

CA☆ FORUM ON PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

UNESCO's World Heritage Convention at 40

Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation

by Lynn Meskell

The year 2012 marked the fortieth anniversary of UNESCO's 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. It remains the major international instrument for safeguarding the world's heritage. The Convention's most significant feature is its integration of the concepts of nature conservation and preservation of cultural properties in a single treaty. Recognizing the increasing threats to natural and cultural sites, coupled with traditional conservation challenges, it was established as a new provision for the collective protection of heritage with outstanding universal value. This paper identifies three critical challenges that the World Heritage Convention faces today. Each of these has implications for how the international community chooses to identify, reify, protect, and promote something called "World Heritage" as a privileged category. These are the mounting challenges to expert opinions and decision making, the increasing and overt politicization of the World Heritage Committee, and UNESCO's fiscal crisis exacerbated by the recent US financial withdrawal.

We all followed events in Mali, where I dispatched a technical mission to examine the World Heritage properties of Timbuktu and the Tomb of Askia threatened by armed groups. On its fortieth birthday, the World Heritage Convention faces these threats, and also a more fundamental challenge—that of its credibility and its future. In recent years, some developments within the inscription process have weakened the principles of scientific excellence and impartiality that are at the heart of the Convention. It is my responsibility to ring the bell. (Irina Bokova, UNESCO director-general, opening the thirty-sixth session of the World Heritage Committee, June 24, 2012, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation)

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of UNESCO's 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. It remains the major international instrument for safeguarding the world's heritage. Perhaps the Convention's most significant feature is its integration of the concepts of nature conservation and preservation of cultural properties in a single treaty. Recognizing the increasing threats to natural and cultural sites, coupled with traditional con-

servation challenges, the 1972 Convention was established as a new provision for the collective protection of heritage with outstanding universal value.¹ As envisioned, the Convention would be organized on a permanent basis, ratified by the international community, and implemented in accordance with modern scientific methods.² By signing the Convention, each country pledges not only to conserve World Heritage Sites situated on its territory but also to protect its national heritage. According to UNESCO, ratification benefits nations as they participate in an international community of concern for global sites that embody cultural diversity and natural wealth. In doing so, these nations are expressing a shared commitment to preserve that legacy for present and future generations. For the signatories, having sites inscribed on the Convention's list garners international and national prestige, enables access to the World Heritage Fund for monetary assistance, and brings the potential benefits of heightened public awareness, tourism, and economic development.

1. For UNESCO, outstanding universal value means cultural or natural significance that is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. Statements of Outstanding Universal Value are made up of several elements: a brief description of the property, a statement of significance, a statement of authenticity, a statement of integrity, and a section describing how the World Heritage Site is protected and managed.

2. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>.

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Over the past 4 decades, the context for global heritage preservation has changed, and its successes and aspirations have led to an increasing scale and complexity of operations. From its humble beginnings, tackling a small number of sites, such as the Nubian monuments, Moenjodaro, and Borobudur, under the auspices of UNESCO's international safeguarding campaign, to the juggernaut of 962 sites in 157 countries, UNESCO, or more particularly the World Heritage Centre, now faces unprecedented challenges. As the number of World Heritage Sites reaches 1,000, requests for international assistance and field missions mount, commitments to sustainable development and enhanced capacity building increase, and conflict over heritage sites like Timbuktu or Preah Vihear intensifies. In addition, the recent controversy over the recognition of Palestine as a signatory to the Convention prompted the United States to withdraw from UNESCO, and the resultant loss in revenue has pushed the organization toward fiscal crisis. These external challenges in the global political arena are also matched by escalating internal tensions from within among the three pillars of the organization: the World Heritage Centre, the Advisory Bodies, and the World Heritage Committee, comprising 21 elected States Party representatives.

This paper identifies three critical challenges that the World Heritage Convention faces at its fortieth anniversary that have implications for how the international community chooses to identify, reify, protect, and promote something called "World Heritage" as a privileged category. These are the mounting challenges to expert opinions and decision making, the increasing and overt politicization of the Committee, and UNESCO's fiscal crisis, which has been exacerbated by the US financial withdrawal. Over the past 2 years, I have researched the organization at its headquarters, and I have been an official observer at the annual World Heritage sessions, held in Paris and Saint Petersburg; I have witnessed the geopolitical machinations within the Committee and the excessive lobbying by nominating nations. The pacting between certain blocs, the maintenance of colonial connections, the escalating attacks on the Advisory Bodies, and the overturning of many conservation recommendations have been insightful for an archaeologist such as myself. In addition, I have worked at two World Heritage Sites, one in Turkey (Çatalhöyük) and the other in South Africa (Mapungubwe). The former I have followed through from nomination to inscription; the latter involves a longer-term ethnography tracing the aftermath of inscription and the political machinations to stave off World Heritage in Danger listing (Meskell 2011, 2012). Throughout such processes, archaeologists typically presume that power largely resides with UNESCO's Paris headquarters, and they have critiqued the organization in the most general of terms. However, as an intergovernmental body and part of the UN family, States Parties that are signatories to the Convention are in fact the most powerful decision makers in World Heritage (Askew 2010), particularly those that have representation on the Committee.

Anthropologists have been involved with UNESCO in different capacities from the beginning, including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Charles Wagley, Marvin Harris, Robert Redfield (see Metraux 1951), and particularly French scholars, such as Roger Callois, Pierre Bessaignet, Lucien Bernot, and, most importantly, Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, in later decades, anthropologists have distanced themselves from the organization: some fear that their top-down definition of culture fails to address nationalist repressions and neocolonial endeavors, while others accuse the organization of creating an essentially flat cultural map of the world rather than viewing culture as entangled in process, negotiation, and contestation (Wright 1998). Anthropologists such as Thomas Hylland Ericksen (2009) take issue with UNESCO's romanticized concepts of culture and diversity, specifically as borrowed from Lévi-Straussian notions of cultural relativity and culture contact.

However, more recently UNESCO has again attracted attention from ethnographers, archaeologists, economists, political scientists, and legal scholars writing on topics ranging from governance and bureaucracy (Bertacchini et al. 2011; Brumann 2012*b*; Logan 2012*b*; Schmitt 2009, 2012) to list credibility (Askew 2010; Zacharias 2010), global strategy and representation (Labadi 2005, 2007; Schmitt 2008; Willems and Comer 2011), the politics of culture and rights (Berliner 2012; De Cesari 2010; Ericksen 2009; Logan 2012*a*), and cultural economics (Bertacchini and Saccone 2011; Frey and Steiner 2011; Frey et al. 2011; van Blarcoma and Kayahana 2011). Social anthropologists have traditionally focused most of their attention on the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage because of its reliance, as suggested above, upon the concept of culture, the privileging of human diversity, and the appeal to a global ethic (e.g., Arantes 2007; Brown 2004; Brumann 2009; Ericksen 2009; Hafstein 2009; Schmitt 2009, 2012). My focus in this forum piece is the emergent crisis facing the World Heritage Convention, evidenced by politicization and revolutionary tactics performed at the annual World Heritage Committee sessions and further complicated by the dire economic predicament caused by the US withdrawal.

Background

UNESCO is an intergovernmental organization, guided by international relations aimed at fostering peace, humanitarianism, and intercultural understanding. It developed out of the universalist aspirations for global governance envisaged by the League of Nations (Singh 2011; Stoczkowski 2009; Valderrama 1995). Today it remains embedded within modernist principles of progress and development and similarly subscribes to the liberal principles of diplomacy, tolerance, and development. Established after the end of World War II, in the wake of devastation and atrocity, UNESCO's task was to promote peace and "change the minds of men," primarily through education

and promotion of cultural diversity and understanding. It should be noted that UNESCO's mission stemmed from a specifically European organization called the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation (ICIC), which operated between 1936 and 1946 (Droit 2005; Hoggart 2011), rather than being a direct offshoot from the United Nations. Founded by such prominent figures as Henri Bergson, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, and Thomas Mann, the ICIC was established to create a "state of mind conducive to the peaceful settlement of international problems within the framework of the League of Nations" (Valderrama 1995:3). Not surprisingly, the work was focused on education, universities, libraries, and internationalism. It is often said throughout UNESCO that the E (for education) comes first. Given this history of recognition and reconciliation, the long-standing ethos of cultural diversity, and the protection of minority lifeways, it is not surprising that UNESCO has emerged as the only structural avenue to global governance and promotion of cultural heritage. Within the United Nations, UNESCO may not be as powerful or have as high a profile as international peacekeeping, environmental initiatives, or development programs; instead it is perceived as the cultural arm, the visionary agency, and the "ideas factory" for the larger organization (Pavone 2008).

The World Heritage Centre was established in 1992 to act as the Secretariat, or the focal point and coordinator within UNESCO for all matters related to the Convention. It ensures the day-to-day management of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, organizes the annual sessions of the World Heritage Committee ("the Committee") and its Bureau, and provides advice to States Parties in the preparation of site nominations. Along with the Advisory Bodies, it also organizes international assistance from the World Heritage Fund and coordinates both the reporting on the condition of sites and the emergency action undertaken when a site is threatened. Other aspects of its mission include organizing technical seminars and workshops, updating the World Heritage List and database, and developing teaching materials devoted to heritage preservation (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/134>).

In the World Heritage process, serious decision-making heft has been given to the recommendations of three external Advisory Bodies as referred to in the Convention, comprised of international experts who conduct monitoring missions and evaluations: the International Centre for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). ICCROM was set up in 1959 as an intergovernmental organization dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage and is only involved in State of Conservation reporting in a limited manner. ICOMOS was founded in 1965 and provides evaluations of cultural properties, including cultural landscapes proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. Both ICOMOS and the IUCN are international, nongovernmental organizations. The IUCN was established in 1948 and provides technical evaluations of natural heritage properties and mixed properties and, through

its worldwide network of specialists, reports on the state of conservation of listed properties. These bodies communicate their findings in lengthy reports online and in briefer presentations at international meetings.

The Committee is made up of 21 States Parties, which are elected at a General Assembly and serve a 4-year term.³ Members must all be signatory nations to the World Heritage Convention, and their representatives are now dominated by state-appointed ambassadors and politicians rather than archaeological or ecological experts. In accordance with Article 8 of the Convention, the Committee is the actual body responsible for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. It defines the use of the World Heritage Fund and allocates financial assistance upon requests from States Parties. Significantly, it has the final say on whether a property is inscribed on the World Heritage List (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>). The Committee can also defer its decision and request further information on properties from the nations in question. It examines reports on the state of conservation of inscribed properties and asks States Parties to take action when properties are not being effectively managed. It also decides on the inclusion or deletion of properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/committee>). This statist power structure is inescapable when attempts are made to instigate structural changes, whether creating an indigenous expert advisory panel, recognizing nonstate actors like nongovernmental organizations, or upholding the heritage rights of minorities within nation states (see Meskell 2013). All of the aforementioned are regularly proposed and debated. Yet ultimately what UNESCO seeks is broad consensus across the Committee or a two-thirds majority vote. Securing either of these in reality remains fraught given the political interests of individual governments and their representatives.

As of August 2012, there were 962 sites on the World Heritage List: 745 cultural sites and 188 natural and 29 mixed properties, located across 157 States Parties. There are now 38 sites listed as World Heritage in Danger, most being concentrated in Africa. The disproportionate number of cultural sites on the List reflects the historical development of the List, with its early focus on ancient monuments. However, each year cultural sites continue to dominate, and their nominations tend to be more time-consuming, controversial, and politically polarizing than natural properties. Reasons for this include the linkage to specific ethnic groups and achievements, disputed historical territories, current religious and national tensions, and individual biases over cultural values and achievements. The List is also historically dominated by properties from Europe (Labadi 2007), although there have been vigorous efforts within the World Heritage Centre to create a more representative inventory. Among those efforts

3. Officially the term has been set at 6 years; however, there has been a voluntary self-imposed limitation to 4 years. This decision was intended to give more countries the chance to participate. In reality, an examination of Committee members over the years reveals that a group of no more than 15–20 countries constantly rotates on and off of the Committee.

is a new “upstreaming process,” which was suggested at the thirty-third sessions in 2009 (Decision 33 COM 14.A2 para. 14) and is designed to assist underrepresented countries in preparing robust conservation dossiers and identifying the criteria for outstanding universal value, optimally leading to site inscription. In 2012, 38% of the new sites inscribed on the List were situated in Europe and North America.

The 1972 Convention is an intergovernmental agreement that has been operating for 40 years with strong consensus and near universal membership. One hundred eighty-nine nations have ratified the Convention, including a wide range of signatories from developing and developed countries. The Operational Guidelines for implementing the Convention were first drafted in 1977 and form the basis for all decisions, including the criteria for inscription. According to Sophia Labadi (2013:31), this is a flexible working document that has been revised repeatedly by the World Heritage Committee, thus illustrating the evolving nature of interpretation and changing sociopolitical context of the Convention. One critical challenge will be ensuring that the Convention maintains a credible status in the identification and conservation of the world’s cultural and natural heritage. There was mild consternation when France’s Nord-Pas de Calais mining basin, with its industrial slag heaps, was inscribed in 2012, joining the ranks of the Giza Pyramids and the Taj Mahal (Samuel 2012). And yet this listing challenges the assumption that UNESCO only focuses upon elite monuments and architecture and is out of step with modern, living, and different heritage values. The central tenant of the Convention is the notion of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), namely, that “some sites are so exceptional that they can be equally valued by all the people of the world” and thus entreat global protection (Labadi 2013:11). By their own admission (see Rao 2010), UNESCO recognizes problems such as the slow pace of change and the divergent interpretations of the Convention, differing interpretations of OUV, and appropriate management standards by States Parties, Advisory Bodies, and the Secretariat (see Jokilehto and Cameron 2008; Titchen 1996). Within the World Heritage system, there have been numerous concerns that lie beyond the remit of the Secretariat. Too great an emphasis is placed on inscription as an end in itself; in addition, one observes a reduced technical basis for decision making; increasing Committee, Advisory Body, and Secretariat workloads; budgetary pressure from near universal membership and global economic slowdown; and burgeoning political, economic, environmental, and social pressures on heritage sites worldwide.

Challenging Experts

Throughout recent World Heritage Committee meetings, national agendas have come to eclipse substantive discussions of the merits of site nominations and the attendant issues of community benefits, the participation of indigenous stakeholders, or threats from mining and exploitation (see Askew 2010; Logan 2012b; Meskell 2011, 2012). With the growing

dominance of strategic political alliances within the Committee of 21 states, the recommendations of the Advisory Bodies have been increasingly overturned and publicly derided (*Economist* 2010; Jokilehto 2011). Despite an impassioned appeal by the director-general at the opening of the 2012 sessions for more considered adherence to UNESCO’s mission, the Committee’s disregard for Advisory Body recommendations continued unabated. In an unprecedented move, Irina Bokova (2012) made a preemptive plea:

The credibility of the inscription process must be absolute at all stages of the proceedings—from the work of the advisory bodies to the final decision by the States Parties, who hold the primary responsibility in this regard. Today, criticism is growing, and I am deeply concerned. I believe we stand at the crossroads, with a clear choice before us. We can continue to gather, year after year, as accountants of the World Heritage label, adding more sites to the list, adhering less and less strictly to its criteria. Or we can choose another path. We can decide to act and think as visionaries, to rejuvenate the *World Heritage Convention* and confront the challenges of the 21st century. World Heritage is not a beauty contest.

Despite this injunction and the many nations that murmured their agreement with Bokova during the opening ceremony, revolutionary politics continued throughout the proceedings as they had done since 2010. Figure 1 demonstrates the increasing trend toward divergence between ICOMOS and IUCN recommendations with regard to site nominations and the subsequent Committee decisions adopted.

At the request of the Committee, in 2010, an external auditor was tasked with assessing UNESCO’s priority initiative, the “Global Strategy for a Credible, Representative, and Balanced World Heritage List” (UNESCO 2011a). The audit revealed then that the Committee’s decisions had increasingly diverged from the scientific opinions of the Advisory Bodies, contributing to a drift toward a more “political” rather than “heritage”

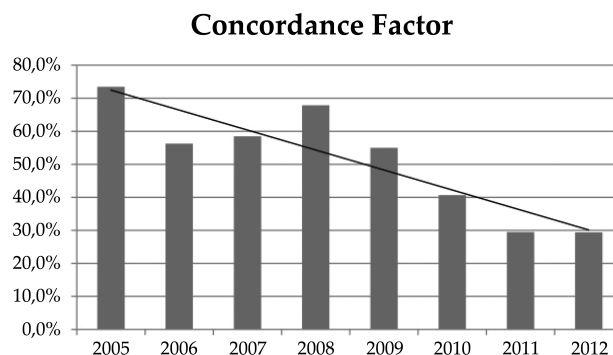


Figure 1. Increasing trend toward the divergence between ICOMOS and IUCN recommendations with regard to site nominations and the subsequent Committee decisions adopted. Courtesy of Marc Patry, World Heritage Centre, Paris.

Table 1. Comparison of 2011 and 2012 World Heritage Advisory Bodies's recommendations and World Heritage Committee's decisions

2011 Recommendation (Advisory Bodies)	Result (Committee decisions)
11 Inscriptions	11 Inscriptions
3 Referrals	3 Inscriptions
4 Deferrals	4 Referrals
12 Deferrals	11 Inscriptions, 1 approved extension
3 Noninscriptions	2 Deferrals, 1 referral
2012 Recommendation (Advisory Bodies)	Result (Committee decisions)
13 Inscriptions	13 Inscriptions
7 Referrals	7 Inscriptions
4 Deferrals	4 Inscriptions
2 Deferrals	2 Referrals
4 Noninscriptions	2 Referrals, 1 deferral, and 1 inscription on an emergency basis

Source. Table courtesy of Alessandro Balsamo, World Heritage Centre, Paris.

Note. The above data compare recommendations from the Advisory Bodies with decisions taken by the World Heritage Committee at the thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth sessions. Site referral occurs when some minor additional information is needed from a State Party to supplement the original nomination. Deferral entails additional information from, or more action needed by, the State Party and requires a new mission to evaluate the property.

approach to the Convention. Contrary to Article 9-3 of the Convention, sufficient representation was not being given to heritage experts within the national delegations, and these were now largely political appointments. Moreover, amendments were being made to draft decisions even before a site was publicly presented, and several delegations had lodged official complaints (UNESCO 2011a:6). The director of the World Heritage Program for the IUCN, Tim Badman, blogged from the thirty-fifth sessions in Paris that "most observers would conclude that this year has tipped the Convention further towards crisis. An increased trend for the Committee to not agree with the technical evaluations of nominations has continued, notably for the cultural nominations, where many inscriptions were against the advice of our sister advisory body ICOMOS" (June 29, 2011).⁴ Similarly, the auditor disclosed that the relationship between the World Heritage Committee, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and the Advisory Bodies was at a critical juncture and that this breakdown in the effective functioning would weaken the credibility of the Convention. Participants in the audit observed, moreover, that the current monitoring system was under increased pressure and that the effects of climate change, anthropogenic pressures, and poor protection and management were negatively impacting many sites. Moreover, UNESCO's funding for monitoring almost 1,000 properties was insufficient, and financial support for conservation was largely derived from extrabudgetary sources (69%; UNESCO 2011a:7). The strategy behind the List of World Heritage in Danger as a tool of conservation through the mobilization of international assistance was also failing.

The so-called neutral countries on the Committee, including Estonia, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, Portugal, and Sweden, similarly expressed their concern over results from the audit.

4. http://www.iucn.org/fr/ressources/focus/world_heritage/paris_diary_par_jour/?7769/Day-Nine-Life-jus-beginning.

Canada and Estonia complained of the loss of focus on the Convention through premature inscriptions and the rush to inscribe rather than conserve sites (Meskell 2012; see table 1). The United States claimed that geopolitical considerations, not scientific ones, dominated decision making (Morris 2011).⁵ This is in part due to the lack of heritage expertise, whether archaeology or ecology, within the delegations themselves. If such tendencies were to persist, the United States warned, the increased politicization of Committee decisions and procedures would doom the Convention to irrelevancy. The Estonian delegation accurately captured the concern:

To preserve the quality and the credibility of the WH List and the compliance of the listed sites with the required criteria and conditions it is necessary that the evaluation and inscription mechanism guarantees the neutrality and reliability of the process. The role of Advisory Bodies who provide professional and independent advice to the Committee is essential in the established evaluation system. However, as highlighted in the Audit, the decisions of the Committee diverge more and more frequently from the professional advice of the Advisory Bodies. Based on our experience of 2010 and 2011 Committee sessions the inscription process did not take fully into account the detailed analysis of nominations made by the Advisory Bodies when other factors such as a big anniversary of the site, relevant lobbying, or political pressure came into play. Therefore, the credibility and consistency of the decisions was compromised. (Siim 2011)

However, there was a palpable difference in the States Parties attitude toward individual Advisory Bodies. This was reiterated by a senior African delegate with long-standing ex-

5. At the time, the United States was not serving on the World Heritage Committee.

perience in various facets of the World Heritage system. From decades of experience and participation, he believes ICOMOS and the IUCN have developed very different practices, priorities, and trajectories. He considered the IUCN exemplary in its working relations with African countries, assisting with their nomination dossiers and thus ensuring better preparedness for inscription. He explained that the director of the IUCN's World Heritage Program personally participates in African workshops and capacity building, taking an active role in natural heritage conservation across Africa. The fundamental difference is that the IUCN is vastly better resourced: it is supported by 1,200 member organizations, including more than 200 government and 900 nongovernmental organizations and some 11,000 voluntary scientists. The IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 staff in 45 offices and hundreds of partners in public, nongovernmental organizations, and private sectors around the world.⁶ Whereas ICOMOS complains that "lack of funding is a major and permanent problem in the World Heritage system, and even more so for ICOMOS, whose voluntary real and in-kind contributions to the World Heritage process last year totaled more than €500,000, an amount that is unsustainable" (ICOMOS 2012: 11). The delegate then went on to speak glowingly about ICCROM and ICOM and their efforts to facilitate and train. ICCROM is interested in making a difference in Africa, he explained, and it understands different types of heritage, not simply European models. This assertion may align with the external auditor's report calling for diversification in the geographical origin of experts working with the Advisory Bodies (UNESCO 2011a:9). The experts selected by ICOMOS are often engineers and architects, not heritage practitioners, and so they fail to understand the African context. Additionally, the delegate maintains that ICOMOS should operate a consultancy or tender system whereby States Parties can obtain expert outsider input. Similar views have been expressed repeatedly throughout the past 3 years in World Heritage Committee sessions (see Rao 2010). In 2012, at Saint Petersburg, such criticisms became full-scale indictments that punctuated daily discussions of nominations and state of conservation reports, including the summation on the final day. In 2011, Brazil led the constant barrage of challenges, whereas India proved the most vocal and volatile opponent of the Advisory Bodies in 2012.⁷

Vinay Sheel Oberoi, the Indian Ambassador to UNESCO, consistently launched the most vocal attacks on ICOMOS throughout the 10-day meeting in Saint Petersburg. During discussion over damming the Portuguese Alto Douro Wine Region, Oberoi imputed that the "pyramids would never have been built if ICOMOS and the World Heritage Committee had been there." On visual pollution from French wind farms,

6. <http://www.iucn.org/about/>.

7. The thirty-fifth sessions of the World Heritage Committee in Saint Petersburg were streamed live for the first time and were thus able to be archived (<http://whc36-russia2012.ru/>).

he reiterated that, if World Heritage had existed in the nineteenth century, the Eiffel Tower—Europe's most well-known symbol—would not exist because of burdensome regulations. As a self-appointed spokesman for the current Committee, he claimed that "ICOMOS doesn't stand for heritage" during debate over Montenegro's site of Kotor. More seriously, during reports on rebel fighting in the Virunga National Park (DRC), he stated that the Advisory Bodies were out of their remit, unqualified to comment, and thus had transcended the boundaries of their assigned task.

Director of the World Heritage Centre Kishore Rao (2010) acknowledges the systemic problems that underwrite such heated Committee criticism toward the Advisory Bodies. These can be glossed as failures in the World Heritage system, based as it is on the presumed principles of international cooperation and assistance. For instance, the Advisory Bodies do not directly participate in or assist countries to prepare, revise, or review their tentative lists. This avoidance is due to a perceived conflict of interest, where experts have historically positioned themselves as evaluators rather than collaborators. Thus their expertise cannot be freely shared with States Parties to ensure successful nominations, although many field evaluators in practice engage in constructive dialogues. Rao (2010: 164) considers the "conflict of interest" argument one of the greatest ironies of the World Heritage process and one that runs counter to the spirit of the Convention. The inability for field assessors to communicate their expertise is especially critical for less developed countries (often those underrepresented or not represented on the World Heritage List) that lack sufficient technical and financial resources to prepare successful nominations. But even wealthy countries such as China that can spend millions of dollars on nominations expect that their investment will guarantee site inscription. More than US\$5 million has been offered in preparatory assistance for some 360 nominations, and ultimately only 18.5% resulted in site inscription (Rao 2010:165). In Rao's view, this vast expenditure of time, effort, and money would be better channeled into a system of cooperation and mentoring. Even though the Convention is ideally supposed to foster a collaborative global effort throughout the entire process, the reality is understandably more complex, especially when one considers the financial constraints now placed on the Advisory Bodies and across UNESCO as an organization (this will be discussed below).

Sustained critiques of the World Heritage system may seem like critical organizational and postcolonial interventions against what is seen to be a traditionally European-dominated body (see Strasser 2002). Senegalese delegate Professor Hamady Bocoum recalls that UNESCO largely began as an organization to preserve European architectural achievements after the devastation of World War II and subsequently has had to embrace other heritage forms and practices worldwide. So recent critiques may also be read as overt attempts to displace the northern hegemony that has historically characterized the World Heritage List in historic terms. During the Saint Petersburg meetings, we witnessed other

troubling ethnocentric assumptions laid bare as the German ambassador to UNESCO, Martina Nibbeling-Wrießnig, explained that European countries have more than 100 years of protective legislation and consider monuments and heritage more important than do other nations. She claimed that this has enabled European sites to more easily fulfill the criteria for World Heritage inscription. "Our countries 'build in stone,'" she ventured; and she then went on to note that others use different materials, leading to differential preservation. Understandably her position was met by diplomatic, yet resolute, rebuttal (see discussion in Meskell 2013).

The timing of this heritage insurgency may indeed be strategic. As Christoph Brumann (2012a) has astutely observed, in the past few years the European representatives on the Committee have come from smaller, less powerful nations like Estonia, Switzerland, and Sweden, while the challenges were mounted by large, powerful emerging nations, including Brazil, Mexico, India, and South Africa. For those State Parties leading the challenge, this could be seen as a revolution against the so-called expert adjudicators and their role in the contest that site nomination has become. Since ICOMOS has attracted criticism for appearing too white and European, this could be positioned as a strategic defiance of long-held hegemonic positions on the places where world heritage is located, how it is understood, and the ways in which it can be legitimately practiced and lived. This could indeed be liberating, particularly for traditional and living heritage. Yet, in the sessions I have attended and analyzed, the properties being proposed still inhabit the familiar taxonomies of chateaux, churches, mosques, historic cities, forts, and, to a lesser extent, archaeological excavations. The question remains, can such challenges drive substantive revisions to the Convention's core mission or will they be fleeting challenges that merely serve nationalistic goals that are themselves reliant upon the composition of the Committee?

Committee Politics and Pacting

Unlike the employees of the World Heritage Centre, members of the World Heritage Committee are representatives of States Parties and thus are free to pursue their own national interests, maximize power, push their economic self-interest, and minimize their transaction costs (Pavone 2008:7). These national imperatives and economic necessities are more binding than any ethical norms. Annual Committee meetings are becoming more like marketplaces, where the nations of the world address "each other at great length, but by procedures that ensure genuine dialogue is ruled out" (Hoggart 2011:99). Given the economic interests at stake and the presumed prestige inscription on the List bestows, States Parties are increasingly insisting upon the nomination of properties that, in the opinion of the IUCN and ICOMOS, do not appear to warrant global recognition. There is a correlation between the countries represented on the Committee and the location of properties nominated. From 1977 to 2005, in 314 nominations,

42% benefited those countries with Committee members during their mandate. The proportion decreased to 16.7% in 2006 and increased to 25% in 2008, increased again to 42.9% in 2010 (UNESCO 2011a:6) and dropped to 27% in 2012. This is striking when one considers that the 21 Committee members comprise only 11% of the total number of signatories.

Recently there have been concerted efforts to prohibit nomination of sites by States Parties serving on the Committee, but such recommendations were, not surprisingly, vetoed by Committee vote in 2011. One of the prime incentives for serving on the Committee is to vigorously argue for, and thus ensure, a successful site inscription. States Parties lobby aggressively for support before and during the meetings, and international alliances are cemented prior to properties being presented for debate through the spurious practice of circulating signature sheets. The practice of garnering signed amendments before the opening of the debate on site nomination was officially proscribed in the 2010 external audit (WHC-11/35.COM/9A). One national delegation complained to me that they had to write formally to all 21 States Parties before the Saint Petersburg meeting to lobby for inscription—without demonstrating any qualms about engaging in this unsanctioned practice. At those meetings, they then enlisted four nations from their region to challenge the ICOMOS recommendation for referral and were ultimately successful in their bid.

Blocs can be forged on continental, regional, religious, economic, and even former colonial relationships. Political pacting not only serves to ensure inscription for Committee member's own national sites (Bertacchini and Saccone 2011) but prevents threatened sites from being transferred to the List of World Heritage in Danger. One bloc that has secured voting power is the formidable geopolitical alliance known as BRICS, a politico-economic coalition formed between Brazil, Russia, India, China and, most recently, South Africa (see also Hoggart 2011). Over the past several years, four of the five have served on the World Heritage Committee. The acronym BRICS was coined at Goldman Sachs (O'Neill 2001) for those nations at a similar stage of newly advanced economic development and the subsequent shift in global economic power away from the older-styled developed G8 countries (Meskell 2011, 2012). Brazil, China, and South Africa served on the 2011 World Heritage Committee, and Russia, India, and South Africa served in 2012, greatly benefiting both South Africa's and Russia's potentially endangered national parks that have mining concessions either in or adjacent to their inscribed properties.

The case of Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape and South Africa's maneuvering to ensure it was not placed on the endangered list highlights the power of such alliances.⁸ With an open cast colliery operating within Mapungubwe's proposed buffer zone, the IUCN, ICOMOS, and the World Heritage

8. In 2003, ICOMOS did not recommend Mapungubwe for inscription. Importantly, South Africa was on the World Heritage Committee at that time. Russia and India were also members that year.

Centre voiced their concerns to South Africa, sent scoping missions, and produced reports outlining the destructive impacts of the mine. After presenting findings from a joint World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS reactive monitoring mission conducted in early 2012, the Indian delegate launched an attack on the Secretariat and Advisory Body. Ambassador Oberoi criticized ICOMOS for the “lack of understanding” between itself and the State Party: “Leave the technology of mining to those countries,” he argued, and later again, “We cannot comment on technical issues, we are not expert.” Russia voiced its support for India, preempting the controversy over its own property, the poorly named Virgin Komi Forests, also currently endangered due to state-sponsored gold mining (see 35 COM 7B.25). With the BRICS alliance in force, we witnessed the debt repaid when Komi was discussed later that day. South Africa has maneuvered through the last few sessions of the World Heritage Committee with a palpable degree of duplicity (see Meskell 2011, 2012). UNESCO and its Secretariat find themselves in an impossible situation. Trapped by diplomacy and the principles of cooperation and mutual understanding, they cannot accuse the State Party of being dishonest or disreputable since they too are engaged in the business of UN peacekeeping.

Ultimately, universal heritage goals are frustrated and have been impeded by the interests of nations that cannot be called to account, since UNESCO is underpinned by the desire for consensual and diplomatic solutions within the wider UN structure, thus by the organization’s very definition and mandate. It is often said that World Heritage unites people and fosters intercultural understanding (Bokova 2012; Cameron 2009), which has been part of its *raison d’être* from the outset (Valderrama 1995). Yet, on the ground, the creation of something called “World Heritage,” and the recognition that ensues, may also incite and divide, as the case of the Preah Vihear temple and its 2008 inscription illustrates. The site is located in Cambodia along the border with Thailand, itself a disputed boundary demarcated during colonial occupation (Logan 2012*b*:124). A few months after its inscription on the List, violence erupted around the temple between Thai and Cambodian troops. At the 2011 World Heritage Committee meeting in Paris, Cambodia circulated a booklet documenting the destruction and bloodshed with a letter from Prime Minister Hun Sen calling upon the UN Security Council to intervene. Later during those sessions, Thailand publicly resigned from its membership of the 1972 Convention, only to rescind its position shortly after and then serve as a representative on the World Heritage Committee. As of July 2012, both countries had withdrawn troops from the area, and Cambodia is set to host the thirty-sixth World Heritage Committee sessions in 2013.

A longer-term political predicament for UNESCO, one with more far-reaching financial implications, is its recent recognition of Palestine, culminating this year in the first nomination and inscription for Palestine with the Church of the Nativity (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1433>). The UN and

UNESCO have actively supported Palestine for many decades, from the establishment in 1949 of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), to granting observer status to the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970s (Valderrama 1995:246), to attempting in the early 1990s to admit Palestine as a full member to UNESCO. In 2011, the vote to extend UNESCO membership to Palestine was passed 107 to 14, with 52 abstentions. The United States, Israel, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany were among those who opposed, while the BRICS countries—Russia, China, India, South Africa, and Brazil—all voted in favor. As Morag Kersel and Christina Luke argue (2012), the US Congress had previously passed legislation intended to block normalization of Palestinian relations and activities in the international community. Two aspects of federal law obligated the US State Department to terminate its funding to UNESCO. A 1990 law bans the appropriation of funds “for the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as a member state.” In 1994, Congress barred funding “any affiliated organization of the United Nations which grants full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood” (Lynch 2011).

The United States has suspended financial support to UNESCO twice before over political decisions: once in 1977, when Israel’s petition to be considered part of Europe was denied, and again in 1984, over national interest and cold war conspiracy, costing UNESCO some \$43 million in lost revenues (Valderrama 1995:294). British academic and former Assistant Director General of UNESCO Richard Hoggart (2011:40) accurately captured the situation when he said that “sovereign states are easily resentful.” Political pacting also explains the current fiscal withdrawal, although not in visible US participation and representation, as was clearly evident in budget meetings and behind-the-scene negotiations in Saint Petersburg. The position of the United States toward Palestine appeared isolated at best, as hundreds of delegates cheered the inscription of Palestine’s first site at the World Heritage Committee meetings.

Economic Crisis

UNESCO moved swiftly to launch a global media response to the US withdrawal. Director-General Bokova (2011) claimed that the “withholding of U.S. dues and other financial contributions—required by U.S. law—will weaken UNESCO’s effectiveness and undermine its ability to build free and open societies.” She also made a high-profile tour of the United States, making appearances at the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and the Florida Everglades to talk about sustainable tourism and heritage. The not-so-subtle media message was that the American move will severely hamper its own ambitions abroad, since UNESCO funding develops and sustains free and competitive media in Iraq, Tunisia, and Egypt. Bokova

claimed that UNESCO's literacy programs in conflict zones provide the critical thinking skills and confidence to fight violent extremism. And, linked to the concomitant pullout of Israel, Bokova reiterated that UNESCO is the only UN agency with a mandate to promote Holocaust education worldwide. Using funding provided by the United States and Israel, UNESCO is developing curricula to ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten (Bokova 2011). Quoting the US State Department, she noted that "U.S. engagement with UNESCO serves a wide range of our national interests on education, science, culture, and communications issues. . . . We will work with Congress to ensure that U.S. interests and influence are preserved."

The United States contributed around 22% of UNESCO's total budget.⁹ At first glance, the US withdrawal signaled a shortfall of around US\$60 million. Other countries, including Turkey, Qatar, Algeria, and Gabon, made voluntary donations that on face value may have gone some way to remedy the financial crisis. But the political economy of these particular transactions is more complex. First, the United States was already in arrears with its contribution and then was withholding for an additional 2 years. This ongoing deficit plus shortfalls in monies allocated to the World Heritage Fund and for other extra-budgetary programs compounds the crisis. In March 2012, the director-general predicted a US\$188 million cash shortfall. In June, at UNESCO Paris headquarters, I was told that the shortfall was closer to US\$240 million and that the effect was crippling on vital programs, making it almost impossible to keep global operations going. Second, the additional international voluntary contributions will have little impact: some were earmarked to return entirely to the donor nation, like Algeria, or allocated for special programs, like Qatar, and could not be funneled into the general budget.

Across the board at UNESCO, newly advertised positions have been frozen and consultancies and short-term programs have been cut, and while reforming the organization is seen as critical (35 C/Resolution 102), real economic restructuring is not possible given labor laws and lack of Committee agreement. One senior official proposed moving personnel from the Paris headquarters to regional field offices both in regard to cost-cutting and following the strategic advice to "bring UNESCO closer to the field" (UNESCO 2011*b*): this was swiftly vetoed. Instigating change is particularly difficult, since the intergovernmental structure of the agency requires winning the two-thirds majority State Party support. Human resources are down 22.5% at UNESCO, entailing a heavier workload for current staff.

The World Heritage Centre faces a further reduction of US\$1,000,000 on its activities, while maintaining its priority of international assistance as set out by the Committee. For the World Heritage Fund alone, the budget for 2012–2013 is US\$5,208,205, a reduction of 21% (Draft Decision 36 COM 15 Rev). An appeal to States Parties in March 2012 for vol-

untary contributions resulted in just one country, Estonia, offering €10,000. Figures for 2010 reveal that 60 nations contributed less than US\$100 to the Fund, and many others are in arrears. Currently the average budget per property is only US\$3,343 (WHC-12/36.COM/15.Rev:10). This negatively impacts not only the conservation and management of World Heritage properties but also evaluation and monitoring missions, assistance with nominations, capacity building, educational materials, information systems, and annual meetings. Thus, an appeal was made to the director-general for further allocation of emergency funds to support the statutory functions of the Convention.

At the thirty-sixth sessions in Russia, the scale of the financial crisis was transparent. Each day budgetary side meetings were held to devise a solution to increase the voluntary contributions of States Parties. Since the number of signatories to the Convention is unlikely to increase, the current contributions mean that escalating costs—plus the US withdrawal—signal a further downturn and an unsustainable future. The Advisory Bodies were also requested to reduce their budgets by US\$400,000. And while the IUCN has a large network of supporting countries and fee-paying nongovernmental organizations, ICOMOS is in more dire financial standing. With increasing calls from States Parties for international assistance and collaboration, including more missions and scaled-up support and training on the ground, it is difficult to see how ICOMOS can perform its advisory functions in such a situation (ICOMOS 2012). One lasting irony is that the Russian Federation spent more money hosting the thirty-sixth sessions than the entire budget for the World Heritage Fund. Perhaps the most poignant reminder of the financial crisis facing the World Heritage program and its powerlessness to intervene in the politics of preservation erupted during the thirty-sixth sessions with the destruction in Mali. On June 28, the World Heritage Committee discussed the failures of an earlier treaty, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954), that 115 States Parties have ratified. Mali ratified the first protocol of that Convention in 1961, although not the second protocol from 1999. ICOMOS proposed that Timbuktu be immediately placed on the World Heritage in Danger List. Two days later Director-General Bokova publicly called for a halt to the destruction. Eleonora Mitrofanova, the World Heritage committee chairperson, described the destruction as "tragic news for us all, and even more so for the inhabitants of Timbuktu who have cherished and preserved this monument over more than seven centuries." On July 1, Mali addressed the Committee and appealed for assistance, but it gave little outline of how UNESCO could effectively respond in the face of ongoing rebel attacks. And while Committee members were eager to find a solution, they were quickly frustrated by their inability to act or offer concrete solutions on the ground. Recall Linda Fasulo's (2009) assertion that we have a fundamental misunderstanding of organizations like UNESCO, fearing them to be too strong rather than too weak to be effective. Indeed, some delegations complained that such inaction called into

9. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco_director_general_presses_washington_to_restore_us_funding/.

question the Committee's integrity, yet most of their time was spent drafting a statement of condemnation. France quipped that they were not addressing a State Party, so could be fairly sure that the perpetrators would not be reading the declaration or following it. Undaunted, German Ambassador Nibbeling-Wrießnig called for a minute's silence, saying, "We have lost a child, we have lost a parent today."

Deliberations over the situation in Mali and the draft declaration continued the following day. Committee members wrangled for hours over wording like "rehabilitation and reconstruction" and were plagued by problems of translation between the English and French terms for "safeguarding." Chairperson Mitrofanova posed the more uncomfortable questions: When could UNESCO send a mission, since realistically it would be unsafe to do so now? Given the budgetary constraints, who exactly will pay for such promises of reconstruction? The Indian Ambassador characteristically retorted that UNESCO lacks both the mandate and the capacity to take any action in Mali.

We cannot do this. . . . The international community has to do things at the request of the state community. . . . We're getting into dangerous terrain." In the end, it was left to Mitrofanova to recapitulate UNESCO's economic and political predicament: "All we have are computers, papers and pens. . . . You're dealing with bandits and criminals and we only have paper and pens. The international community at this time has not set up specific actions and effective measures, which those who take human life and destroy cultural heritage have. . . . The call to reason does not always produce the best outcome with these people.

Final Thoughts

UNESCO, I was once told, is a fascinating topic for an archaeologist to research. On the one hand, the organization signifies everything, a powerful and universal symbol, providing the only global standard for recognizing and protecting archaeological heritage. On the other hand, it means so little to archaeologists: they scarcely understand its processes and are often outside its capillary networks of power. It is this uneasy polarity I find compelling. In theory, UNESCO constitutes the arena where archaeology reaches worldwide attention, and yet archaeologists themselves are largely invisible in the political processes, governance, and public profile of the organization. Despite the valid critiques of the World Heritage List and its Eurocentrism, the recognition and value that inscription bestows is remarkably still desired by almost all the nations of the world, regardless of political or religious affiliations, economic status, or historical trajectory. That fact, in itself, offers a powerful lens onto the potentials of something called heritage in political, cultural, economic, and spiritual terms. And despite the criticisms made currently by the members of the Committee, those are the very same nations that continue to aggressively lobby for the same emblematic recognition and privilege that inscription affords.

World Heritage, considered a near universal instrument for preservation and cultural memory, and by many as a driver for development, peace, and intercultural dialogue, may be deeply imperfect and in serious need of revision. Most senior officials at UNESCO and within the World Heritage arena would almost certainly agree. Whatever the obvious shortfalls, the 1972 Convention remains one of the most powerful mechanisms for countries and communities to showcase their particular historical achievements to the wider world. Yet, as this paper outlines, the Convention faces significant challenges and must realign itself with more encompassing understandings of heritage globally coupled with the contemporary needs of divergent communities. Much more archaeological and anthropological writing has been devoted to the many criticisms of World Heritage on the ground, to preservation regimes, nationalist agendas, forced relocations, indigenous resistance, and other forceful challenges that are increasingly being launched from multiple fronts.

Looking back on the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention in 2002, UNESCO found it necessary to develop a new strategy, dubbed the Five Cs: Credibility, Conservation, Capacity Building, Communication, and Communities.¹⁰ On reflection, these five issues continue to be both imperative and unresolved a decade on. Coupled with these urgencies, UNESCO faces a burgeoning suite of new challenges that I have documented above—challenges to the economic and political order of things. Put simply, the three pillars of the Convention (the World Heritage Centre, the Advisory Bodies, and the World Heritage Committee) now find themselves more often in conflict than in collaboration. With the ramping up of nationalist agendas and political pacting to ensure site inscription, the effectiveness of ICOMOS and the IUCN is being eroded by the Committee and by escalating financial constraints. Erosion of expert authority in preference for a process of mutuality may indeed be desirable and in keeping with the spirit of the Convention (see Rao 2010). Yet the way in which transformation has been transacted over the past 3 years has seen diplomacy and cooperation flowing unidirectionally. States Parties serving on the Committee, like Brazil in 2011 and India in 2012, have taken every opportunity to impugn the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies, whether in discussions about inscribing sites or those endangered by mining, conflict, or disaster. Ambassadors on the Committee may be impelled to toe their government's line on critical issues, but on others they act as rogue agents, offering opinions based on nothing more than touristic impressions or paternal sentiment. On the other hand, state representatives must also counteract the views of powerful countries like Germany that continue to espouse ethnocentric opinions, as demonstrated in the 2012 World Heritage Committee meetings (see Meskell 2013). Given these growing tensions, Rao's proposal for a system of greater cooperation

10. Originally it was only four Cs in the Budapest Declaration: the issue of "Communities" was added later (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/177>).

throughout the entire World Heritage process, fostering a collaborative global effort between the Center, the Advisory Bodies, and States Parties, appears to chart the most credible, transparent, and professional way forward for the Convention.

While the Committee currently has considerable power to push through the inscription of sites, it is ostensibly powerless to protect those already on the List, as the case of Mali demonstrates. In addition, political alignments between States Parties like the United States and Israel have attempted to hamper the ambitions of Palestine to garner recognition and sovereignty within the United Nations. The overwhelming support for Palestinian membership has meant that the US fiscal withdrawal, although not yet one of UNESCO membership per se, has further harmed the organization and its ability to operate. Taken together, these three new threats (to the Advisory Bodies, to the transparency of the Committee, and to the budget) critically impede the functioning and funding of the World Heritage process. During the thirty-fifth sessions in Paris, there was talk of the "death of the Convention." At UNESCO's fortieth anniversary, the desire to join the List continues unabated and, with renewed calls for reshaping its future, the organization is adapting to its criticisms, obligations, and requests, albeit in greatly reduced circumstances.

Acknowledgments

A version of the paper was delivered as the opening address at the World Archaeology Congress at the Dead Sea in Jordan, and I am grateful to Claire Smith for that invitation. Other colleagues who deserve special mention for sharing their expertise are Claudia Liuzza, William Logan, and Gamini Wijesuriya. For their invaluable insights into UNESCO World Heritage, I thank Melissa Baird, Hamady Bocoum, David Berliner, Kristal Buckley, Christoph Brumann, Regina Durighello, Ian Hodder, Sophia Labadi, Ian Lilley, Webber Ndoro, and Lindsay Weiss. I am especially indebted to my colleagues at UNESCO Paris Headquarters, including Lon Addison, Lazare Eloundou Assomo, Alessandro Balsamo, Francesco Bandarin, Marc Patry, Kishore Rao, and Mechtild Rössler, for their generosity and direction. Mark Aldenderfer has supported this topic for a forum piece from the outset, and five anonymous reviewers also provided careful and constructive guidance. Finally, Lisa McKamy has my eternal gratitude for being the best managing editor in the business.

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