

ISSUES OF CULTURAL PROPERTY – THE USUAL TENSIONS

Two articles this weekend about the Parthenon marbles.

The Guardian reports a video making a case for the return of the marbles sent to 1000 members of Parliament in the UK. The New York Times yesterday ran an article about the guilt instilled by a new museum on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens, to be built for the marbles, still in London.

Tschumi's design.

There are various organizations now campaigning for the marbles to leave London for Athens.

Issues of cultural property again. And the usual tensions.

But note the key point. The Greek Government is now accepting the British Museum's [ownership](#) (they would be on long term loan in Athens). This means they will almost certainly return to Greece.

The Parthenon Marbles are indeed extraordinary works of art. For some this means they belong to all humanity. So it doesn't matter if they are in London, New York, Berlin, whatever. Indeed it has been argued that they have been, and maybe still are, better off in London. Because they might not have been as well looked after in Athens (even perhaps until recently), and London is a major art and cultural city – it is good to have them alongside other great works of art, so readily accessible in the metropolis. With the British Museum the legal owners (I think there is little dispute about this), why should they go back to Athens?

But many see the marbles as quintessentially Greek. The ultimate artistic achievement of the ancient Greek miracle. A symbol of what it is to be Greek. How could they not be in Athens?

Both these arguments are, for me, dangerous. Yes – *dangerous*.

In the first argument, art is seen as a form of cultural capital whose ownership marks and even accrues to an advanced and civilized sensibility. The European imperial powers of the nineteenth century had it, and it is found still in their great cultural centers and institutions. It is opposed to lower cultural forms and barbarism. It needs protecting.

On the second, I argue that the sculptures are not somehow essentially Greek.

Identity does matter, of course. But to see identity as somehow inherent, an essential quality, is just the kind of notion that has led to all kinds of internecine conflict, bigotry and discrimination.

This doesn't mean you can't make a case for the marbles being Greek. You could say that contemporary Greeks are the heirs to classical Athens of the fifth century BCE. That the art (and all the culture) of those times therefore belongs to contemporary Greeks, even though it may have been bestowed upon all humanity since then. (Doesn't this sound all too familiar). But this is an argument or assertion, an [act of creating or reaffirming](#) identity. Think of the enormous changes between then and now: the people who have come and gone; the great cultural changes that break this supposed continuity of inheritance.

Instead, why not see culture and identity as ongoing processes, projects, works, things we get involved in and work at, because they matter to us.

The sculptures are art [works](#)— this is the best argument for their return. They belong with the building they were designed for.

See also what I said last year about the looting of the Baghdad Museum and culture as property – the notion that fuels the market in illicit antiquities.

[Heritage](#) is a key term here. Are the marbles Greek heritage? Or humanity's heritage? (UNESCO promotes the listing of World Heritage Sites.) Or neither?

Heritage is usually defined as the past's legacy to the present – the cultural capital the present has inherited. Here again are notions of owning cultural property. Instead, think of heritage being about different kinds of relationship

with the past. What kind of relationship depends upon what you want to do with the past.

So when David Lowenthal, our most astute commentator on heritage, criticizes it for being antithetical to real history (because heritage may not involve factual accuracy), he is missing the point. Heritage may indeed be quite historical. Or not. It depends on the project.