung in Kroatien, Bosnien-Herzegovina und Kosovo 1991–2004,* Wien, Köln und Weimar 2018.

3   Juliette van Krieken-Pieters (ed.), *Art and Archeology of Afghanistan. Its Fall and Survival,* Leiden and Boston 2006; Lawrence Rothfield (ed.), *Antiquities under Siege. Cultural Heritage Protection after the Iraq War,* Lanham 2008; Idem, *The Rape of Mesopotamia. Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum,* London 2009; Peter G. Stone und Joanne Farchakh, *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq,* Woodbridge 2011; Michael Greenhalgh, *Syria's Monuments. Their Survival and Destruction,* Leiden und Boston 2016.

4   Michel Foucault, *Archäologie des Wissens,* Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 198.

5   "One might think that a period which, within fifty years, uproots, enslaves, or kills seventy million human beings, should only, and forthwith be condemned. But also its guilt must be understood" (Albert Camus, *The Rebel,* Bombay 1960 (Paris 1951), p. 11).

6   Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (ed.), *Information Report on War Damage to the Cultural Heritage in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina 1–10,* February 1993 – January 1997; András Riedlmayer, *Killing Memory: The Targeting of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage. Testimony Presented at a Hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.* U.S. Congress, April 4, 1995; idem, *Erasing the Past: The Destruction of Libraries and Archives in Bosnia-Herzegovina,* in: Middle East Studies Association Bulletin 29/1, Juli 1995, pp. 7–11; idem (with Andrew Herscher), *Monument and Crime: The Destruction of Historic Architecture in Kosovo,* in: Grey Room, 1, Cambridge 2000, pp. 108–122; idem, *From the Ashes: The Past and Future of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage,* in: Maya Schatzmiller (ed.): *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States,* Montreal 2002, pp. 98–135; idem, *Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992–1996. A Post-war Survey of Selected Municipalities,* Cambridge 2002; UNESCO (eds.), *Cultural Heritage in South-East Europe: Kosovo,* Venice 2003; idem, *Cultural Heritage in South-East Europe: Kosovo,* Venice 2004.

7   Strahl (2018), see note 2.

8   Emily Gunzburger-Makaš, *Representing Competing Identities. Building and Rebuilding in Postwar Mostar, Bosnia-Hercegovina,* New York 2007; Walasek et al. (2015), see note 2.

9   Olaf Ihlau and Walter Mayr, *Minenfeld Balkan: Der unruhige Hinterhof Europas,* München 2009.

10 Michael S. Falser, *Die Buddhas von Bamiyan, performativer Ikonoklasmus und das ›Image‹ von Kulturerbe,* in: Michael C. Frank und Kirsten Mahlke (eds.), *Kultur und Terror* (=ZfK – Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften), 1/2010, Bielefeld 2010, pp. 81–93.

11 Katja Bernhardt et al., *Die blinden Flecken der Kunstgeschichte? Das Beispiel Ukraine,* in: Kilian Heck and Alexandra Lipińska (eds.): *Als der Krieg kam. Neue Beiträge zur Kunst in der Ukraine,* Heidelberg 2023, pp. 12–43.

12 Manfred Sapper and Volker Weichsel, *Quell des Widerstands,* in: idem (eds.), *Widerstand / Ukrainische Kultur in Zeiten des Krieges* (=Osteuropa – interdisziplinäre Monatszeitschrift zur Analyse von Politik, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Kultur und Zeitgeschichte in Osteuropa, Ostmitteleuropa und Südosteuropa), Jg. 72, Heft 6–8, 2022, pp. 5–6, here: p. 5.

13 Ada Raev, *Im Fokus. Die künstlerische Kultur der Ukraine,* in: Sapper and Weichsel (2022), see note 12, pp. 353–374, here: p. 353.

14 Norbert Huse, *Denkmalpflege. Deutsche Texte aus drei Jahrhunderten,* München 2006.

15 Miles Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement. A History of Architectural Preservation. Antiquity to Modernity,* New York 2013.

16 Reckwitz (2012), see note 1.

17 Already classic: David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country,* Cambridge 1985; idem, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History,* Cambridge 2010; idem, *The Past is a Foreign Country Revisited,* Cambridge 2015; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition,* Cambridge 1983; more recent: Laurajane Smith, *Cultural Heritage. Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies,* Oxfordshire 2006; Michael Dylan Foster and Lisa Gilman (eds.), *UNESCO on the Ground. Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage,* Bloomington 2015; Christoph Brumann and David Berliner (eds.), *World Heritage on the Ground. Ethnographic Perspectives,* New York and Oxford 2016.

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22 Reckwitz, (2012, see note 1), pp. 64ff., here: pp. 79, 82.

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29 Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege,* Berlin 1957 (1832), p. 396.

30 United States, Department of the Army (eds.), *The U. S. Army / Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual / U. S. Army Field Manual no. 3-24 / Marine Corps Warfighting Publication no. 3-33.5.,* Chicago 2007, p. 388.

31 Article 43, para. 2.

32 *Tschechen sammeln Geld für Panzer,* in: Der Spiegel (online), 23. September 2022, (https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/tschechien-buerger-sammeln-geld-fuer-panzer-fuer-die-ukraine-a-9192451e-f335-4984-ae1d-6c249dcf48dd [12.12.2023]).

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