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The Consecration of World Heritage Sites – Practice and Critique

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In their work on heritage futures, Cornelius Holtorf and other colleagues go beyond situating archaeology, preservation, heritage and the discourses and practices connected with them in *contemporary societies* as critical heritage studies have rightly done. Instead, they reflect on the implications of archaeology and heritage for *future societies*. In his contribution, Holtorf engages with a recent study by Lewis Borck (2018) on heritage practices as future-making, which examines cultural heritage sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for the regions of North America and the Caribbean. Borck draws on the notion of prefiguration – a very valuable analytic term in Holtorf’s view – in order to describe how “archaeologists use the past in the present to construct a history for the production of the future” (Borck 2018: 232). He is concerned with the choice of sites included in the World Heritage List and thus with current archaeological preservation practices prefiguring – and distorting – the future look back into the past. He claims that with 55 out of 61 listed World Heritage Sites representing vertically-organized societies, the visible traces of Western and colonial societies are highly overrepresented in the regions of North America and the Caribbean. Thus, he worries that this distortion is creating “a hierarchical history [which will limit, HS] our ability to imagine, both implicitly and explicitly, alternative ways to organize collectively outside of top-down power structures” (Borck 2018: 234). While Holtorf is sympathetic to Borck’s approach of drawing on the notion of prefiguration, he calls for more differentiation in this particular case.

Borck’s observation is highly valuable for criticizing the general global misrepresentation of sites included in the World Heritage List. This fact has already been addressed for a long time both inside the UNESCO system itself, with general reflections on Eurocentrism and the imbalance of the World Heritage List (UNESCO 1994), and with the Nara process (Larsen 1995) and critical heritage studies (e.g. Byrne 1991; Kowalski 2011). I would follow Holtorf’s argument that Borck wrongly singles out the contribution of World Heritage listings when it comes to prefiguring history in the future and agree that “there are many other and possibly more significant inspirations and sources for constructing future histories, ranging from educational curricula and mass media coverage to thriving intangible traditions and the reasoning of influencers or professional experts” (Holtorf *infra*: 3). Examining UNESCO World Heritage Sites in an isolated way thus does not make for the best-suited case study to support the claims Borck wants to make. If World Heritage Sites are studied to account for these research questions, it should always be in context with these other cultural practices and discourses that also have an effect on the politics of memory. One of these contexts is an aspect that both Borck and Holtorf are missing: UNESCO World Heritage listings are unparalleled in their effect of orienting global tourism. In an international economy of attention, with nation-states competing globally for their share in the tourist industry, the states use heritage as a resource in their struggles to be noticed globally as attractive destinations for tourism (English 2005; Bandelj and Wherry 2011). With 1.7 trillion US-dollars’ worth of total international tourism exports, as the World Tourism Organization states in a report from 2019 (UNWTO 2019), tourism is a major force in the global economy. If and to what extent World Heritage Sites have an impact on shaping global heritage futures cannot be answered without looking at the dimensions and directions of global tourist flows. In this respect, the contribution of World Heritage Sites to heritage futures becomes evident.

In connection with this, there is another point that both Borck and Holtorf seem to miss or at least underestimate: the importance of heritage interpretation. The mere listing of a site in itself, as distorting as it may be in terms of global representation, does not say anything about its impact on its visitors. Instead, we should also take a close look at how the heritage values of each site are interpreted and communicated. One of the reasons why Western and colonial sites are nominated is that they can serve as sites of remembrance and also as sites for the critique and open discussion of the hierarchical political structures they represent. It is not the site in itself or the mere choice of its inclusion on the World Heritage List that matters, but the way it is embedded in practices of interpretation that makes a difference for the shape of heritage futures.

Holtorf’s view on the UNESCO system seems too vindicating in the end when he writes that “the practices of the [World Heritage, HS] Convention are to a very high degree, and on a global scale, accessible, inclusive, and democratic, collectively fostering peace and security in the world” (Holtorf *infra*: 4). While I agree that the Convention is exceptional both in its global acceptance as a means for protecting cultural and natural heritage and also in international exchange and the understanding for cultural diversity it surely has created, this all-too-positive account misses many points where the UNESCO system currently is flawed or has been from the start. We need a more differentiated look at the consecration practices of World Heritage that should be grounded in sound ethnographic work (Brumann and Berliner 2016; Schäfer 2016, forthcoming; Brumann 2017; Meskell 2018).

I will give only three examples of why and where the World Heritage Convention is currently flawed. First of all, it is – due to the lack of other established international legal structures – a treaty between nation-states. Thus, while the system is democratic in the sense that state members to the Convention get to vote on the members of the World Heritage Committee and those members in turn get to vote on all issues of nomination and preservation pertaining to the Convention, it is a representative body of *governments* and not of the *people* living in the nation-states. There is little voice for the opposition in the World Heritage system. This becomes visible when tensions arise between governments and local communities, e.g., when the positions of indigenous people or other local stakeholders are disregarded for the sake of inscribing sites. As much as UNESCO and the World Heritage Centre are trying to increase community involvement, their power reaches its limits when it comes to the interests of nation-states and thus national governments (Kalaycioglu 2020).

Second, the Convention has seen a lot of “politicization” in recent years (without implying that it hasn’t also been political before). Sadly, although it is still true that negotiations are mostly guided by what is emphatically called “the UNESCO spirit” amongst participants and what can actually be experienced in ethnographic observations at the committee meetings, world heritage nominations are increasingly prone to be instrumentalized for political purposes. This has become evident, for example, in all recent decisions regarding sites that form part of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which have seen great diplomatic upheaval and the eventual departure of Israel from UNESCO. Another example are tensions between the Republic of Korea and Japan about acknowledging the role of Korean (and also Chinese) forced laborers at the Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution. These sites could only be inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2015 after a huge, high-level diplomatic effort, yet the tensions remain on-going.

And third, there has also been a shift in the composition of the national delegations to the World Heritage Committee. As Bernd von Droste, the former director of the World Heritage Centre has observed, in the more recent development of the Convention since 2006 heritage experts in the delegations have increasingly been replaced with diplomats. Thus, Droste concludes that the composition of the World Heritage Committee “reflects elections of a diplomatic rather than technical character, which leads one to suspect that its work may be ruled by political trade-offs rather than by professional judgement” (Droste 2011: 38). I can confirm from ethnographic study of the Committee sessions that the role of experts’ opinions differs heavily from delegation to delegation. In consequence, the decisions about which sites are inscribed on the World Heritage List are only in part guided by heritage professionals.

These three reasons again raise the question of whether UNESCO World Heritage designations are the best case in point for Borck if he wants to criticize *archaeological* preservation decisions. They show the deep entanglement of archaeological, heritage, economic and political issues in the processes of consecrating World Heritage Sites. Accordingly, the contribution of World Heritage to the formation of future histories is a complex matter.

If we want to understand this complexity, we need to take a close look at what actually happens in the processes of designating, nominating, evaluating, interpreting, and deciding about World Heritage Sites. This is why I would call for an interdisciplinary approach in understanding World Heritage that brings together experts with backgrounds in archaeology, heritage management and interpretation, political science, ethnography, sociology and others.

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