

## Rèplica/ Response

# Response to Scholarly Critiques on ‘Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Heritage Values Amidst Conflicts’

## *Resposta a les crítiques acadèmiques sobre «Construir, deconstruir i reconstruir els valors del patrimoni enmig dels conflictes»*

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The authors, Rouhani and Finlayson, express their sincere gratitude to the esteemed scholars for their thoughtful and invaluable responses to our article, ‘Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Heritage Values Amidst Conflicts.’ Zarandona’s very generous comments—at least on the first two sections of our paper—are extremely kind.

The article aims to highlight the fluidity of cultural heritage by shedding light on its political, social, and economic dimensions, challenging the notion of universal values often attributed to heritage by international organisations and field ‘experts.’

Although the concept of universal value was formalised in the 1972 World Heritage Convention, it has deeper historical roots and broader implications for how cultural heritage is perceived globally by states, policymakers, and the media. Zarandona rightly identifies several examples of negative heritage sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, challenging our statement about the absence of such sites repre-

senting conflict and trauma. While we are aware of these inscribed sites, a 2021 study by Beazley and Cameron, commissioned by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, confirms that after four decades of listing, only 18 sites fit the broad category of those associated with recent conflicts or divisive memories, representing just 1.6 percent of the total sites at the time of the study (Beazley and Cameron 2021). Our article does not focus specifically on World Heritage listing and its gaps.

Rico’s comments on negative heritage address a different aspect than the main observation in our paper where we refer to her 2008 publication. In her comment here, Rico focuses primarily on the differing perspectives on heritage, emphasising that when values are challenged by some stakeholders, it ‘can only indicate that the value is not universally accepted’. She argues that negative heritage plays a role in disrupting the notion of universal heritage values. Our use of the term aligns more closely with Zarandona’s perspective, in which heritage is not universally positive, but instead can commemorate conflict and trauma, rather than focusing on whether the value of a heritage site itself is challenged or contested. In this regard, Zarandona’s example of the Historic Centre of Mexico City and Xochimilco World Heritage Site is an excellent case where the WHS combines Aztec temple and colonial cathedral and the inscription is entirely positive, with its outstanding universal value summed up by UNESCO as: ‘From the 14th to the 19th century, Tenochtitlan, and subsequently, Mexico City, exerted a decisive influence on the development of architecture, the monumental arts and the use of space first in the Aztec Empire and later in New Spain.’ (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1987)

In our paper, we argue that the international conventions protecting cultural heritage, such as the World Heritage Site inscriptions, emphasise heritage as a universal good (albeit not exclusively). We fully agree with Zarandona that this baseline assumption can often overlook the conflict and trauma that such sites may represent for local communities. Where we differ is in our argument that the negative connotations of these sites, while significant, are often not the primary reason for their inclusion. In fact, the trauma is frequently overlooked in the WHS listing. For instance, in the case of Mexico City, we also observe that the images selected on the WHS website predominantly feature the colonial cathedral, with only a few showing the ancient canal system. There are no images of the Aztec temple. The trauma and conflict associated with the site are not intentionally memorialised, and the political dimension, while very real, is largely overlooked.

The 1987 article by Batalla mentioned by Zarandona critiqued an authority-centred definition of cultural heritage nearly 40 years ago. Clearly, there was something in the air, even if Batalla's article was not widely recognised, as the World Archaeology Congress was debating many related issues in 1986 (see Byrne 1991 for a short summary of these debates). We continue this debate today not due to a failure of academic discourse, but because of the continuity in practice, what Rico has seen as 'the preservation of authorities' where good intentions are often not realised (Rico 2017: 48). Alternative approaches to heritage management and universal significance do exist, but these ideas do not always reach heritage practice (Byrne 1991).

The commentators have expressed some disagreement with our statements. Zarandona, for instance, disputes our assertion that 'we typically view cultural heritage as inherently positive and worthy of protection from external threats, embracing universally accepted values.' Drawing from his academic experience, he points out that 'we always tell our students that heritage is always political and therefore contested'. Similarly, Rico critiques the authors' 'prolific' use of 'we' and 'our' in the article, suggesting it assumes compliance and acquiescence, reinforcing a hegemonic global heritage discourse that overrides other voices, thus contributing to the universalisation and homogenisation of heritage. Unfortunately, this somewhat misses the mark. Far from being prolific, we use these words almost exclusively in the first page of our argument ('our' only crops up three times in the entire paper), where we are commenting on the idea that there is an assumption of shared values that have been used to create an international movement to protect cultural heritage. The rest of the paper goes on precisely to address this issue, including the need to reinvent the concept of 'Us' (Rico 2017: 49).

We acknowledge and appreciate that the field of heritage studies has engaged in serious debates on the concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse and the universality of values. Our article references several scholars who have contributed to deconstructing these assumptions over the past decades. However, the persistence of this assumption in decision-making circles, particularly at the state or international level, and the portrayal of heritage protection in the media suggest that these critical perspectives have not yet fully permeated beyond academic discourse. Numerous UNESCO projects continue to link cultural heritage with peacebuilding, and heritage reconstruction is frequently prescribed as a tool for societal reconciliation, particularly in the Global South, as evidenced by the post-conflict reconstruction ef-

forts in Mosul (Isakhan and Meskell 2019) and the restoration of Stari Most bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Greer 2010). It is within this context that the authors, Rouhani and Finlayson, argue that 'the value of protecting cultural heritage is a basic assumption of our modern time,' while also recognising the academic challenges to this expert-driven, global heritage regime.

As Rico rightly notes, even as experts, funders, and heritage agencies recognised the need to engage with stakeholders, this brought new complexities and obstacles. Our own practical experience in Southwest Asia has illustrated many of the tensions that arise, where the experts may be constrained by the way funds are distributed, with budgets delivered by Western governments with rules dictating who can apply, the specialist language that must be used, and how those budgets can be distributed. It is no secret that one of the motivations behind international heritage funding is soft power, and the theoretically well-informed and morally well-intentioned practitioners may have to struggle to resist becoming a soft power agent rather than an equal partner with indigenous stakeholders. In the UK, allowing academics to apply for funds targeted to support cultural heritage in the Global South as part of Official Development Assistance (ODA) allowed the government to double count two protected budgets—research and development—while simultaneously (re-)establishing very colonial dependencies by stressing where expertise, funding, and even agency are situated. Such scenarios are common in many international relationships. The British Council's Cultural Protection Fund provided a much more progressive context, where applicants did not have to be British and where academic value was not part of the application assessment.

However, the questions raised by Rico in her 2017 chapter on 'Stakeholder in practice, "Us" and "Them" and the problem of expertise' are extremely valid in the Southwest Asian context, where states frequently use heritage to promote the idea of the modern nation-state, appropriating or destroying minority heritage as required for the overall objective. Local (national) experts view themselves as stakeholders, where World Heritage is very much the business of national governments. Contrastingly, minority non-expert voices may view local experts in much the same light as international experts, all working in the same university-educated, generally metropolitan, and ultimately Western-derived traditions, which are repeatedly reinforced by external funding, whether driven by aid or tourism. Despite increasing localisation of heritage management, the protection of heritage sites often still involves

the removal of local community members or, at the very least, greater restrictions on their lives. While these actions are ostensibly taken to ‘protect’ the heritage, they also reinforce issues of agency, power, and control over tourism income.

Rico’s insightful discussion of language and the dominance of English in global heritage discourse and Zarandona’s references to Guillermo Bonfil Batalla and García Canclini, resonate with our own experience. As Rico noted, they wrote their response in English instead of their native Spanish. Similarly, Rouhani had to write in English instead of Persian. This underscores a larger issue within the field—the hegemony of English not only limits the diversity of perspectives but also restricts the multiplicity of voices and narratives that could otherwise enrich heritage discourse. The six official languages used by UNESCO all share imperial hegemonic roles and while six may be better than one, as Rico notes under-represented scholars are pushing back against the dominance of English and European languages (four of the six) and the value of other languages to reflect a multiplicity goes well beyond these six.

Devji offers a deeply thoughtful contribution and introduces an important new perspective by situating the concept of ‘humanity’ within the frameworks of colonialism and humanitarianism. Central to his argument is the notion that heritage becomes the infrastructure of humanity and the idea of universal terms, which dehumanise humanity by forgetting the ‘varied and changing ways that humanity has been conceptualised’ by different people and societies over time. He highlights the way in which these frameworks, driven by humanistic principles, often construct communities in the Global South as ‘voiceless’—a process mirrored in how cultural heritage is objectified and cast as a victim within a globalised paradigm. This imposes an apparent moral imperative on the ‘international community’ to prioritise its preservation, often depoliticising heritage and reducing it to its material elements to foster a universal connection. This returns us to the difficulties of providing aid without re-estab-

lishing colonial relationships. Through his exploration of Gandhi’s writings, Devji challenges the contemporary understanding of humanity, suggesting that it is more rooted in biological ties than in moral ideals. This approach encourages us to reconsider the relationship between heritage, humanity, and the moral and political dynamics that shape them.

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