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The Heritage Game: Economics, Policy and Practice
Alan Peacock and Ilde Rizzo
209 pages
Hardback

Written by two leading cultural economists, The Heritage Game is a forceful exploration of the various arguments that can be made for public investment in cultural heritage from an economist’s point of view. Its main focus is the value of economic analysis of the formulation and implementation of heritage policy. Consequently, the authors deal with issues such as establishing economic reasons for public intervention, evaluating the demand for heritage, investment and performance appraisal, and the relationships between heritage institutions and the economy. Along the way, they debunk the over-emphasis within the heritage profession on professional judgement as the basis for rationalizing the need for public investment, arguing that this carries no favour amongst policy-makers and politicians and only makes the profession look elitist. Positioning themselves as friends of cultural heritage, the authors want to demonstrate to museum directors, historic-site managers and CEOs of various heritage bodies that economics provides a sounder base from which to make the arguments for public support of cultural heritage. As they put it, they thought it “worth trying to cure the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ that all too frequently arises from a lack of understanding of what economics can contribute to cultural heritage policy” (p. x). As one such deaf person, I took from the book a number of salutary lessons. I also took from it a number of frustrations, and in what follows I shall try to briefly cover both the lessons and the frustrations.

The most salutary reading was in the first few chapters, where I began to appreciate just how difficult it is to get hard economic data on the cultural heritage industry at any level of government, let alone data that might bear international comparison. Not that the problem is the heritage industry’s alone, for the fault lies as much in the lack of a common set of criteria for measurement between government bureaucracies as between different museums and heritage sites or organizations. There is no doubt, as the authors argue, that we are very bad at keeping statistics that might inform our arguments for public funding based on the ability to pinpoint the real economic contribution of the heritage industry. Figures are hidden within the general statistics for a range of industries, including the creative industries, leisure and recreation, or for government bureaucracies not usually associated with cultural heritage – for example, transport or military museums embedded in particular government departments. It is a difficult task to gather those figures together, let alone establish equivalences between them. There is also the public/private divide, which makes it hard to aggregate the total value of the cultural heritage industry given that these sectors answer to different financial imperatives. These problems are made more difficult by the lack of an agreed terminology as well as the nature of the labour force, a large proportion of which is made up of volunteers whose financial contribution cannot be quantified because there is no agreed method for doing so. These difficulties make it impossible to establish a national picture of the economic contribution of heritage, let alone develop international comparisons between Western countries. Getting a global picture is well nigh impossible.

Peacock and Rizzo seek to demonstrate both the need to address these difficulties and the value of doing so. Thus they show the value of various methodologies for specific tasks, such as the Contingent Valuation Method for establishing the demand for heritage, recognizing that this demand cannot be simply measured by box office success but includes what economists term non-use values. They also show that a basic grasp of economics can help one to understand the various styles of public intervention in the heritage industry, from outright full public subsidy (almost non-existent in Western countries) to no intervention at all, leaving it to market forces to shape the field. As a lesson in how governments approach the question, Chapter 6, The Practice of Public Intervention, is invaluable.

While finding ways to establish what the cost-benefit for the heritage industry might be is an important and useful correction to the over-emphasis on professional judgement as the basis for decision-making, there are some serious limitations arising from the frame of the book and the scope of its analysis. The narrow focus on developing arguments that might curry favour with politicians and policy-makers reflects a narrow understanding of what should be counted in as economic value. The arguments are mostly played out in terms of accounting for broad public support for public investment in heritage. In their desire for a more democratic basis for public decision-making than the elitism of connoisseurship, the authors fail to engage with developments in the heritage and museology fields themselves as well as those within public sector policy. The economic focus suggests a worrying lack of interest in engaging in such basic discussions as the contribution of heritage to the tourism industry beyond a rudimentary level. There is, fur-
thermore, no engagement with one of the issues that has always made it difficult to get public support for heritage-listing regimes that carry legal consequences – the perception that heritage listing has a negative impact on property values. Some decent analysis of whether or not this is so, and of whether listing increases value, would be extremely helpful. While there is some recognition that economic value might include non-use values, which the authors define from an economic perspective as existence, option and bequest values, there are many of us who would argue for a much broader understanding of the significance of heritage to society.

A more disappointing aspect of the work from the perspective of one of those deaf people is that no attempt was made to add an economic perspective to some of the most important debates now taking place within the museum and heritage fields – debates that have nothing to do with the traditional fields of connoisseurship. Two of these will serve to illustrate. The first is the growing recognition that the conservation of our heritage fabric may well have a role to play in the need to find sustainable building practices. Could there be an economic value, from the point of view of sustainability and the need to address global warming, in finding ways to recycle and adapt our built heritage? Can economists help us to identify what that value might be? The second comes from the increasing interest on the part of policy-makers in the value of the heritage industry in building social cohesion. In Britain alone, which is the base of one of the authors, there has been intense debate over the increasingly instrumentalist public policy that expects the Gallery, Library And Museum (GLAM) sector to address social and economic disadvantage in the bid to increase social cohesion. Can economists develop a methodology for estimating the value of the sector’s contribution to social cohesion via the ways in which they add to both social capital and social value? If cultural economists could work away at these problems, rather than at simply how to reflect either box office appeal or their disciplinary interpretation of non-use value in public policy, their contribution would be the greater.

With these issues in mind, it is difficult to know who the book is aimed at. Despite the authors’ clear desire to address it to managers of cultural heritage sites and museum directors, cultural heritage experts are likely to find that its approach to heritage issues is at a basic level and to find its advocacy of cultural economics unconvincing and rather tedious. Few economists will have much interest, and those already interested in the economics of culture will have little to learn from it. Public policy-makers may find it of more use, although most are already well versed in using economics to determine policy. What would be of most use to them is a clear explanation of other sources of value in relation to heritage so that they can make more thorough assessments of the value of heritage as a public policy instrument, such as for environmental and social issues.

The book is informative and helpful, but its old-fashioned understanding of the heritage field hinders it from engaging more usefully with the ways in which economic analysis might contribute to the efforts of the heritage industry to play a more vital role.

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