



THE BASIS OF THE THEORY OF CONSERVATION AS A PREREQUISITE FOR ITS APPLICATION. ON THE QUESTION OF EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE PRACTICE OF CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT: An integral part of theory, a prerequisite for its predictive and explanatory function, is its *empirical layer* - the generalization, sorting and explanation of empirical findings. The latter are also a guarantee of objective confrontability with the addressed area of reality and, consequently, of the theory's plausibility and applicability. The article deals with the fact that *in the theory of conservation the sources of knowledge of the phenomena addressed (the state of conservation) are insufficiently provided and mediated*. The analysis of the field practice is unsatisfactory. This is done in a number of forms, but especially by interpreting only subjective experience and also by theoretical research of a qualitative nature. What is absent, however, is *empirical research that is quantitative or quantitative-qualitative*, ideally on a *regional or national scale*.

By analysing a range of theoretical writings, both international and domestic (doctrinal documents, articles, concepts and strategies), the causes and consequences of the existing situation are outlined. As a solution, the author proposes the development of broader empirical research in 3 main research areas: *analysis of the state and quality (effectiveness) of conservation practice, economic analysis, analysis of the relationship of society to heritage sites*. The context of practice research for the needs of field theory are discussed, while the subject of the essay is in fact field *metatheory*.

KEY WORDS: Metatheory, empirical research, theoretical research, basis of theory, conservation practice

Introduction

The prerequisite for theoretical grasping of reality is first of all its sufficient knowledge and interpretation, which can be considered as its basis, frame of reference. This premise also applies to the theory of heritage conservation, not only in general, but also to each of its partial solutions to specific problematics. The theme of the conference is an example. Insight into the communication of professionals with other stakeholders in the heritage process needs an assessment of the state of practice. The related serious question about the nature of the expertness of the conservationist, and consequently about participation and the role of subjectivism in the conservation profession, will also not escape assessment according to the criterion of the reality of practice. Moreover, the expert may not be an individual person, but an entire institution. From an expert point of view, its authority should not be built only on individual experience and opinion, but on collective experience backed by research. At the same time, the search for the basis of conservation theory can be understood as a kind of communication between experts and other actors in the conservation process, especially if we do not understand communication in a narrowly interpersonal or interdisciplinary way¹.

In my article, I critically address the fact that in the theory of conservation, the sources of knowledge of the phenomena addressed (the state of conservation) are insufficiently provided and interpreted. The inadequacy of these key assumptions of theory has a number of causes and consequences². In principle, I am not criticizing the formation of the whole theory, all the stages of its conception, but I am questioning its most important input basis, from which it is developed - *the knowledge of the state of the field - the practice of conservation*. I derive this fact from analysing (verifying) the final form of the theory. I am actually concerned with the methodology of the formation of the theory of conservation, or also with the field *metatheory*³. In this "return to the roots" I logically struggle with clearly defining some of the basic terms and principles of the theory and methodology of conservation. I can only briefly outline these terms here⁴.

¹ These theses correspond to the objectives expressed, inter alia, in Articles 7, 11,13,15,17 of The Faro Convention. Council of Europe (2005). *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*. <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>

² This article is a follow-up to my earlier paper which addressed the issue of the lack of empirical research on heritage conservation from the perspective of general management of the field. However, it concretizes the problem for the process of forming a conservation theory. Jesenský V. (2020). *How do we know the state of heritage conservation? On the issues of analysis and self-reflection of conservation field*. https://www.academia.edu/44790391/How_do_we_know_the_state_of_heritage_conservation_On_the_issues_of_analysis_and_self_reflection_of_conservation_field_prezentace_na_konferenci_ACHS_2020

³ I am reluctant to call the issue part of the philosophy of conservation due to the vagueness of the term in the discourse.

⁴ Many of these terms (concepts) are apparently considered so well established, unproblematic or even irrelevant that they receive little or no attention and scrutiny in professional discourse. I leave the obvious related issues of other conceptual characteristics for further discussion, e.g. also in the TheoPhilos Committee.

The theory of conservation and its basis in the knowledge of the reality of practice

The definition of theory within the paradigm or systematics of conservation⁵ is not well defined in professional or research papers⁶. For the purposes of this text, *I consider conservation theory to be a consistent explanatory and predictive system of constructs (propositions, principles) dealing with the ideological basis, i.e. the essence (subject matter and fundamental basis) and goals of conservation (including the context of these categories)*⁷. In this narrower conception, a theory of conservation can be claimed as a scientific theory, not as a theory of a scientific discipline (which conservation is not) or serving only science, but as a scientifically elaborated one. What is important, however, is that the theory as defined must consistently cover the whole of conservation and not just highlight partial phenomena or, on the contrary, thematically loosen the theoretical paradigm. Only such a concept can responsibly define the goals of the field and thus become the basis of the methodology. Only such a theory can become an essential part of concepts, strategies, generally, deliberate direction of conservation.

Consequently, we can derive several characteristics relevant to the problem of the paper. The object of interest of the theory in question is conservation as a phenomenon. Its *object field is the formal and informal⁸ practice of conservation*⁹. The theory of conservation is not a theory of heritage objects or cultural heritage! An integral part of theory, a prerequisite for its predictive and explanatory function, is its empirical layer - the generalization, classification and explanation of empirical knowledge. To be credible and applicable, a theory must be objectively verifiable, confrontable with the area of reality being addressed¹⁰. To be concise and economical, a theory must make claims that are concentrated from as many examples as possible of the phenomena being explained and their connections. Only such theories are applicable - they can be the structure of our knowledge and ideas about reality, into which new information can be incorporated.

⁵ Here I simply understand *conservation* as a system of ideas, activities and subjects (including collective ones) involved in deliberate actions - dealing with heritage objects induced by the value relationship to material heritage objects and their context with the aim of developing their heritage values. In this text, *heritage objects* are considered to be tangible immovable objects and sites, including their furnishings, but not movable objects and collections.

⁶ If we look at the few synthetic works that have conservation theory as their main subject, we find only minimal characteristics of the theory as a concept and category. For example: Muños Viñas S. (2005). *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (p. 12). Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann. Otero-Pailos J. (Ed.) (2023). *Historic preservation theory : an anthology : readings from the 18th to the 21st century* (pp. 16-21). Design Books.

⁷ In a broader paradigmatic conception, theory can be defined as the sum of an ideological basis and the thought tools for its realisation (cognition and interpretation). By these basic tools I mean terminology, methodology (including the methodology of economics, legislation, management, research, education), history of the field, systematics (of heritage funds and institutions) and philosophy (ethics). For the definition and structuring of conservation theory, see Jesenský V. (2017). Co je teorie památkové péče. *Zprávy památkové péče*, 77(6), (pp. 621–632).

⁸ Clark K. (2019). *Playing wit the Past. Exploring Values in The Heritage Practice* (p. 17, 18). Berghahn.

⁹ This process has also been referred to as the transfer of professional experience. Šola T. (2005). What theory? What heritage?. *Nordisk Museologi* 2005 (2), (p. 7).

¹⁰ See falsifiability. Popper K. R. (1997). *Logika vědeckého bádání* (Fiala, J. Trans.). Praha: OIKOYMENH. (Original work published 1934).

Quantitative or quantitative-qualitative research plays an important role in the acquisition of empirical knowledge. Of course, reality can also be mediated by forms of theoretical research, deducing propositions on the basis of secondary data collection from literature and other interpretive sources using logic, comparison, etc.¹¹

The specific data and consequently information obtained should cover these *research areas*:

- *analysis of the state and quality (effectiveness) of conservation practice*
- *economic (cost-benefit) analysis*
- *analysis of the relationship between society and heritage objects*

Among other things, it is appropriate to distinguish theory from disciplinary *methodology*. The latter builds on the theory, applies the ideological basis or directly addresses the rules of conservation activity¹². Of course, the solution of methodology also requires sufficient knowledge of existing practice.

The state of knowledge and interpretation of the practice of conservation in its theory

The knowledge to address the issue has been drawn from a long-term examination of a wide range of sources. The following selective summary deals with the types of texts that are serious, have a wider reach, are accessible and whose claims to knowledge about the state of conservation practice are unquestionable¹³.

First of all, these are *international* (sometimes national) *doctrinal documents*¹⁴. Even though they are not theoretical scientific studies or reports on the state of conservation and have a primarily normative methodological function, they always refer to their professional competences and have a broad disciplinary validity. The above mentioned documents also assume the existence of a theoretical characteristic of the field in their orientation, and build on it, although they do not explicitly say so. From this perspective too, it is therefore reasonable to expect them to make appropriate arguments and to be backed up by a thorough knowledge of the state of the art in current conservation practice. The vast majority of these 56 documents also, albeit very briefly

¹¹ Of course, we are not referring here to theoretical knowledge and prior understanding as a primary part of empirical investigation.

¹² Put simply, if theory is concerned with the questions of what (or who) and why, then methodology is concerned with the question of how. There is, of course, some overlap between the two categories. The synthesis of conservation methodology is another complex, dynamic topic with a unique treatment. Jesenský V. (2017). Co je teorie památkové péče. *Zprávy památkové péče*, 77(6), (p. 627).

¹³ Needless to say, it is not a sufficient analysis of the theoretical and methodological discourse of the discipline, and it also includes texts of international and national scope. The question is to what extent a more complete analysis of the discourse of heritage conservation, without disqualifying generality, is within the power of the current research community. In addition to this A. Heritage, S. Golfomitsou (Eds.) (2015), *ICCROM FORUM on Conservation Science – Position Papers 2015*. ICCROM. <https://www.iccrom.org/publication/conservation-science>

¹⁴ 45 ICOMOS, 3 UNESCO, 5 EU (Council of Europe...) and 5 other documents were analysed. <https://www.icomos.org/en/resources/charters-and-texts>

and selectively, state this situation. However, with three exceptions, they never refer to any factual data or research to support this statement. At most, they sign up to other documents. If the argument should be the authority or even the experience of the authors of the texts, then it should be noted that, with 7 exceptions, no specific authors of the documents are mentioned or only vaguely and collectively (meeting participants, committee, etc.). Interestingly, at the same time, 21% of the documents call for research and monitoring of the practice of the field¹⁵! This is, among other things, a logical reaction to the undeniable generality and frequent thesis-like nature of the recommendations formulated in international documents, which are meant to accommodate a sometimes even global perspective and context. It is probably assumed that the application of the documents will be operationalised on the territory of the individual signatories (states) just according to the knowledge of the current domestic conservation practice¹⁶.

The most extensive source of the formulated theory of heritage conservation is *specialized published texts* (monographs, anthologies, individual articles)¹⁷. It can be summarized that in the given works empirical research affecting wider practice is practically not worked with or referred to, and the maximum scale of the addressed real phenomena is local, units of cases, narrowly defined local community, etc. Slightly more frequent references to real-world research can be found in the field of critical heritage studies, but their relationship and role in relation to practical conservation is still problematic¹⁸.

Also, the most succinct conclusion from a search of *domestic scholarly and research articles and papers*¹⁹ is that the National Heritage Institute (NHI) and conservation in the CR are generally above average in their research on heritage, but hardly at all in their research on the wider actual practice of conservation²⁰.

¹⁵ *The Florence Declaration on Heritage and Landscape as Human Values* (2014) even calls in point 5.1 c for a directive for this kind of research.

¹⁶ The Faro Convention is thus formulated in a univocal manner. (footnote 1)

¹⁷ Only a selective analysis of the content of some 30 monographs, a number of thematic proceedings, including the ICOMOS TheoPhilos proceedings, and many other individual published studies and articles has been undertaken.

¹⁸ However, within the framework of cultural heritage studies, research tends to focus on the behaviour and actions of communities, on the study of culture, and therefore tends towards ethnological or cultural-social anthropological research using qualitative methods. Jesenský V. (2021). Co může památková péče získat z critical heritage studies? *Zprávy památkové péče* 81 (3), (pp. 372-380).

¹⁹ In the national journal *Zprávy památkové péče*, other regional journal and collections, and even strategic documents and concepts formulated by the NHI - the guarantor of state heritage conservation in the Czech Republic. One conception is directly related to research: NPÚ (2023). *Dlouhodobá koncepce rozvoje výzkumné organizace Národní památkový ústav na léta 2024–2028*. https://www.npu.cz/portal/o-nas/veda-a-vyzkum/koncepce-dkrvo/koncepce-vo-npu-2024_2028.pdf

²⁰ While more than 130 (!) practice methodologies have been developed over the years in the context of NHI institutional research, their basis in practice analysis is absent or unrecorded in the texts. <https://www.npu.cz/cs/pamatkova-pece/o-pamatkove-peci/metodicke-materialy>

Despite the generally negative findings on more comprehensive empirical research into the practice of heritage conservation, it is important to mention that such research and theoretical, methodological and management documents and reports that directly use such research do exist²¹.

Interpretations of the state of conservation practice in use

What forms of characterisation and interpretation of the state of contemporary conservation practice are used in professional discourse, how are they defended and are they not somewhat proxy²²? Unfortunately, it is unexpectedly common that authors simply *do not deal with the justification of their theses* at all, and such an approach can hardly be described as heuristic. In many cases, *the research on heritage objects* (objects of conservation interest) *is presented as research on conservation itself* (the treatment of heritage objects). Some texts present *the knowledge of the historical situation as a direct explanation of the current situation*.

A more responsible and legitimate way of argumentation is the aforementioned *classical theoretical research*. The citation-based argumentation used in this context is confronted with the reality of the current enormous inflation of professional and scientific texts, as well as the diversity of opinions or their availability. Opinions are subsequently defended only by other opinions, not by reality research. The resulting theory is then objectivizable essentially only intersubjectively, in discussion, and its interpretive character is closely related to the role of authority. In addition to testability, the problem of theoretical formation of basis is the questionable generality of the theory, its effectiveness (applicability) and the possibility of generating a misleading methodology. This can be supported by the concept of bidirectional relationship defined in double hermeneutics²³. After all, the recommended hermeneutic approach²⁴ in principle presupposes a shift in knowledge through familiarity with the context of the existing claims in use. Isn't empirical research such knowledge of context?

There is one method that is supposed to make theoretical and methodological research argumentative, but that is why (not only because of that) it is a regular addition to it. These are *case studies*. However, it is important to note that these are considered qualitative research, tend to be narrowly focused on one or a few cases, and primarily explore internal complexity and

²¹ For example Walker M., Marquis-Kyle P. (2004). *The illustrated Burra Charter: good practice for heritage places*. Burwood: Australia ICOMOS. Bold J., Pickard R. (Eds.) (2018). *An integrated approach to cultural heritage - The Council of Europe's Technical Co-operation and Consultancy Programme*. Council of Europe. On a regional and partly national scale, the older research of the author of the article can be an example. It was an analysis of the implementation of research and documentation of immovable heritage objects within the conservation practice in Central Bohemia and the provision of these activities throughout the NHI. Jesenský V. (2004). *Operativní průzkum a dokumentace nemovitých památek*. Doctoral thesis. FA ČVUT, Prague. To the sources of knowledge analysed can be added the author's personal experience of many years of practice and debate within the NHI.

²² The answers are the result of content analysis of the above sources.

²³ Giddens A. (1987). *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (pp. 20-21). John Wiley & Sons.

²⁴ For example Walter N. (2020). *Narrative Theory in Conservation. Change and Living Buildings* (pp. 130-140). Routledge.

relationships. While the cases dealt with are also intended to serve as instrumental to broader explanations, in the scientific discourse of conservation, case studies are usually used more as illustrations or interpretations of an already formed view of a particular phenomenon. However, they cannot address its representativeness and significance. A more substantial modification of the theory could be aided by collective case studies, but these do not appear in the discourse.

The author's subjective experience and authority remains the most common form of justification in favour of certain statements about conservation. The contradiction is that such experience and authority is not directly documented or specified in the texts, and can be diametrically opposed. To some extent, this also applies to institutions. A similar uncertainty exists for views that are backed by a kind of collective consensus. It is not clear from what subjective experiences and by what specific mechanism such intersubjective experience has arisen.

The outline of the state of research on the practice of conservation could be complemented by a comparison with related fields such as environmental management or education, where appropriate empirical research on practice is a standard part of the solution.

Causes and consequences of the identified state of knowledge and interpretation of practice

What most impresses and provokes us in the issue of interpretation of conservation practice for theoretical elaboration are the concrete implications for conservation and its theory. They suggest that questions about the reasons for the identified absence of empirical investigation are reasonable.

The causes stem from the very nature of conservation. It is a cultural phenomenon that is based on values - social constructs and interpretation. The role of objective science in the field is not unreservedly defined. Heritage conservation is a complex, interdisciplinary and dynamically variable field with many influencing factors. Research on the phenomenon is therefore methodologically *complex and laborious* in both its analytical and synthetic parts²⁵. The predominant expert assessment appears to be the most accessible form of mediating practice, but it is weakened by the vaguely defined position of the expert. Communication is a fundamental driver of the value-functional process of conservation. This has the effect of promoting *solutions through discussion and consensus*²⁶ in methodology and theory. There still seems to be *low social demand for critical monitoring of the field*, with introversion and *a reluctance to be self-critical* (fear of exposing the shortcomings of one's own work). Professional conservationists are thus responsible for the lack of access to analyses of conservation practice for further processing. At the same time, the external sphere, especially academic, is in inadequate contact with the practice of conservation, has less access to professional supporting documents and tends towards theoretical research.

²⁵ The complexity of the broad scope is multifactorial, with many factors being extra-disciplinary. Teamwork is a necessity.

²⁶ Cf. Prof. Jokileht's answer in the survey on the tasks of conservation theory. Jesenský V. (2017). Mezinárodní anketa k aktuálním úkolům teorie památkové péče. *Zprávy památkové péče* 77 (6), (pp. 697-704).

The consequences of the lack of empirical knowledge of wider heritage practice can only be explained in general terms in the context of this article. A theory with a weakened basis of knowledge of practice without support in empirical data may lead to unscientific objectivism in interpretation and formulation of objectives. This has negative implications for the follow-up *methodology* through which *practice will be affected*. At the same time, persisting in a rather non-binding interpretation of reality does not create the necessary pressure *to monitor the application of the results of theoretical and methodological research*. This is clearly visible in conceptual, strategic, managerial and general planning documents (e.g. also in economics, education, etc.). Among other things, this is a handicap for *the advocacy of heritage conservation* compared to other fields. To give just one concrete example: with the codification and ongoing recognition of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, and the simultaneous development and activity of critical heritage studies²⁷, cultural heritage theory is moving away from a systematized and institutionalized practice of heritage conservation. The theory and methodology of conservation (immovable heritage objects) must cope with the context of cultural heritage theory and methodology, perhaps by defining itself more explicitly in relation to it. I believe that the main tool for such a demarcation or alignment will not be the confrontation of deduced theoretical views, but a critical reflection on the practice of conservation and its interpretation in a new theory.

Solution proposals

The remedies are based on the characteristics already mentioned. There is a need for much more *empirical quantitative research on quality of conservation* (what is quality conservation, what are its attributes and factors of its operation), *efficiency of care and system and on social and environmental sustainability*. The frequency of phenomena (methods of conservation used, their results, use of methodological tools including doctrinal documents, main obstacles to quality conservation, etc.) should be documented. It is evident from the materials examined that technological and material research, as well as all types of historical research, are developing in heritage conservation. We lack *comprehensive methodological and especially social analyses* (the relationship of the community to heritage objects, to conservation)²⁸, as well as *economic research*. The concrete objects of research must be, above all, the *actions of conservation* (research and documentation, physical interventions, presentation of heritage...), *stakeholders, conservationists, organisations, methods of financing*. In other words, the emphasis should be on inductive explanatory procedures. It is clear that the closest to the practice as a whole are the professional conservationists, almost all over Europe associated in state agencies (institutes, offices). The contribution of these institutions to research is undoubted, but the research erudition will be on the side of academic researchers. Their cooperation therefore seems optimal.

²⁷ Jesenský V. (2021). Co může památková péče získat z critical heritage studies? *Zprávy památkové péče*, 81(3), (pp. 372-380).

²⁸ Research on this topic will not be easy, considering the considerable value fragmentation of societies where the role of the individual rather than the role of communities may be growing (the problem of social cohesion, collective consciousness that is not intersubjective, etc.).

As an example of a concrete research proposal, we can mention the content and discursive analysis of professional statements (assessments, consents) of professional conservationists (agencies) on heritage objects interventions. Such documents are a standard tool in the majority of at least European countries, they are digitally stored and contain a large amount of information about actions and their circumstances on the territory of regions and, consequently, countries, they also form a time continuous resource. In further research, these statements could be confronted with the results of the treatment of the corresponding objects in the field, etc.²⁹

Conclusion

A theory of conservation cannot emerge and evolve without *up-to-date knowledge of the changing practice of the field*. This knowledge is overwhelmingly interpreted by individuals or institutions who refer to their own experience, theoretical research or collective opinion formed by consensus in a discourse in which the sources of the opinions used are subject to minimal criticism. The question arises as to whether in heritage conservation, as a cultural phenomenon and a cultural and social issue at its core, a given type of cognition of reality is not a completely dominant right. An affirmative answer has many advocates³⁰. I think that, after learning about conservation practice as primarily a practical activity affecting the physical handling of material objects, this exclusivity cannot be defended. On the other hand, must be admitted that *empirical quantitative research* in operationalizing concepts can suffer from reductionism, constructionism and distortion of reality. This suggests the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods³¹.

From the attempts to interpret the reality of practice by means of broader international summaries of research or methodological strategies, and especially from the hints of their application, which ended in embarrassment³², we can deduce that the problem may also be in *the setting of the scope of research*. Where they transcend the cultural circle of conservation implementers (the community - the collective subject), their theoretical elaboration begins to move towards little applicable generality. Therefore, *empirical research on the scale of the state, its regions, or phenomena occurring in such a territory* seems to be optimal.

²⁹ For example, NHI's fund of expert statement reports in CR, which provides around 20,000 new, often lengthy, documents each year, has never been retrospectively examined.

³⁰ Jukka Jokilehto, in the last email of our direct correspondence on the issue of empirical knowledge of practice as a prerequisite for conservation theory, even implied a consensus discussion approach in the claim of capacity building. Jesenský V. (2023). Vzpomínka na Jukku Jokilehta, *Zprávy památkové péče* 83 (4), (pp. 372-374).

³¹ Hendl J. (2008). *Kvalitativní výzkum* (2nd, rev. ed.). Praha: Portál.

³² For example Heritage A., S. Golfomitsou S. (Eds.). *ICCROM FORUM on Conservation Science – Position Papers 2015*. ICCROM. <https://www.iccrom.org/publication/conservation-science>. Harrison R. (2015). Beyond „Natural“ and „Cultural“ Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene. *Heritage & Society*, 8(1), (pp. 24-42). Heritage A., Iwasaki A., Wollentz G. (2021). *Anticipating Futures for Heritage*. ICCROM. https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/publications/2023-11/anticipating_futures_web_pdf.pdf

And finally, the current still seemingly trivial connection. Above all, discursive and qualitative methods of theory formation will soon be inexorably transformed by the involvement of AI. It will use only digitized existing knowledge (from texts) without correcting it with author's experience gained from the field, from practice. What conclusions can be expected³³?

It cannot be denied that the argumentation supporting the claims made in this paper is limited. The analysis of published sources could certainly be extended to include philosophical, sociological, anthropological and other interpretations. A deeper elaboration would also be appropriate from the perspective of scientific methodology. However, I believe that there is sufficient reason to at least think more systematically about whether all methodological and strategic materials of heritage conservation are based on appropriate, concise theory, or on the knowledge of the state of heritage conservation supported by research and data. And whether and how the application of the field theory in practice is verified, which is another big topic for theoretical research.

Acknowledgement

Peer-reviewed article was created on the basis of institutional support for long-term conceptual development of a research organisation provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (research area Theory and History of Heritage Conservation).

³³ This article was not created using AI. However, I have no doubt that AI will soon become a topic of research and discussion in conservation and also on the TheoPhilos Committee.

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