Chapter 29
The Commodification of World Heritage: A Marxist Introduction

Thomas M. Schmitt

Abstract The commodification of World Heritage potentially takes place in various contexts or "markets", such as tourism markets, media markets, but also in the sessions of the World Heritage Committee as an inscription market. Loosely following Marxian categories, but based on a broader range of scholars, for example, from philosophical anthropology, several problem areas in the commodification of World Heritage can be distinguished: first, exploitation (e.g. of a World Heritage title, heritage values or of the environment of a site), second, alienation (of residents and visitors towards a site, or between residents of a site and its visitors) and, third, a possible "fetishism" around the title. The article offers a systematic conceptual approach for the analysis of commodification phenomena related to heritage and especially the World Heritage system.

Keywords World Heritage · Commodification · Critical theory · Alienation · Heritage tourism · Heritage studies

29.1 Introduction

The World Heritage List is devoted to the preservation of outstanding cultural artefacts, natural features and wildlife and also to the mutual understanding of humanity. According to these idealistic ascriptions, there should not be any place for the commodification of World Heritage. However, this might be perceived as a problem, for example, in the context of tourism at World Heritage sites, but also regarding negotiations within the World Heritage Committee which are not only driven by scientifically based or universalist ethical arguments. The aim of this paper is (1) to offer fundamental concepts for an understanding of commodification processes, (2) to discuss the appropriateness of their application in World Heritage and (3) to discuss possible solution approaches and their limits. The systematic presentation of this nexus of heritage and commodification is preceded by a brief literature review

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on this topic. For reasons of logical coherence, the broader spectrum of heritage studies is considered here. A first hypothesis, which must always be empirically tested, is that corresponding problems are potentially aggravated at World Heritage sites.

Within heritage studies, phenomena that can be associated with the term commodification are discussed in the context of tourism valorisation and branding, e.g. for sites, in particular. The majority of the relevant literature does not use the term commodification but related terms, such as commercialisation, valorisation, marketing/marketisation or branding, which are not necessarily identical. Since the 1970s at the latest, the change of cultural traditions – interpretable as intangible heritage – and of local settings, such as around historical monuments, occurring as a result of adaptations to the interests of the tourism industry and the supposed needs of tourists, have been critically discussed (cf. MacCannell, 1973; UNESCO, 1975; Tangi, 1977; Vorlaufer, 1999). In 1977, Tangi distinguished three major areas that may be affected by tourism, namely the "natural environment", the "man-made environment" (i.e. the built environment or cultural landscapes, including the preservation of historic monuments and sites) and the "socio-cultural environment", including the commercialisation and banalisation of socio-cultural traditions.

This simple systematisation is still helpful today in order to structure the now unmanageably extensive literature on the nexus of heritage and tourism from a factual point of view. The Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1972) have repeatedly analysed problems of tourism at World Heritage sites and tried to address standards for sustainable, environmentally and socially compatible tourism (ICOMOS, 1999; IUCN, 2011).

As traced by Dicks (2003), the formation of British heritage studies in the 1980s can also be understood as a reaction to the increasing marketing of historic sites and local traditions by the "heritage industry", whose products were seen as "fantasies of a world that never was" (Hewison, 1987, 10). The widespread "marketisation" of heritage in the U.K. since the Thatcher era has been interpreted as a neoliberal strategy of restructuring the national economy; the educational mission of heritage institutions is being undermined in new kinds of "heritage centres" in favour of a market-like representation of the past (Lumley, 1988; Walsh, 1992; Dicks, 2003). In her influential essay *Theorizing Heritage*, the U.S. anthropologist B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995, 369) even called heritage as "a 'value added' industry": "Heritage produces", according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "the local for export". Undoubtedly, this essay had a stimulating effect within the emerging field of heritage studies. However, the author of this chapter explicitly does not share the equation of heritagisation and economic valorisation, i.e. commodification, suggested by the essay's formulations.

In numerous publications, the World Heritage List and comparable institutions are interpreted as brands, for example, in applied publications with a tendency towards affirmative and other publications with neutral to critical connotations (Hall & Piggin, 2003; Quack & Wachowiak, 2013); a tourist (mis)understanding of the World Heritage List thus prevails here. In a critical reflection, the question of how

this brand understanding of the World Heritage List affects our perception of World Heritage sites arises, as discussed below in Sect. 29.4.

There is a vast body of literature on the nexus of heritage, on the one hand, and tourism, marketisation, commercialisation and branding, on the other (Bendix, 2018), the review of which exceeds the scope of this short contribution. The term *commodification,* however, is rarely explicitly used in heritage studies. A noticeable part of the contributions that use this term – by no means all of them; Bui and Lee (2015) – explicitly draws on theoretical concepts from the Marxist theoretical tradition or Critical Theory (Walsh, 1992; Henning, 2006; Smith, 2007; Baillie et al., 2010; Aggenbach, 2017; Su, 2015). Between these contributions and the present introduction, which aims to develop the topic of the commodification of (World) heritage systematically, by drawing on these theoretical traditions, there are thus recognisable content-related affinities.[1]

29.2 Relations of Commodification and Heritagisation: A Conceptual Framework

The word *commodification* is derived from Latin and contains the noun *commoditas* (commodity) and the verb *facere* (to make), thus expressing the concept that something is made into a commodity. Commodification as a social phenomenon has accompanied civilisation for several thousand years. In a more specific sense, the term commodification is used when objects that were previously not treated as goods, or only to a small extent, are now (also) traded as goods according to market principles. A core idea of critical observation of commodification processes is that the objects – e.g. World Heritage sites in our case – change significantly in their social perception, functioning and associated social practices due to commodification.

Several "markets" can be distinguished, in which World Heritage or at least specific goods relating to World Heritage are negotiated. These include the following:

- *Tourism markets*: Cities or regions compete for tourists and the money they spend. The World Heritage title is used in marketing a city or region as a destination or in advertising a tourism product associated with the site.
- *Location markets*: Cities or regions compete for the attention of investors, skilled labour or state subsidies, where a World Heritage title can be used for location branding.
- *Media markets*: Sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List or the list as a whole are the focus of numerous media, such as books, films or photo calendars.

[1] The author of the contribution would like to clarify that he does not see himself as a Marxist; in particular, he does not share ontological positions of Marxism. However, for the discussion of commodification, as for numerous social phenomena, Marxism and especially Critical Theory offer substantial starting points.

- *Markets for movable goods*: Movable cultural goods, for example, wild animals, ivory or fossils, are extracted (as a rule illicitly) from World Heritage sites and traded.
- *The inscription market*: The World Heritage Committee is the central body that decides on the inscription or non-inscription of sites on the World Heritage List, and, from a certain perspective, the sessions of the Committee might be conceptualised as inscription markets, as discussed below in Sect. 29.3.3.

The concept of commodification is theorised in more depth in the next section. What has been said so far is sufficient to develop a formal analytical framework that explicates possible relationships between heritagisation and commodification (See Fig. 29.1). Heritagisation is understood here as the signifying practice whereby social institutions (such as the World Heritage Committee) or collectives recognise an object or phenomenon as "heritage", whether in a formal or informal way. Such an object could be, for instance, a single building like Notre Dame Cathedral or a cultural landscape or a nature reserve like the Serengeti. From a formal point of view, heritagisation and commodification can be understood as comparable processes in which additional meanings are attributed to objects, and additional practices are assigned to them.

Both are analytically separable phenomena that can run parallel but do not necessarily have to do so (cf. the discussion above on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995). The protection of historical monuments or natural areas, for example, is not automatically economically motivated, but can be – this would be the ideal systemic case – due to "intrinsic" motivations of monument and nature conservation or other "extrinsic" but not economic motives, such as nationalist objectives of stabilising identities and power by recourse to a selected past.

With the official designation of such an object as heritage, defined significances or heritage values are attributed to it; in the case of World Heritage, this is done

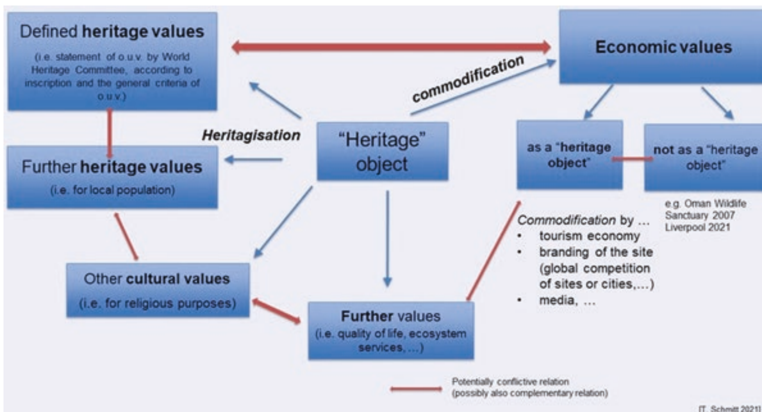

Fig. 29.1 Heritagisation and commodification – a conceptual framework. (*Note.* [Chart] prepared by the author, T. Schmitt 2021)

through the statement of outstanding universal value (OUV). In addition, this heritage object may be associated with other heritage values or significances, such as personal or collective memory values. These two types of heritage values/significances are not coherent in all cases and at least occasionally conflictive. This also applies to other cultural significances of the property. A listed church or synagogue is, for example, often perceived not only as a monument but also, in its original primary functions, as a place of prayer. The heritagisation of the monument may often be a *conditio sine qua non* for its long-term preservation, but, at the same time, heritagisation changes its primary perception and the way it is dealt with. Heritage objects can also have other values ascribed to them, such as protected rainforests which have the function of CO_2 storage; in economised terms: forests provide ecosystem services.

Heritage objects can also be *commodified* in the sense that they can be assigned *economic values*. This can be done (1) by abstracting or negating their heritage significances. The most striking example within the history of the World Heritage Convention is the Oman Wildlife Sanctuary, which the Omani government dedicated to oil production in the 2000s rather than maintaining it as a nature reserve and World Heritage site. On the other hand (2), it is precisely the (World) Heritage title that can be economically valorised, for example, for the tourism economy or location branding, and here we are dealing with the commodification of (World) Heritage in the narrower sense.

It remains to be said that all these different value attributions can stand in a potentially conflicting relationship in this framework, but they could potentially also complement each other. Which relationships – conflicting or complementary – are realised must be analysed separately for each individual case.

29.3 Theoretical Aspects of Commodification and Their Transfer to (World) Heritage

In this section, the concept of commodification and the attempt to transfer it to World Heritage will be elaborated in more detail. It is hard to talk about commodification meaningfully without looking at Karl Marx's philosophy and political economy, which have significantly influenced subsequent thinking on this subject (see Ibe & Lohmann, 2005; Watts, 2009), including non-Marxist thinkers like Karl Polanyi. Three key terms used by Marx are to be discussed in our context: exploitation, alienation and commodity fetishism. They are first briefly introduced in the following in a Marxian sense and discussed with reference also to non-Marxist thinkers from the social sciences and humanities. The sub-sections each conclude with a discussion of the extent to which these concepts can be usefully transferred to the field of heritage and specifically to the implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

29.3.1 Exploitation

Exploitation can be understood in a general sense as a condition in which, for the benefit of one person (or institution, collective, organisation), other persons (or institutions, collectives, organisations, animals) are unfairly harmed (Zwolinski & Wertheimer, 2017). In Marx's analysis of capitalism, the capitalist exploits the worker by paying him a wage that allows him to live only at a subsistence minimum, while the capitalist siphons off the surplus value of labour for himself. Labour itself becomes a commodity, which is traded on labour markets where the capitalist is undoubtedly de facto in the dominant position; exploitation is not primarily the result of individual malice but is a structural phenomenon. The concept of exploitation was later transferred to other areas, such as the exploitation of women by men or the exploitation of nature (Zwolinski & Wertheimer, 2017). In this respect, it seems legitimate to transfer the concept of exploitation tentatively to the fields of heritage and World Heritage. The common denominator of different understandings of exploitation is the idea of a parasitic relationship or a harmful, instrumental utilisation of a person, an animal, a resource or a system to one's own advantage (Zwolinski & Wertheimer, 2017).

In such a sense, one possible form of exploitation of a heritage site or the World Heritage idea would be persons, companies, organisations or governmental bodies trying to make financial, social or symbolic profit from the title or the prominence of the site without paying attention to its adequate protection or other legitimate interests, such as those of the local population. This could be done by (1) not providing sufficient financial, human and material resources to protect the site or (2) deliberately allowing, seeking or encouraging overuse of the site, for example, through tourism, at the risk of damaging its material substance, socio-culture or environment. (3) On the global level, the World Heritage system could be exploited for national prestige or personal careers (diplomats, perhaps also scholars researching on heritage). The "profit" of the social actors at the expense of World Heritage would be financial income (especially tourism-generated) or, e.g. in the increase of personal, regional or national symbolic capital.

In the introduction, the thesis was put forward that problems of the commodification of heritage are particularly evident at World Heritage sites. With surveillance by the international community and specific instruments such as the List of World Heritage in Danger, the World Heritage system has, on the other hand, a strong potential to respond appropriately to such local undesirable developments. It would be the task of a site-specific assessment to judge to what extent World Heritage is affected by local forms of exploitation. However, the instrument of the List of World Heritage in Danger is not applied consistently, as national delegations often pull out all the stops to prevent an entry on the Danger List (Schmitt, 2009, 117–118).

29.3.2 Alienation

The second essential phenomenon of commodification for Marx is the socio-cultural phenomenon of the alienation of the worker. This initially manifests itself as the alienation of the worker from the object, the product of his labour and the labour process. This forces the worker not to perform the work in a self-determined way but only by fulfilling given norms. According to Marx's analysis, this first alienation from the product of labour is immediately followed by (1) alienation of the worker from nature (as the material basis of commodity production), (2) alienation from oneself, (3) alienation from the human species and (4) alienation from concrete fellow human beings, who are only regarded as a means of securing life and satisfying needs (Marx 1844/2018a, 183). Marx borrowed the concept of alienation from G.F. W. Hegel and applied it to the realm of economics; previously, Jean-Jaques Rousseau had asserted a self-alienation of human beings through the artificiality of culture (Barth, 1959, 21). After Marx, the concept was taken up in philosophical anthropology and within the Christian theologies (Schrey, 1975; Zima, 2014). The core element of all meaningful concepts of alienation is a separation between a subject and an object, whereby this object can also extend to the entire environment or refer to itself. This separation does not have to be subjectively conscious but can also be stated from the outside (Leopold, 2018; Zima, 2014, 3). Alienation is usually assessed as extremely disadvantageous. Many authors no longer (exclusively) attribute alienation to capitalism but interpret it, for example, as an effect of rationalisation and modernisation processes, postmodern constellations and civilisational mechanisms in general (Schrey, 1975; Zima, 2014).

To what extent can the concept of alienation be meaningfully applied to the field of heritage/World Heritage? Let us start by looking at tourist visitors as well as residents at a World Heritage site. The latter, in its cultural meanings or its "natural" aspects, can certainly represent something "foreign" for visitors, perhaps also for residents of the surrounding area, and this experience of foreignness should not necessarily be equated with a negatively evaluated alienation according to the above explanations.[2] This sense of foreignness is potentially productive; it also prevents a hasty nostrification, for example, of the remnants of a past cultural epoch or even of a "wild" nature.

While newly awarded World Heritage titles meet with an extraordinarily positive response in many countries, at least in the published opinion of regional media, cases have been documented in which an award of a title meets with indifference or even rejection (Schmitt, 2011, 306). Representatives of indigenous groups, in particular, describe the World Heritage designation as a form of expropriation of their own cultural traditions by national stakeholders and the international community (Disko & Tugendthat, 2013, 16); this experience can be understood as a form of alienation from their own cultural resources by the World Heritage system. In these contexts, it is not commodification that creates a potential alienation situation, but

[2] See Landmann (1975) on the general relation between "the foreign" and "alienation".

the official heritagisation or the confrontation of locally and globally different cultural patterns.

It is now conceivable that the commodification of World Heritage sites could trigger even more serious alienation processes. Such alienation can be loosely coupled with exploitative economic structures, for example, of employees in the tourism economy, but it is analytically separable from them as a socio-cultural and existential-psychological problem and potentially affects a larger group of people than, for example, precariously employed people. Alienation in this sense can concern (1) the relation of local residents to the site and (2) of external visitors/tourists to the site but also (3) between and among residents and visitors and (4) self-alienation effects. Alienation in this context can mean that people are not able to "access" a site – in a phenomenological sense rather than in the sense of physical accessibility; they do not understand its cultural and natural features and significances (anymore). Alienation can further affect the relationship between visitors and local people or between different members of the local population, as potentially all social relations at the site are subordinated to the dictate of its commodification. This reflects Marx's spectrum of meaning, in which alienation can refer to things, nature, other people and oneself.

Black and white images should be avoided in such analyses: A certain degree of commodification is often a positive prerequisite for generating income that enables regional development and the adequate protection of a heritage site. Moreover, not every market interaction necessarily poisons the social relations between the participants. Many readers will probably be able to cite experiences of positive human exchange associated with market interactions from their travels to (World) Heritage sites. It seems to be an elementary prerequisite that tourist visitors do not ignore the economic disparity that usually exists between them and a large part of the employees, e.g. in the service sector; it is part of socially good relations that this disparity is alleviated. Conversely, it is known from experimental economics that simulated market situations, such as those emulated by stock exchanges, lead to an erosion of ethical behaviour, which can be understood as a form of self-alienation (Falk & Szech, 2013). Thus, if the economy at a World Heritage site and therefore the social life is largely based on its commercialisation, this will have potentially serious negative social and psychological effects. In principle, corresponding problems are now recognised in the World Heritage system: "World Heritage conservation and management strategies that incorporate a sustainable development perspective embrace not only the protection of the OUV, but also the wellbeing of present and future generations" (UNESCO, 2015, 2). This gives rise to a responsibility of the World Heritage Committee that goes beyond conservation issues.

29.3.3 Commodity Fetishism

In addition to exploitation and alienation, another Marxian concept relating to commodification became famous in the critical social sciences, namely the *fetish character of the commodity* (Marx, 1867/2018a). This occurs when a product no longer appears to people as the result of human labour but as a thing whose properties are presented as external and natural. The *exchange value*, the price, detaches itself from the *use value*. Contemporary readers can exemplify this by looking at branding: a brand is symbolically charged and filled with emotion, detached from the concrete usefulness of the objects. Marx (1867/2018b, 332, 337) makes a comparison here with religious categories: a commodity is only "at first sight a trivial thing", but "full of metaphysical subtleties and theological capers" surrounded by "magic and phantoms". Referring to these arguments, Michael Watts (2009, 99) states, "It is as if our entire cosmos, the way we experience and understand our realities and lived existence in the world, is mediated through the base realities of sale and purchase. Virtually *everything* in modem society *is* a commodity". Thus, one may assume that (partially) unconscious hegemonic patterns of understanding at least partially influence our perception of World Heritage. The inscription, the World Heritage designation, would then be the equivalent of the fetish around which all activities and efforts revolve, be it acquiring the title (through appropriate nomination dossiers), maintaining it (through preservation measures) or communicating about World Heritage. The heritage values that art historians or, for example, nature conservationists appreciated about a site, and whose reception had initially drawn attention to it, fade then into the background – analogously to the *use value* in relation to the *exchange value* in Marx's theory. Whereas Marx developed the idea of fetishism from a consideration of cultural phenomena and transferred it to the economy, the preceding considerations again transfer it back to the realm of culture.

The previous remarks had shown the theoretical possibility for a "commodity fetishism" around the World Heritage title. In an ethnographic study of the World Heritage Committee in the 2000s, the author described "[r]eciprocal expectations and claims of national states" (Schmitt, 2009, p. 117; Schmitt, 2011). Meskell (2015, 3) speaks for the 2010s of, marked as a euphemism, "gifts and exchanges on a global stage". The World Heritage Committee appears here as a

> global marketplace where the inscription of heritage properties is prized more for its capillary transaction potentials than its conservation values. World Heritage Committee debates (…) are becoming largely irrelevant in substance, yet highly valued in state-to-state negotiations and exchanges of social capital. (Meskell, 2015, 3)

This and similar assessments,[3] insofar as they are accurate, can be interpreted as an expression of a partial "commodity fetishism" within the World Heritage system. In the 2000s, the author had recognised corresponding tendencies but had seen them limited by the desire for the hegemony of – however justified – scientific positions

[3] See Brumann, 2011, and Brumann & Meskell, 2015 for further readings.

in Committee decisions (Schmitt, 2009, 117). Some delegations, such as the Algerian delegation, deliberately evaded the expectation to increase the number of their own World Heritage sites for reasons of national prestige and decided to ensure better protection of existing sites before increasing the quantity (Schmitt, 2011, 228). If one leaves the scientific observer's perspective and asks for practical solutions, the attitude of the Algerian delegation at that time reveals probably the most difficult *remedy* for such commodity fetishism: self-restraint. The global public cannot rely on this alone: Academia, media, NGOs, advisory bodies and the UNESCO administration have the task of critically reflecting the work of the Committee in this regard.

29.4 Summary

The article attempted to present a systematic outline of the nexus of commodification and (World) Heritage, as far as this is possible in the limited scope of a book chapter (see Table 29.1). Table 29.1 also takes into account "markets" such as the tourism market and media markets (or the media presentation of World Heritage), which were dealt with in greater detail, based on approaches of Critical Theory, in earlier versions of this paper.[4]

This contribution took a conceptual starting point in central ideas of Marxian thinking on commodities, namely exploitation, alienation and commodity fetishism, which were also taken up outside the Marxist tradition, for example, in philosophical anthropology, and applied to social and cultural phenomena beyond economic production. In this respect, it seems permissible and promising to use

Table 29.1 Possible aspects of commodification in heritage-related markets – a heuristic assessment

Heritage related markets Aspects of commodification	**Inscription** market (the World Heritage Committee)	**Tourism** markets	**Media** markets	Markets for (illegal) **movable goods**
Socio-economic *exploitation inequalities*	Possibly favouring or tolerating	XX	(X)	X
Socio-cultural *alienation misunderstanding commodity fetishism*	Possibly favouring or tolerating XX	XX	X	X
Damaging of **physical-material** features of sites	Possibly favouring or tolerating	X		XX
Damaging of **environmental** features	Possibly favouring or tolerating	XX		X

Note. (X), X, XX: minor … major estimated relevance. [Table] prepared by the author, T. Schmitt, 2021

[4]This book chapter is based on a presentation held at the online conference "50 Years World Heritage Convention" of the Institute Heritage Studies (June 2021).

these concepts tentatively as a lens for analysing the social embeddedness of the World Heritage system. The aspects of commodification were applied to different "markets", the "inscription market" of the World Heritage Committee on the global scale, tourism markets on the local/regional scale, as well as – drawing on approaches of Critical Theory – the question of representation of World Heritage in media. The problem of illegal trade in artefacts, animals and plants with a connection to World Heritage sites had to be left out of this article for reasons of space. The concepts used are suitable for naming and classifying the consequences of existing practices related to World Heritage – be it in the local tourism sector or, for example, in the global decision-making arenas.

Marxian concepts and partly also those of Critical Theory make a claim to totality, which is not adopted by the author. For the author, for example – until empirically proven to the contrary – the World Heritage Committee is not per se a pure bazaar for titles and national prestige but also the possible place of reasonable or engaged debates; in what mix this happens is a question for empirical research. Furthermore, tourism at World Heritage sites does not automatically lead to the exploitation of people and the environment and cultural content of the site but potentially to positive encounters in the sense of "sharing heritage", income for the local population and cultural understanding. The concepts used here are thus not intended to provide an inappropriately one-sided explanation of the empirical world; rather, these conceptual lenses can sensitise us to relevant problem areas. At the same time, it became clear that there are no one-dimensional solutions for the problem areas under consideration, but that possible solution strategies have to apply different levers, usually with a combination of structural changes, changed awareness and individual practices.

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