Erik Nemeth, Cultural Security. Evaluating the Power of Culture in International Affairs.


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This is a useful collection of writings on issues of great importance. The author has overreached, however, in claiming that they mark the constitution of a new field, ‘cultural security’, that “encompasses research, analysis and strategies aimed at mitigating exploitation of cultural property as a pawn in foreign relations, and as a tool in acts of political violence and terrorism” (p.40). The domains to be encompassed are multiple as well. They include the destruction and defacement of historic monuments or the looting of art objects during armed conflicts, whether between or within states, notably at the hands of religious fanatics or terrorist groups as is the case today. They also include the looting of art objects and artefacts during wartime or the theft from archaeological sites or museums of such objects in times of peace, as well as their smuggling to marketplaces in other countries. These are all topics that many other scholars have analysed already, but usually separately, in an abundant literature that the author has drawn upon fully. For the purposes of the present volume, the author has brought together ten of his previously published journal articles in order to make his case. Thus constructed, the writing is marred by a certain amount of avoidable repetition.

In order to frame the issues as embracing physical security as well as economic and political dimensions, Erik Nemeth’s writings analyse “threats to the security of cultural property (art crime), the financial value of cultural property (art market), and the role of cultural property in foreign policy (cultural diplomacy)” (p. xv). He writes as an impassioned advocate, addressing himself principally to policy makers in the United States of America and within an American perspective of almost Wilsonian internationalist idealism. Indeed it is from the American academy that the recognition that ‘culture’ can be instrumentalised as a security issue originally emerged and since then it has become a familiar trope in culturalist interpretations of international relations, albeit principally connected to identity politics, in other words the ways in which ethnic differences and identities have been and continue to be exploited by political entrepreneurs of various stripes. Applying the notion

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1 It must also be said that most of the literature on these topics is by American legal, historical and heritage scholars.

of security to the rather different matters discussed by the author is problematic in several ways, as will be explained below.

The author’s message is both normative and instrumental. On the normative plane, he writes in the name of global heritage doctrine on the cultural patrimonies of states as embodied in UNESCO’s 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. On the instrumental level, the author argues that the US authorities (and by extension other ‘market nations’ as he terms them) should be far more proactive against the global ‘bads’ targeted in these and other international treaties, since this would boost their cultural diplomacy and help them to attain soft power. While the first of these positions is laudable and the second tenable, the author does something of a disservice to his cause by attributing ideological and security related causes or motivations to the phenomena of looting, theft and destruction.

The first section of the book explores the history of such threats. The opening chapter reveals right away what is problematic about the approach. On the one hand, it offers a clear analysis of the principles underlying international conventions adopted under the aegis of UNESCO in this field, together with their successes, failures and weak points. But on the other, so as to make facts on the ground fit his ‘security’ framework, the author attributes causality to the Cold War as an instigator of processes of illicit trafficking in movable cultural objects, whereas ideology itself was in no way a motivating factor. The events described did take place during the Cold War years, but in no way because of it. Nor, in the post-Cold War period, have such processes disappeared, on the contrary. A whole new range of destructive and looting behaviour, both between and within states, has emerged as a corollary of ethnic cleansing, religious extremism (reduced to the notion of ‘terrorism’ by the author) and insurgencies of various kinds. The theft or smuggling of artefacts is not designed as cultural humiliation of the Other per se but for financial gain – as indeed the author himself argues in other parts of the book.

There is a similar twist in the second chapter, which attributes ideological motivations to Nazi plunder during the Second World War, whereas there was no such object: the point was simply to appropriate the artworks for public as well as private collections in Germany, as has been demonstrated in many publications on the topic (most of which have been consulted and cited). Soviet plunder from Nazi Germany at the end of the War on the other hand, was indeed partly linked to the goal of gaining possession of artworks not necessarily for their intrinsic value but as a form of reparations. The chapter also presents the US Army’s efforts at the end of the Second World War, popularised by the recent film The Monuments Men, to recover and restitute to their countries of origin art objects looted by the Nazi leadership. It shows how today, intelligence agencies, belonging to the military or otherwise, need to anticipate the risk of threats to cultural property. Yet to describe

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4 The author also cites UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, but the phenomena he explores in this volume are connected with material or tangible heritage exclusively.
intelligence agencies as having become the ‘protectors’ of cultural property would
seem exaggerated, particularly when intelligence failures have been so evident in
this regard. The third chapter of this section, despite sticking to the ‘Cold War’
and ‘post-Cold War’ periodisation, deals well with the role art historians and other
scholars have played both in committing art crimes and detecting them, yet it also
overstates their independent agency – most of the time they have acted at the request
of governments or international organisations.

The second section of the book is similarly good in parts, like the proverbial
curate’s egg. The fourth chapter sees the collection of ‘cultural intelligence’ as the
initial building block for the mitigating strategies the author advocates. It usefully
sets out the main sources of such specialised knowledge: news reports in the
media, documentation processes initiated by scholarly institutions or on behalf of
international organisations such as UNESCO, the International Council of Museums
(ICOM), or Interpol, auction sale archives (with a highly informative set of tables
and graphs). It explores ways and means of investigating art world circuits, both
licit and illicit, notably criminal networks and the dealers who work with them.
While it offers no magic wand to penetrate this universe, it rightly identifies such
detective work as a source of evidence for a ‘pre-emptive strategy’. The fifth and
sixth chapters home in on the looting, trafficking and worldwide sale of African art.
Using data from art auctions, the ‘secondary art market’, the author presents and
reviews data that confirm that there has been a significant increase in sales volume
since 2001, together with a steady gain in market value and notes that “trends in
the art market may predict looting and trafficking” (p. 167). Somewhat dubious,
however, is his apparent assumption that all African art in the ‘market nations’ found
its way there illicitly. He also reiterates what most observers have long known,
namely that “foreign demand motivates the unearthing and sale of tribal art in host
countries” (p. 167). Apart from the fact that the term ‘tribal art’ is a strange one still
to be used nowadays, only a certain proportion of artefacts of African origin are
actually ‘unearthed’, i.e. come from archaeological sites. He also attributes to these
art flows, even if they are prohibited by the respective national laws, an exaggerated
role in “eroding cultural identity, fostering public-sector corruption, and providing a
source of revenue for insurgents” (p. 151) – obviously, such claims help justify the
‘cultural security’ label.

Be that as it may, the author rightly observes that the next step is to be in a position
to acquire direct intelligence on looting and the like. He sensibly recommends better
and more investigative work on gallery owners and arts dealers. He also imagines the
possibility of a ‘network of human assets’, that is, a corps of intelligence gatherers
in this domain, which would naturally be far more costly than simply mining the
information provided by auction house websites, as he himself has had to do. A deeper
exploration of auction sales data in the sixth chapter compares the market nations
of African objects compared to Western classical antiquities and pre-Columbian
artefacts. It argues that such knowledge would help market nations combat these
market flows “in the interest of foreign relations” and give them “predictive risk
assessments for looting of cultural patrimony in geographic regions that hold a
wealth in coveted cultural artifacts” (p. 192). The idea is that such assessments “will
inform countermeasures and cultural diplomacy” (p. 193).5

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5 Nowhere does the author challenge the assumption that cultural artefacts are the exclusive ‘property’ of the
The paradigm of cultural diplomacy facilitates the author’s transition to the third section of the book, entitled ‘Cultural Power – Emerging Political Clout of Cultural Property’. The argument here, if taken literally, would afford unwarranted agency to cultural property per se, but of course the author’s idea is that by helping combat one-way flows of cultural property from ‘source nations’ to market nations, authorities in the latter group can strengthen their soft power arsenal – in the manner of ‘Minervian’ international relations actors driven by the dictates of wisdom rather than those of realpolitik.6 He offers useful coverage of damage to cultural property in time of war, largely in past history but also including recent developments in Iraq. The chapter entitled ‘Art Intelligence Programs’, which picks up the thread of topics already raised in the preceding chapters, once again repeating facts and arguments already presented, calls for “insights into the role of cultural property in terrorist agendas” (p. 229), including stakes such as the income terrorist groups can earn by illicit trafficking or the performative political symbolism of the destruction they choose to wreak. The chapter reiterates the worthy ambition of providing the USA as well as EU countries with the kinds of anticipatory intelligence that, once acted upon effectively, would constitute a form of soft power (like many other writers, the author confuses the process of deploying certain cultural assets with a view to acquiring soft power with the mere possession of the assets themselves). It also presents the rather naïve belief that such action would impress the members of source nation diasporas in market nations, contribute to forging goodwill with immigrant populations or even “offset animosity engendered by economic competition and perceived disparities in material wealth” (p. 247). Another scarcely credible idea is that this will advance the cause of “accommodating cultural needs of local communities with Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic beliefs”, in turn contributing “to productive coexistence” (p. 246).

A brief ninth chapter argues the case for a proactive stance on the part of the United States of America. It also notes that Western nations have contributed more to the conservation of immovable cultural property in the ‘source nations’ than in preventing the looting and trafficking of movable cultural property there. The final chapter tries to argue that the “the politics of cultural property and economics of the art market (sic.) indicate a complement to hard and soft power” (p. 270). This is the ‘alternative power’ in the chapter’s title, for which the writings strung together in this volume all attempt to make the case.

Chief among the merits of this book is to bring together evidence and arguments on a wide array of threats, both past and present, to the integrity or ownership of cultural property. Such analysis is generally available only separately. The author is driven by a laudable commitment to combating the global ‘bads’ these threats represent, a cause to which any right-thinking person would readily subscribe. But his argument stumbles in attempting to force them all into his Procrustean bed of ‘security’.

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