

# WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

## Because It Can Help Preserve Cultural Heritage Important for Understanding and Social Benefit

February 22, 2022

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Cultural heritage is today threatened on a number of fronts.

Embodied in the form of ancient archaeological sites and historical buildings, collections of antiquities, artworks, artifacts and archives, and as the lifeways of contemporary communities, cultural heritage comprises features of continuing existence and past accomplishment recognized by a social group as an enduring symbol of its identity. Benign neglect, devastating accidents, major natural disasters—and increasingly climate change—all challenge our ability to preserve cultural heritage. Think of earthquakes in Haiti and Italy and their ruin of historic buildings and galleries; remember the fires that wreaked havoc on Notre Dame and destroyed collections at the National Museum in Brazil; and imagine the loss of living cultural traditions among Inuit communities seeing massive warming in the Arctic. Social persecution, terrorism, and armed conflict too endanger the preservation of cultural heritage. Consider the burning of historical manuscripts in Timbuktu; recall ISIS blowing up the ancient trading center of Palmyra, the Taliban looting and trafficking ancient treasures; and recognize the Myanmar government's persecution of the Rohingya for their religious and ethnic ways and the Chinese government for doing the same to Uighurs and Tibetans.

While cultural heritage is often taken for granted, these challenges enable us to see cultural heritage as purposefully articulated, sometimes deliberately invented, monumentalized, memorialized, displayed, documented, studied, analyzed and promulgated. It is subject to change, revitalization, revision, and even erasure over time. Though generally thought of as positive, cultural heritage may of course be contentious. What might be valued and celebrated by one group or segment of society may be denigrated by a neighboring group or another segment of society—witness protests and disagreements over monuments and statues in the U.S. today.

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While the notion of something like “cultural heritage” has likely been with humankind for a very long time it was the documentary and analytic work of antiquarians, historians, philologists, archaeologists, ethnographers, naturalists, museum curators, archivists, and art collectors in the 18th and 19th centuries that led to the development of the world's great libraries, archives, and museums and the crystallization of the concept. Elaboration of this impulse to document, preserve, study, and present led to full-blown governmental attention,

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communal advocacy, and occupational professionalization in the 20th century and especially in the post-World War II era with the drive to found newly independent nations out of the history of older societies and to construct an internationalist world order. Nations and the UN developed a host of cultural heritage programs, the oft-stated goals of which have been to foster understanding and respect for the diversity of human cultures and promote social and economic benefit among heritage practitioners and communities, and the larger society.

A variety of government ministries of culture, national museums, archives and libraries, intergovernmental organizations like UNESCO, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, and the World Intellectual Property Organization, and non-governmental programs run by the International Council of Museums, the World Monuments Fund, the International Federation of Library Associations, the Blue Shield, the Aga Khan Foundation, the Getty, the Smithsonian, and others have developed conservation, preservation, and revitalization programs devoted to safeguarding cultural heritage in an effort to ensure not only its survival, but also its flourishing as an important educational and economic force of contemporary civic life.

Efforts to save cultural heritage involve a variety of experts, from conservators to law enforcement, from architects to program managers. Technical expertise in engineering, architecture, archaeology, history, hydrology, agronomy, geology, ecology, and other disciplines is often needed to help preserve physical, cultural, and natural sites. Chemists, material scientists, conservators, artists, biologists, forensic anthropologists, botanists, and zoologists may all contribute to the safeguarding of collections. Folklorists, ethnographers, arts managers, social workers, community organizers, educators, and similar professionals may be involved in developing programs for intangible cultural heritage. In almost all cases, officials and civil servants, local community leaders, benefactors and donors, advocates and activists become engaged in cultural heritage preservation efforts. Some projects may be quite modest—recording oral histories, for example—and may cost just hundreds or thousands of dollars and take weeks or months to execute. Others, such as architecturally restoring a historic city center as is now being done in Mosul, Iraq, may require billions of dollars and take decades to complete. Large projects may involve significant support from local, regional, and national governments and/or international development banks, aid organizations, like the British Council, the U.S. State Department's Ambassador's Fund, and the World Bank, as well as from foundations like Mellon, Prince Claus, and ALIPH, and corporate sponsors. Garnering such support typically requires a good deal of advocacy and consciousness-raising and adept matchmaking.

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The social sciences and social scientists play a key role in this overall effort. The social sciences provide the tools for understanding the social, cultural and historical contexts of cultural heritage preservation efforts and the political

and economic factors at play in possible intervention scenarios. The social sciences provide methods for on-the-ground data collection and analysis and for predictive and comparative assessments of results and consequences.

Cultural heritage is a major industry, a key component in economic development. Heritage sites draw multitudes of visitors, tourists, and adherents whose presence stimulates extraordinary secondary economic activity. Cultural heritage collections and practices spawn various related artisanal, design, fashion, performing arts, and culinary arts enterprises that serve consumers and generate income. Cultural heritage typically creates jobs—whether in historic restoration work, the management and operation of sites, or service in the related hospitality industry. This makes cultural heritage financially and economically valuable and, when well-managed for the benefit of local or host communities, an asset for social stability and well-being. That benefit can be invaluable in places that have

experienced trauma and are recovering from disaster or conflict.

Cultural heritage more directly engages our curiosity for knowledge. It teaches us about particular times, about architecture, engineering, design, environment, social structure, economy, artistry, craftsmanship, technical knowledge, religious beliefs, challenges, triumphs, and injustices. It offers an appreciation of history and lets us understand something about the way in which people lived.

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But heritage is not only about the past. It symbolizes how people think of themselves, their predecessors, and their neighbors today, as well as about the world they occupy. In that sense, cultural heritage can offer us valuable lessons. By way of positive, negative, and even ambiguous examples, cultural heritage sites, collections and traditions can at their best teach us about tolerance and respect for a diverse humanity and give us an appreciation of the forces of nature. Cultural heritage can even help us heal in the face of social strife and natural disaster. Saving culture heritage can help save us from the foibles of intolerance and prejudice toward our fellow human beings and our ignorance and arrogance about our role and impact on the planet. It can remind us of our better nature, and can help us live in a more humane, respectful world.



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