

Can the Past and the Future Coexist?

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Change is a modern phenomenon. Modernist scholars from Smith to Hegel to Marx viewed change as one of the defining characteristics of modern society. The idea of “change” became synonymous with the idea of “progress”: modern societies advanced from earlier, primitive stages to advanced, better stages. With the rise of the idea of progress began the rise of the “past” as a distinct cultural phenomenon. Explorers, armies, and governments collected and displayed artifacts of past cultures as a way of illustrating the idea of progress.

With the rise of postmodernism and multiculturalism in recent decades, the debate about the past has intensified. The idea of progress as the natural result of change has been abandoned for the most part in these views, as have modern conceptions of the past. Rather than being used as a prop to support progress, the past is now seen as a distinct reality placed in great danger by the present and by the idea of progress. This reinterpretation of the past has influenced debates over environmental protection, the extinction of native languages, and the ownership of cultural artifacts. Globalization, with rapid increases in trade, travel, and communication between countries around with world, has intensified the debate. Along with this process have come increasingly violent reactions against change and the disruptions it has wrought to the political and economic status quo of many contemporary societies.

The change in cultural conditions, such as the decline of native languages or the export of historic artifacts, is one important way the average person becomes involved in globalization. Control of these symbolic aspects of society provides powerful

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opportunities for factions that try to expropriate them for political advantage. Responses to the increasing concern for cultural preservation have included everything from local conservation societies, to strict social (government) ownership of all cultural artifacts, to the designation of United Nations World Heritage sites. Systematic approaches to cultural preservation have been complicated not only by the obvious variety of opinion in diverse cultural settings but also by the sheer variety of objects, artifacts, resources, and traditions threatened by a changing world. A good recent overview of this situation is Alexander Stille's *The Future of the Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

Stille takes us on a whirlwind tour of the world's natural and cultural resources, from the most prominent, such as the Sphinx and pyramids of Egypt, to the exotic, such as wood carving in the East Indies. He shows that perhaps more than ever societies around the world are being forced to come to terms with the past, what it means, and how they want to preserve it. Approaches to historic preservation have been as diverse as the problems. The one commonality seems to be a heightened urgency of the problem. As societies have adopted some degree of capitalism and modern technology, they have often experienced a growing anxiety about the loss of tradition. As technological change has made available previously unimagined tools for the preservation and study of the past, it has also brought about unprecedented potential to destroy natural and cultural objects. Social and geographic mobility has also had a profound effect. As Stille points out, "Paradoxically, the rootlessness of contemporary society has created a tremendous yearning for a connection with ancient or vanished civilizations" (p. xiv). He illustrates with numerous examples how this "double-edged nature of technological change" (p. xvii) is playing out around the world.

Stille's stories demonstrate the common thread running through debates about both environmental protection and cultural preservation: he realizes that "some of our notions about nature [are] deeply related to issues I was dealing with in the chapters on monuments and museums" (p. xviii). For example, he looks at the debate over who controls "endangered" resources or artifacts. Who decides what gets protected and what does not? The ever-present irony in these debates is that the Western preservationists, environmentalists, and art historians alike, concerned about preserving the past and diverse cultures and societies, often seek to impose their own Western values on the very cultures they purport to be interested in "saving." It seems that the modernist idea of perpetual change leading to progress has been replaced by an equally rigid postmodernist view that all change is bad and that preservation is the only good. Trying to implement such preservation strategies has often brought Western activists into conflict with the very peoples and cultures they claim to be helping, raising a question about whose interests conservation actually serves: the conservationists or those whose culture is being "preserved"?

China is a notable venue of the conflict. China's long history, stretching back millennia, has produced magnificent historic and cultural artifacts. Western preservationists, the Chinese government, and Chinese citizens, however, disagree about how

to preserve these vast riches. The ancient Chinese capital of Xi'an has become a focal point in this conflict. In 1974, a peasant uncovered the first pieces of the vast army of terra-cotta soldiers buried underneath the fields of Xi'an, which has since become one of the world's most celebrated archeological sites. Western archeologists are eager to study the site and to apply their expertise, but Chinese government officials, sensitive to the appearance of foreign imperialism, have refused almost all foreign involvement. The typical Chinese citizen is proud of the fabled army but more concerned about economic development and growth, which daily create new threats to historic objects. When Stille traveled to Xi'an and witnessed the city's rapid construction, he seemed to find it impossible to avoid judging the city's residents from his Western perspective: "most Chinese, many of whom have known famine and extraordinary hardships in their own lifetimes, are surprisingly unsentimental about these changes" (p. 48). Later in the same chapter, he explains this phenomenon, noting that "while the rapidity of change is disconcerting to some Westerners, for most younger Chinese, it cannot come fast enough" (p. 58). He quotes a Chinese girl who states, "Xi'an is changing but it needs to change more quickly" (p. 58). The situation in Xi'an demonstrates the important role economic development has to play in preservation. Although economic development is derided—sometimes with good reason—as the source of destruction for cultural and natural resources, it is a necessity for providing the technology and the resources to undertake preservation and to motivate local societies to engage in preservation.

The conflict over control of local resources is shown even more starkly in Stille's chapter on the preservation of Madagascar's tropical rain forests, which is being carried out in a manner inimical to local control and even to local survival. As Stille observes, "The big conservation projects of Madagascar are highly unpopular among most local people who see them as simply the latest attempt of foreigners and their own national government to take away their land" (p. 125). The battle in Madagascar centers on the creation of Ranomafana National Park, which American primatologist Patricia Wright convinced the U.S. and Malagasy governments to create following her discovery of a new species of lemur there in the 1980s. The national park has disrupted the life of the nearby residents, who have long depended on the land for their survival and has brought Wright and other environmentalists into conflict with anthropologists who study the local cultures. Stille quotes French anthropologist Maurice Bloch: "It's a colonial enterprise. People are under the authority of a biology professor [Wright] who has been given absolute power over their lives" (p. 126). He continues, "it's the imposition of a foreign idea, a fad, on people through a kind of economic and police control" (p. 126). For people in Madagascar living on the edge of subsistence, the park understandably seems to be a foreign luxury they cannot afford and a foreign condemnation of their culture. Stille remarks, "Adding insult to injury, for several years the only wall label in the museum [built at the park] that was in the Malagasy language was the one marking a small wooden cabinet that says: 'Who is destroying the forest?' When you open the cabinet, there is a mirror" (p. 147).

Stille's chapter on Madagascar illustrates, in addition to the obvious problem of cultural imperialism, how government intervention in preservation efforts, even when well intentioned, often does more harm than good by failing to take into account local residents' values and opinions. Complicating matters are the short-term approaches governments often take to projects. "Huge amounts of money are suddenly poured into a desperately poor country but for a very short period. Almost inevitably, the money will be spent in a hurried, haphazard fashion and local people will rush to cash in while it lasts" (p. 150). Although Stille's goal does not seem to be to condemn government conservation, the readers' condemnation might naturally result after they have considered his examples from around the world, where government policies seem to be at the heart of the challenges facing preservation. It becomes increasingly difficult to sympathize with those who automatically turn to government for preservation when the government itself often causes the destruction in the first place. Stille demonstrates this point with a number of examples:

- "Many factories were placed to the north of Cairo [by the Egyptian government], perfectly positioned to catch the strong breezes coming down from the Mediterranean, carrying industrial pollution to the city and the pyramid area" (p. 22) This pollution is one of the major threats to the pyramids.
- Government efforts to control pollution on India's sacred Ganges River, backed by generous foreign funding, have failed in large part. "Designed primarily to deal with industrial waste, most of the plants made little or no provision for dealing with human waste, which accounts for 80 percent of India's water pollution. . . . [L]ocal residents became so enraged that they forced a city water engineer to stand for several hours in a pool of sewage so that he could better acquaint himself with the problem" (p. 98).
- During China's Cultural Revolution, an episode similar to the Taliban's destruction of Afghanistan's cultural artifacts in the late 1990s occurred when "Red Guards destroyed some 4,922 out of 6,843 officially designated sites of historical and cultural interest, burning temples, hacking statues, and destroying imperial tombs" (p. 44).

The alternative to government conservation is private conservation. Italy's continuing struggle to control its cultural heritage provides the perfect example. Proud of Italy's long history, the Italian government has passed sweeping laws prohibiting the export of archeological objects and strictly controlling domestic ownership. The result not surprisingly has been to restrict the supply of, but not the demand for, illicitly obtained objects and thus to expand greatly the black market for those objects. "The worldwide trade in illicit antiquities is estimated to be worth between \$2 billion and \$6 billion a year—third in size after drugs and arms among the world's black mar-

kets” (p. 77). The enormous number of objects buried under Italian cities and in the countryside ensures that the government’s best efforts will be far too limited to manage all the objects or to prevent looting. Although allowing market forces to be brought to bear in preservation makes sense to many economists, most archeologists remain staunchly opposed to any change in laws that would allow more private collecting. As Stille observes, however, “the freer circulation of objects—allowing either for the sale of highly redundant pieces or for long-term loans that last for decades rather than months—might generate income that could be used to fund more legal excavation, conservation, or security” (p. 92).

The “freer circulation of objects” to which Stille refers would have the added benefit of engaging a broader spectrum of participants in the preservation efforts. Local residents and amateur enthusiasts often possess extensive knowledge of the areas in which they live and explore that even the best-trained experts lack (Stroup and Brown 2001). An open, market-based approach would harness amateur expertise, such as that of the *tamboroli* (tomb robbers) of Italy or that of the amateur bone hunters of the American West, who have discovered twenty-one of the thirty *Tyrannosaurus rex* fossils currently known (Grewell and Brown 2001).

The alternative to market-based preservation, which is government dictate, often involves heavy penalties for landowners who become the unwitting hosts of “protected” artifacts. In environmental protection, stringent government regulations that impose land-use restrictions when endangered species are found to be resident have led to “preemptive habitat destruction” in which landowners attempt to rid their land of members of endangered species before the government finds out about their presence (Stroup 1995). Similar practices occur in archeological preservation, where developers have been known to offer bribes to archeological inspectors to *avoid* making important discoveries that might bring government-mandated delays, or even elimination, of their own development projects (Stroup and Brown 2000). Stille recounts the construction of a new library in Alexandria, Egypt, envisioned as a replacement for the renowned library of antiquity. Some construction of the library, itself a government project with United Nations backing, occurred in the middle of the night, presumably to prevent onlookers from observing the destruction of valuable treasures on the ancient site. Like others in the city, these builders try “to hide or destroy what they find in order to avoid costly delays” (p. 268). As repugnant as paying potential looters and other would-be destroyers of the past to “do the right thing” might seem to many preservationists, it would be scarcely less constructive than current practices, where the incentives are almost always arranged, if unintentionally, to discourage preservation.

The inescapable fact that becomes clear from all of Stille’s narratives is that change—political, economic, and technological—is occurring and will only increase in the future. Conservation of selected aspects of cultural and natural artifacts is the only way to retain some part of the past. Vastly different approaches to that process, however, have led to vastly different results. Stille’s contrast between India and other

countries may provide a valuable lesson. “Other traditional societies, like China, Burma, and Saudi Arabia, preserve themselves by steeling themselves against the outside world, but they may be much more vulnerable as they begin to open up. India is a wide-open society through which numerous armies have marched, and yet it remains remarkably itself” (p. 102–3). Indian society, as Stille points out, though still struggling with modernization, has found many ways to incorporate new technologies into its traditional culture. The seemingly ironic result of this incorporation may be that the societies most open to change are the ones most likely to succeed in preserving parts of the past.

The United States is probably the best example of this process. The U.S. economy and culture are at the forefront of technological change, but that change brings with it the means and the willingness to protect the past. Analysis of public-opinion surveys by University of Chicago scholar Don Corsey has shown that people’s concern for the environment varies predictably with economic well-being: during prosperous times, people show greater concern for “quality of life” issues such as environmental protection. This association makes perfect sense. People who have met their basic needs can more readily attend to altruistic concerns, whether those concerns be the protection of endangered species in Malagasy rain forests, the construction of libraries in developing countries, or the careful cataloging and study of cultural and scientific artifacts. Policies designed to protect the past without taking into account the concerns of the present are bound to fail.

Stille cites Nancy Munn, also of the University of Chicago: “I disagree with the whole premise that cultures ‘die’ or ‘disappear.’ They simply change” (p. 180). The cultures that appreciate this truth and undertake change by the most voluntary methods, which usually means free markets and democratic political systems, generally will be the ones in which the past has the best future.

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