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Heritage, Thrift and our Children's Children

Sarah May

Everyone talks about the Future, what do they mean?

Heritage is commonly claimed to preserve things from the past for future generations. What does the word 'generations' do in that phrase? It reminds us of children, so that the phrase becomes analogous to 'for our children, and our children's children'. Of course, the children of today are the adults of tomorrow, so what is at stake when we use this formulation?

The future is important to heritage; after all we conserve the past for the future. This is reflected in government policy documents with names like 'A force for our future' (DCMS & DTLR 2001). The newly formed Historic Environment Scotland has just released its corporate plan, entitled *For All Our Futures* (Historic Environment Scotland 2016). But when we examine these documents we find very little about this future we are working for. What challenges does it face? What demographics does it have? How far in the future is it? What relationship does it have with us? Considering that it is the stated beneficiary of our work, we know remarkably little about it.

In this paper I will look at how and why heritage uses the concept of 'future generations' in explaining the importance of our work. This creates a role for children in heritage discourse as placeholders of the future. I will examine how this role exerts a domesticating force for the future which twins with the rescuing of the past to avoid anxieties about the present. Finally, I will critically examine how this positions us in relation to children and I will explore how trans-generational gifts can be burdens as well as assets.

Serious consideration of futures and future making is just beginning in heritage studies, this volume is an important corrective to that (though see Harrison 2015; Holtorf and Högberg 2015). In this paper I will consider the work of sociologists such as Adams and Groves (2007, 2011) and social psychologists such as Reicher (2010) who have made considerable progress in understanding the role of future making in contemporary society, which in turn gives us a context for why it is important to heritage.

Dirk Spennemann has studied the rise of 'the future' in the slogans and rhetoric of Historical Societies in the United States. He argues that the future is so vague in heritage discourse because it is rhetorical. It is an *excuse*, an explanation for the importance of heritage that cannot be refuted because it cannot be known (2007). He argues that the appeal to the future in heritage discourse coincided with the rise of concern about environmental degradation. As Figure 1 shows, the relationship between 'future generations' and heritage is broader than in the slogans of American historical societies. The two concepts have similar fortunes in the corpus of books searched by Google Ngrams and are both on the rise.

Figure 1. If we look at the use of the term 'future generations' across the corpus of English language books catalogued by Google Books, we see a sharp rise from the mid 1980's that correspond with an even sharper rise in the term 'heritage' (Michel et al 2011; <http://books.google.com/ngrams>).

But Spennemann cautions that this sloganeering, while increasing relevance for concerned communities:

also raises the expectation that the historic preservation organizations have the interest and intellectual capacity to apply strategic foresight and actively manage not only the extent heritage, but also have strategies in place to deal with the issues of emergent and future heritage (Spennemann 2007, 98).

Can we engage meaningfully with the future that we rely on for relevance? Historic England, the body with statutory responsibility for England's heritage did establish a 'foresight' team, but their remit was primarily to 'future proof' heritage, rather than to ensure that the future benefitted from our work (Historic England, 2015).

But it is not only heritage policies that rely on the future. It is not just a rhetorical device. I am currently conducting fieldwork for the Heritage Futures project, examining future making practices in the Lake District of England. My participants do include heritage professionals working with the World Heritage bid for the area. But they also include shepherds, regulators, entrepreneurs, astronomers, and engineers with responsibility for nuclear waste. All of these people have concern or responsibility for futures well beyond their lifespans. While some of them have never unpicked what motivates them to do so, or what they mean when they work for these futures, they are sincere in their practice. The heritage manager who balances academic and community values in a consultation hopes that her work will make life better in the future. The shepherd who builds her flock reaching for an ideal of a breed that matches the landscape is not only thinking of the present. These practices point to something more than Spennemann's dismissal of the future as an excuse in heritage discourse. The fieldwork aims to describe their practices, and to compare how these construct different long term futures. In this paper I lay out the conceptual frame that guides that empirical work.

Heritage as a link between Past and Future

There are, of course, no shortage of people predicting the future, from climate modelling to technological fixes and catastrophes. However, when we say that heritage is a future making practice, we don't mean that it attempts to predict the future, but rather that it seeks to influence it. Though the materials we use may have been with us for many generations, this is no less creative or politically powerful than seeking to influence the future with new technology or new modes of working. In order to assess whether the future focused policies and slogans mentioned above are effective, it's useful to understand what the overall project of future making does for the present day.

The social psychologist Reicher studies how people and societies establish self continuity, a key aspect of emotional wellbeing. Being future focused is often equated with a positive attitude. But while futures of technological revolution may present as optimistic, heritage draws on a different aspect of wellbeing. Establishing an identity that can form the past and extend into the future is one of the ways that people deal with change and challenge throughout life. He gives a psychological explanation of the power of heritage as something people use in self construction so that it is powerful in the establishment of social control. "One of the critical ways people contest future directions of a group is by arguing over whether it represents continuity or rupture with the past" (Reicher 2010, p151). He also argues that the same structures are key in establishing futures. The change

fact that human beings are able to gaze ahead, to imagine their own future, and create their own destiny renders the topic of history of fundamental importance (Reicher 2010, 170). Do heritage policies that speak of future generations work within this framework?

The sociologists Adam and Groves have examined how different future positionings do different work in the present; contrasting empty futures with lived futures. They consider empty futures as being blank slates which can be used for technological and economic abstractions, pointing to practices such as discounting costs as modellers move further into the future. "Neoclassical economics constructs the future as an empty, quantifiable medium and uses it to construct tools for assessing the costs and benefits of different actions in the present" (Adam and Groves 2011, 20). Lived futures, by contrast stem from relationships of care, with specific people and things that we appreciate for their dynamic and ongoing value. Following this argument heritage can be the bridge that allows an ethical perspective of care to continue past the lifespans of individuals into the deep future. Adam and Groves believe that this gives moral force to our actions as "constructing our own futures through imagination and action forges novel connections that in turn unleash living futures that far outlive us" (2011, 25). This certainly supports the self continuity that Reicher argues is necessary for our present wellbeing.

But this is not what the 'future generations' framing does. We do not extend our living care into an integrated future. We imagine a future which itself is in need of our care, and which is figured as our descendant, our child. In so doing heritage contributes to filling the blank slates of the empty future(s) therefore and becomes an enormously powerful use of the past – no longer the innocent positioning of humble historical societies, but a future-making practice, an identification of the most valuable elements of the past, and a positioning of those actively construct the future. As Adam and Groves argue "when we extend ourselves into the future through imagination and through action, we make and take futures. Because this is the case, there is a basic inequality of power between present and future that does not exist between living contemporaries" (2011, 21).

Heritage, a gift from the Past to the Future

The 'future generations' model figures heritage as a gift, which we received from our parents and will give to our children. "The cultural and natural heritage of every nation is a priceless possession, a precious gift that has been inherited from the past and is to be kept in trust by the present generation for generations yet to come" (von Droste zu Hülshoff 2006, 389). As with other heirlooms, like watches and china, we should take good care of them, use them more carefully than we do things we have made or bought ourselves, and pass them on to our children for them to treasure and treat in the same fashion. "Any loss or serious impairment of this heritage is a tragedy, because these gifts are irreplaceable" (von Droste zu Hülshoff 2006, 389).

There are two problems with this vision. Firstly, it overlooks our own role in the creation of heritage. Very little of what we perceive as heritage was 'given' to us. The majority could at most be said to be salvaged, while some of it has been created by our own efforts from materials that our forbearers neglected or even deliberately tried to get rid of (Holtorf 2015).

Secondly it overlooks the fact that not all gifts are well received and an unwanted gift can be a burden (Daniels 2009). The gift is a central and complex feature of most if not all cultures and anthropologists have long made it a subject of particular study. There is

considerable discussion concerning the centrality of reciprocity but most authors agree that gifts and gift giving practice create and regulate social relations and usually social obligations (Sigaud 2002, Sykes 2004). If we are to consider heritage management as a gift giving practice then we need to examine the social relations it is entangled in, as I am beginning to do in this paper.

Won't somebody think of the children?

Using the phrase 'future generations' leads us to associate the future with children. The anthropologist, Miller has looked at the intergenerational relationships managed through gift giving in his account of shopping in North London. He identifies thrift as an unquestionable virtue in his respondents, regardless of whether their budgets were restricted or not. He suggests that this desire for thrift is associated with intergenerational devotion - the desire to leave wealth for our children. He links this to a phenomenon he refers to as 'the cult of the infant' an aspect of contemporary western society where children have replaced adult males as the devotional focus of the household (Miller 1998, 123-5).

This devotion, in sacralising children, also has the effect of constraining them as I have argued elsewhere (May 2013). Sacred beings are not fully human, they have a responsibility to embody our better nature. Devotion particularly constrains their relationship with material culture. Sacred children are less and less involved in production and disposal, while their acquisition of objects is endlessly scrutinized. This constraint is further tightened by the 'future generations' formulation. If we believe that 'children are the future' this undermines the importance of their lives and their agency today.

The Queer theorist Lee Edelman has argued that the child who is figured as the future in this way is nothing to do with the real cared for children that will carry our care into the future in Adam and Groves' lived futures. The child who is present in this discourse:

has come to embody for us the Telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust... In its coercive universalization, however, the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse - to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse (Edelman 2004, 11).

The future generations formulation calls on the 'our children's children' trope. What of the future generations who are the recipients of our bounty? They are dependent on us: our children and not equal adults. They are endangered: our carelessness with their inheritance will leave them impoverished. They can neither produce their own sense of place and self, nor use fragments in the way that we have. They must be given our past so that they can have a future. But these future generations will grow up just as we have. The future is not the domain of children needing our care, but of independent agents with their own concerns and competencies.

Gift or Sacrifice?

If heritage is a gift, what do we expect the people of the future to give us in return? Of course, the concept of legacy sidesteps the question (MacRury, 2008), but the formulations that von Droste zu Hülshoff used, cited above, was not legacy but gift. I believe that what we ask for from future generations is *forgiveness*. The rise of futurist

rhetoric as identified by Spennemann, is also associated with a rise in the practice of apologising to the future for mistakes we have made, especially for the destruction of ecosystems, extinctions and climate change (figure 2). This trend is trackable in the increase in the use of the phrase 'future generations' which has risen steadily since the 1960s and is exemplified in the spoken word piece "Dear Future Generations, sorry" (Prince Ea, n.d.). In this widely shared video, the artist enumerates our failures, and apologises for the subsequent losses that future generations have suffered. With phrases like 'You probably know it as the Amazon Desert' he describes an impoverished future. Of course, the real audience for the piece is the present day, he hopes to change behavior, not just apologise for it. He invokes the future as judge, but a powerless and imperiled judge.

Of course, if we return to Miller's notion of the Cult of the Infant we remember that children are placeholders of the divine. Gifts to the gods are neither gifts nor legacies, but sacrifices. How would it be to consider heritage as a sacrifice to future generations? This removes the need for us to gain benefit from it; indeed the less benefit we have, the greater the sacrifice. This may underpin some of the resistance to the economic use of heritage sites. It also modifies the question of whether these sacrifices will be valuable to the people of the future. What the gods like about sacrifice is that we have forgone benefit, not that they will use it.

Nonetheless, as mentioned heritage policy makers such as von Droste zu Hülshoff, do not speak of sacrifice, they speak of gifts. This vision of heritage as a gift to the future bolsters a fantasy of intergenerational harmony at odds with our own experiences. This disconnect is so strong that we need to look at what the fantasy does as a social force in the present.

It's the thought that counts

If heritage is a gift to the future that we give with sincerity, then we need to consider how the gift will be received. Simply the fact that it comes from the past should not be assumed sufficient justification for its use in making a future. Gift exchange, especially unequal gift exchange creates and maintains social obligations and hierarchies. The fact of receiving a gift is valuable beyond the value of the gift because it establishes and maintains relationships. In a useful exploration of the current understanding of the gift in Anthropology Sykes asks: "Why should I receive a gift with the understanding that it is the thought that counts, except to acknowledge that I do not necessarily like or need what I receive in order to be glad for it" (Sykes 2004, 2). When we treat heritage as valuable because of its status as a gift, rather than for the pleasure it brings, we emphasise the social relations it enacts.

The gift of heritage is complex and assembles a particularly powerful set of relations. As Graden has shown in the analysis of a gift of heritage materials from Sweden to Minneapolis, the gift "contain[s] and enact[s] multiple performances that simultaneously create and recreate the idea of gift-giving in its role as an activity that binds people together" (Graden 2010). It is the gifting that makes the materials heritage, and gives them value in the new context. Swedish and North American communities are bound together.

The giving of gifts to children is part of their socialisation. Through receiving gifts we want them to learn about who cares for them and how, and how to be grateful. Especially for younger children, the gifts are also often educational in a broad sense, meant to create the conditions for the child to become the adult we want them to be. The inappropriate

reactions of children to the overwhelming number of gifts some of them receive is the source of considerable moral panic. A recent study on materialism and wellbeing cites broken boxes and toys strewn over the floor at Christmas as signs that gifts have not been properly received (Nairn and Ipsos Mori 2011, 4). So through this socialization we learn how to receive gifts, even those we don't want. Does this include the gift of heritage?

China is a traditional gift for the establishment of a home, a wedding gift and then an inheritance, sometimes both. China companies traded on this model for most of the 20th century, but changing domestic patterns undermined the value of china (Blaszczyk, 2000). Combined with changing labour markets, this rendered high status china companies such as Wedgwood unsustainable in Britain. While aspects of design and marketing are maintained here, porcelain production is now based in China (Morgan 2009). Coincidentally, this was received as a loss of heritage by many in the UK, but a Chinese perspective sees it as a return of the historical dominance for China (Lin 2013).

But what does this mean for the status of china as a gift? I received my grandmother's china when she died, but I do not use it. I keep it safe, well packed, I wouldn't consider getting rid of it. But I keep it as a social obligation to her, not because it brings me joy, or even because it has happy memories of her. I have other objects that do those things, but the china is a gift, a legacy, an inheritance that I am responsible for. My care for the china validates my grandmother as having lived a good life. It is a fairly small requirement, but a larger gift may be more difficult to manage.

Figure 3: My Grandmother's china in use at a family Christmas gathering. Holding on to the china bears witness to these events, her hospitality and care. We use our own plates at Christmas now.

My father was a keen sailor and wooden boat owner. He sailed both the Atlantic and the Pacific, and moved on retirement to a house where his boat could be docked at the end of his drive for much of the year. He loved the boat as much as the sailing. He was very proud of her and spent much of his free time and his free money repairing her. When he died he left the boat jointly to his five children in hopes that we would enjoy her too. But none of us had free time or free money. A wooden boat requires constant care. The repairs and other costs mounted and soon her costs outweighed her value. Could we find someone else with more free time and free money to take her on? No. We loved the remembrance of our father contained in the boat, but we couldn't continue to care for her. She was broken up, we each took a part to remember her (or was it my father) by.

Figure 4: My father's boat, the Gay Goose. He sailed her around the world but we couldn't preserve his adventures by preserving the boat.

Both of these examples are things which were valuable within one life, and given to the next generation for the joy they could bring. But their main value was as heritage. We honoured them as gifts, as links to previous generations. While we didn't love them in the same way our parents and grandparents did, we saw them as reminders of good lives. But not all heritage has that pleasant function. Heritage often preserves reminders of more complex pasts, even atrocities. When we give a gift like that, the burden may extend beyond the cost of care. Of course, such reminders serve useful functions for us, and may do for future generations. But when they come in the wrapper of heritage, we and they may feel an obligation to keep them no matter what they do.

A good example of this can be seen in the recent 'Rhodes must fall' campaigns at the University of Cape Town in South Africa and at Oxford in England. Cecil Rhodes gave a substantial amount of money to both universities and was honoured with statues in both places. In 2015 students and staff at the University of Cape Town drew attention to the way that the statue continued aspects of white supremacy and colonial thinking that had not been overturned with apartheid. They called for the removal of the statue as part of a programme of decolonialisation of the university (Kros 2015). Inspired by their example, and recently reminded of the role that Rhodes played in imperialist narratives, a mirror movement in Oxford called for the removal of their statue. The main argument against the removal was that it was heritage, that to remove the statue was to erase history. "A healthy culture does not cease to remember those with whom it has come to disagree. Rather, with the help of historians, it endlessly debates and revises its assessment of them" (Lemon 2016). According to those critical of the 'Rhodes must fall' campaigns, this endless debate clearly can't include removing memorials to people we no longer admire.

It could be argued that, in providing a focus for de-colonising thought, the statues serve a useful function beyond the intention of the original gift to the future. Certainly neither the activists in South Africa nor those in Oxford are the future generations that Rhodes, or his sculptor, had in mind. But, the response to the Oxford activism, that removing the statue is an attempt to whitewash the past also shows how our gifts can be successful in holding social relations in place, forestalling critical appraisal.

Beyond cynicism

So far in this paper I have argued that future generations hold an unreasonable burden in heritage discourse. In attempting to save the past for future generations we may be avoiding responsibilities to our own generation and creating further problems for those we paint as our benefactors. Earlier, I posited the work of future-gifting as a work of apology, atonement, and suggested possibility for moving beyond our current construction of *future generations*. It is tempting at this point to agree with Hocquenghem who writes in the same tradition as Edelman, discussed above:

"We do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement in the form of the future. We choose, instead, not to choose the Child, as disciplinary image of the Imaginary past or as site of a projective identification with an always impossible future" (Hocquenghem 1993, 138).

Hocquenghem does not construct the removal of the Child from future discourse as an act of social revolution, but as a reality-check; an act of reflection on the hubris of future-building. He calls on us to base our work on caring for those people and places we live with now.

Refusing to choose the Child, refusing to create a gift for future generations neither requires nor allows a selfish or trivial approach to heritage. While the fantasies of future generations may be poorly examined, they are sincere sources of inspiration for many people trying to live a good life, they give moral structure to complex and worrying circumstances. As Adam and Groves state, "the continual reaching beyond what we are to explore what we might become is the dynamic that generates the narrative structure of our lives, giving them a kind of unity over time and, with it, overall ethical significance" (2007,

151). The present must project itself into the future for the sake of its own story-arc. Being curious and careful of the future and its people is enriching to us; but it requires that we perform acts of care in the present.

The anthropologist, Robbins, has recently laid out a challenge to study an anthropology of the good life (Robbins 2013). He asks us to focus our attention on how people understand and construct lives that they are proud of. Heritage future making practice, broadly conceived may be part of such a good life. While recognizing as Spennemann does, that the future can be an excuse for our relevance; and that the future generations formulation can be corrosive as I have argued here; that does not mean that we should dismiss heritage as future making practice. Recognising that futures are multiple and complex supports these practices, rather than simply pulling the rug from under them.

Many pasts, many futures

I've argued here that the future should not be imagined as grateful recipient of the heritage that we preserve today. It is not just that people want different things from the future but that futures are created in the present just as pasts are. We have been properly concerned with the morality of our actions in the present in relation to how they may create different futures; but we have paid less attention to how future making practice acts as a political force in the present. There are many reasons that people consider the future as an honourable beneficiary of our efforts. One of these is because transgenerational devotion functions as a focus for moral action. Caring for children is seen as more important than caring for other adults. Heritage envisioned as a gift to the future generations, is a gift to children. We should remember that gifts create obligation, and transgenerational gifts can be received as burdens. This infantilisation of the future is partly a domestication tactic. Facing into the uncertainty of the future is less frightening if we focus on our need to care.

Heritage policy that seeks to preserve things for future generations is only one aspect of heritage future making practice. The rhetoric itself may be used without serious consideration. It sounds good, it captures a sense of care and longevity that motivates many people to engage with heritage. If we look beyond this rhetoric to the practices it draws from we may find a richer more useful sense of the future.

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