

INTRODUCTION



On 25 June 2009, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee assembled in Seville, Spain, for its annual session takes a step that in its thirty-two years of operation, it has never taken before: contrary to the German delegation's wishes, it deletes 'Dresden Elbe Valley' from the World Heritage List. There has been a first delisting of a World Heritage property two years earlier but at that time, the concerned state, Oman, had itself asked for 'Arabian Oryx Sanctuary' to be removed, as that nature reserve had been given to oil prospecting and the oryx antelopes were largely gone. Now in 2009, however, Germany opposes the step, arguing that the controversial new bridge under construction over the Elbe, although much criticized, will not suffice to destroy the World Heritage value of a river valley and cultural landscape more than 20 km in length. Why not wait just one more year and then assess the completed structure without prejudice, the Mayor of Dresden and other German delegates plead. But after more than two hours of tortured and often confused debate, the Committee goes for a vote, using the secret ballot that two state members have demanded. The deletion is decided with exactly the two-thirds majority required.

Several times during the following days, Committee member delegates I talk to feel urged to justify the decision when learning of my German nationality. It has not been an easy step, they say, but since the building project has simply been pushed forward even though the World Heritage Committee had been threatening deletion for already three years, they had owed it to themselves to take a tough decision. The debate shows the Committee divided, as

German lobbying in the preceding weeks has brought some member states over to their side. Of the other states too, none appears to have a particular score to settle with Germany and were it only for their national self-interest, a softer course against one of the world's economic leaders might suggest itself. Yet still, fourteen out of twenty-one states vote for what they say they hate to do, namely delisting a World Heritage property.

Arguably, the delegates are thereby going by one specific interpretation of the Committee's mandate. The World Heritage Convention postulates that the most important cultural and natural heritage sites on earth are everyone's sites, not just those of the nation state in which they are located, and that such universal ownership includes both rights and responsibilities. It follows that when a state neglects its conservation duties, the others must step in to defend the common interest. The debate about the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in 2007 has thrown up the question how this is best done: several states claimed that Oman had no right to ask for deletion, given that the site had become humanity's heirloom, not just the country's. Now in Seville, delegates could also argue for keeping Dresden on the List – severing the formal link with a site does not increase the World Heritage Committee's influence on it. But as that influence has not prevented the construction project – and has not even significantly slowed it down – inaction would amount to rewarding a treaty state that is trampling the Committee's authority, as the critics see it, further encouraging such behaviour from others. Also, the Committee has kept asserting that with the bridge in place, the site will irredeemably lose its 'outstanding universal value', the precondition for World Heritage status. Therefore, with much rhetorical hand-wringing and the inclusion of vague gestures towards a possible future re-nomination of Dresden heritage in the decision text, the deletion of the Dresden Elbe Valley is eventually sealed. In the online version of the List, the entry still features, just like that of the Omani site, but as '~~Dresden Elbe Valley~~ Delisted in 2009'.¹

Six years later in 2015, when a reconciled Germany hosts the Committee's thirty-ninth session in Bonn, the mode of interaction has changed. There is certainly no lack of confrontation behind the substantive issues discussed, such as the destructions of World Heritage properties in war-torn Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. After a major diplomatic drama, Committee member South Korea agrees to adding a series of early industrial sites in Japan to the World Heritage List, on the condition that the wartime forced labour of Koreans in some of these sites be properly acknowledged. And in their usual closed-door negotiations, the Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian delegates fail to come to terms on the Old City of Jerusalem. This leads to the adoption by secret ballot of a decision leaning towards the Arab viewpoint and angry statements that the three delegations subsequently read out. Yet on all other issues, the Committee is in utter harmony. The Seville meeting went to

formal votes over three decisions aside from Dresden and the trend ballooned in subsequent sessions, making these the most contentious in the history of the Convention. Yet in Bonn, only the single vote on Jerusalem is called and all other decisions are by consensus. Delegates also tone down their attacks on the expert bodies advising the Committee, with the belligerence of previous years all but gone.

By returning peace to the meeting room, the Bonn session goes for a different interpretation of global ownership, namely that of unencumbered access to, and use of, the benefits of the World Heritage title for all treaty states. In most cases, the concerned countries receive the lenient decisions they favour, including World Heritage titles for candidate sites not approved by the expert bodies and softened conservation demands for already-listed properties. States thus have no reason to put up a fight – strong wishes are heard now, whereas ignoring a Convention state's pleas to the extent of the Dresden case is out of the question. To this day, no other property has been deleted from the World Heritage List and even the preceding steps – declaring a site as being 'in danger' or the mere threat of this possibility for the future – have rarely been taken against the concerned state's will.

The Puzzle

So what is behind this paradigm change? Why has the World Heritage Committee 'lost its teeth', as some would have it, or why – as others prefer to see it – has it finally begun to operate in a reasonable and inclusive manner? Where has the ambition to be more than the assembled national interests gone and what are the reasons for quite a few participants to believe that such an ambition is misguided to begin with? Who was responsible for crafting the tacit nonaggression pact now in place or was this beyond anyone's control? Building on an ethnography of the World Heritage arena and the way its discourses and practices have developed, this book tries to answer these questions and explain the momentous and, in my view, lasting and irreversible transformation that occurred in the six turbulent years between Seville and Bonn.

This transformation, the book argues, goes beneath the surface level. I identify its root cause in yet another interpretation of universal ownership, namely that of the World Heritage List representing humankind and its achievements in a comprehensive way that reflects their full diversity. More than heretofore realized, lingering imbalances between the Global North and South have contributed to the current sense that the proper way to share the best at a global level is by letting nation states have their way. This is not because the World Heritage arena has shied away from addressing global

inequality and Northern bias; rather, and crucially, reform was promised, but then went only halfway, making the sense of deficiencies and contradiction all the more acute. More than anything else, I argue, a feeling of having been withheld their due has encouraged Southern countries to push for immediate rewards rather than for time-consuming fundamental revisions. The parallels with other global bodies, I will show, are striking, suggesting a larger trend in international governance that presents a serious challenge to present-day multilateralism. World Heritage is not becoming a world affair easily.

Our world has never been more densely interconnected and people were never more at the mercy of long-distance processes, forces and factors reaching into the remotest corners of the globe – the spread of COVID-19 is yet another demonstration. This has certainly increased the common person's awareness of being part of larger entities. However, whether it has boosted planetary solidarity is a different matter. The fortification of national borders, the rise of xenophobia, populism and religious extremism, the unilateralist turn of powerful countries, and the slow progress of global climate policy leave little room for illusions here. Still, universalism, cosmopolitanism and the dream of a brotherhood of men/siblinghood of humans have a long and venerable history, sometimes restricted to communities of religious or political faith, such as Catholicism or communism, but also in a more encompassing fashion. This book is about one such universalist project. This one has a particularly idealistic bent, as it symbolically converts parts of national territories into the property of humankind. It is also administered by the United Nations (UN) agency with the most idealistic mission, the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). With such utopian overtones, to what degree has World Heritage managed to create a connected world of heritage? What does the world own in common here, who is made to represent its interests and how is the world being represented when the World Heritage Committee meets? The title of the book can be read with three different emphases and all three – 'the best', 'we' and 'share' – are put under scrutiny.

The Significance of World Heritage

Engaging with World Heritage is encouraged by the importance that it has acquired in the contemporary world, 'grown beyond anyone's wildest dreams', as one veteran of the arena phrased it to me. I myself recall that when I first saw the bronze plaque with the World Heritage logo on the walls of Cologne Cathedral, this appeared as an obscure honour to me – what could this designation I had not heard of possibly add to one of Germany's most-visited sites? Twenty years on, few people would voice similar doubts. World Heritage has

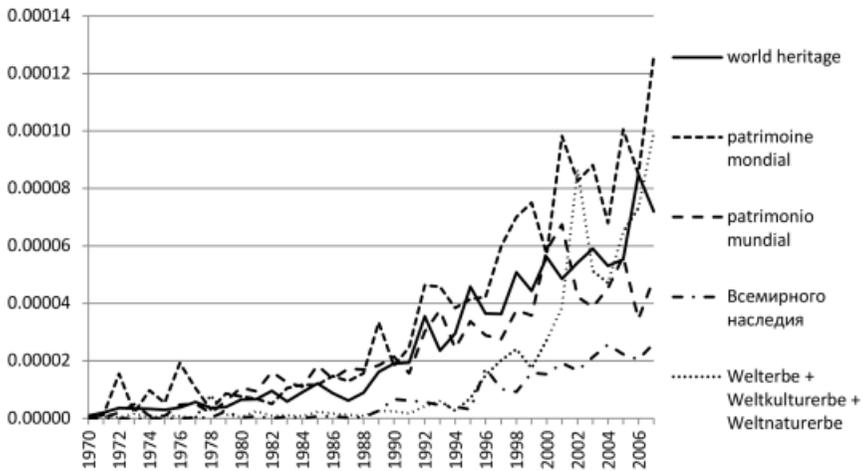


Figure 0.1. Google Ngram values for ‘World Heritage’ phrase and equivalents in printed books. Note: Created by the author based on own Google n-gram search on <https://books.google.com/ngrams>. The numerical values are the percentages of the respective bigram (i.e. two-word compound) or unigram (i.e. word) in relation to the total numbers of bigrams or unigrams that occur in the printed books of the respective language, retrieved with the option ‘case insensitive’ ticked. For better visibility, the table excludes the Chinese 世界遗产 that slowly rose to just under 0.00006 until 2000 but then soared to 0.00039 in 2007 (more than three times as high as any other value), the cutoff year for the Google Ngram data. In German, ‘Weltkulturerbe’ (cultural World Heritage) is used more often than the official term ‘Welterbe’, so I added up the totals for these two terms and ‘Weltnaturerbe’ (natural World Heritage).

become a prominent global distinction and a World Heritage title is rarely ever left unmentioned, even when the likes of the Great Barrier Reef, Angkor or Mount Fuji are being discussed. In Cologne itself, the World Heritage title was key in bringing down a high-rise development plan just across the river that in the eyes of critics would have affected the dominance of the cathedral over the city skyline. The advertising industry marvels how a brand with such traction could be created with so little investment, as a former World Heritage Centre official told me. World Heritage documentaries, tours, websites, apps and publications – from coffee-table books and atlases to serious scholarly treatises – abound. ‘World Heritage’ and its equivalents in other languages have greatly surged in print presence, particularly since the late 1990s (see Figure 0.1), and this is also when the phrase became more prevalent than other ‘world’ compounds such as ‘world map’, ‘world record’ or ‘world news’ – ‘World Heritage’ even managed to beat ‘world peace’ in 2006, perhaps a sign

Table 0.1. Internet search hits for major international competitions and awards.

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|
| Olympics/Olympic Games | 324,000,000 |
| Academy Award(s)/Oscars | 152,000,000 |
| FIFA World Cup | 71,500,000 |
| World Heritage | 71,200,000 |
| Guinness World Record/s | 45,800,000 |
| Nobel Prize/s | 43,800,000 |
| Grammy Award/s | 42,700,000 |
| Eurovision Song Contest | 14,400,000 |
| Paralympics/Paralympic Games | 13,400,000 |
| ISO certified/certification | 12,500,000 |
| Michelin star/s | 11,300,000 |
| Booker Prize | 8,690,000 |
| Prix Goncourt | 6,290,000 |
| (New) Seven Wonders of the World | 6,060,000 |
| Pritzker Prize | 1,350,000 |
| Right Livelihood Award/s | 332,000 |

Note: Numbers retrieved from www.google.com on 12 November 2019, using phrase search and inserting 'OR' between the alternative options that are indicated by slashes or parentheses above (such as in the search entry <'Olympics' OR 'Olympic Games'>).

of the times.² The World Heritage Committee sessions have grown from the congregations of a few dozen conservationists to global events attended by thousands of participants, including ambassadors, government ministers and the occasional head of state. On the internet too, World Heritage holds its own when compared to other globally known competitions and awards (see Table 0.1). It is clearly the one activity most on people's mind when UNESCO is being mentioned, despite the agency's primary commitment to education, and is crucial for the agency's image (cf. also Schmitt 2011: 142). Often, 'UNESCO' becomes a shorthand for World Heritage in popular

reference, such as in talk of ‘UNESCO sites’, showing how much the two things have merged in the public consciousness. And so have the several other UNESCO-administered initiatives concerning heritage, including the sister Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted in 2003 that developed in a sort of love-hate dynamic with the older treaty, which it both imitates and rejects (Brumann and Berliner 2016a: 11–12; Hafstein 2009, 2018: 70–80, 134–35, 162–63).

World Heritage has become important enough to go to war: when the ancient Khmer temple Preah Vihear was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2008, this provoked a series of bloody clashes between the armies of Cambodia, which nominated the site, and Thailand, which claims the temple grounds as its own territory, but had failed to thwart the inscription (see Chapter 5). World Heritage has also become important enough that its deliberate targeting brings publicity. This was demonstrated and clearly intended when Islamic fundamentalists mutilated World Heritage sites in Timbuktu, Mali, in 2012 (see Chapter 1 and the Conclusion) and when ‘Islamic State’ forces followed in their footsteps by blasting the archaeological remnants of Hatra, Iraq, and Palmyra, Syria, in 2015. The very fact that heritage veneration has become almost universal by now, due in no small part to the World Heritage Convention, provokes such spectacular iconoclasm meant to demonstrate the superiority of other authorities and commitments. Nothing has done more to promote the global significance of heritage than the World Heritage endeavour, complete with the risks that go along with celebrity status.

World Heritage can be transformative at and around the sites graced with the title. Often, the designation changes little in terms of actual conservation, particularly when nation states have decided to accept the honour, but not the related obligations, or when they lack the capacity to live up to the latter. What is generated instead may be massive increases in tourism and the corresponding development, lining some or even many people’s pockets, but threatening rather than augmenting protection. It is extremely difficult to generalize about the effects of World Heritage inscription since the more than one thousand properties and their specific national and local conditions are so diverse. World Heritage status has been crucial in stopping high-rise developments in Cologne, Vienna, Riga or Saint Petersburg; giving pause to infrastructural and mining projects in the Serengeti National Park or Kakadu National Park, Australia; or motivating international aid for conserving the ruins of Angkor. If it weren’t for their World Heritage status and how it helps to mobilize a large number of international actors, a World Heritage Centre official told me, the nature reserves in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, such as Virunga National Park, would be long destroyed. There are thus a considerable number of cases where the Convention has served its official purpose. But there is at least an equally long list of sites where the

World Heritage status has made hardly any difference in terms of conservation or has even added challenges in its own right.

As for the people living within, near or from World Heritage properties, a general assessment is even more difficult: in terms of how the prestigious designation generates or reroutes revenues and rights, almost every site has both winners and losers. Insights from ethnographic field studies such as those assembled in a volume I coedited (Brumann and Berliner 2016b) call for caution in expecting what others have hailed as ‘benefits beyond borders’ (Galla 2012). The distribution of the material and immaterial perks created through World Heritage honours is often skewed, and control over sites tends to shift away from local horizons, not necessarily to the Convention’s global bodies but to national, often newly established institutions and their understandings of proper World Heritage management and presentation (Brumann and Berliner 2016a: 24). At the same time, ‘UNESCO myths’ proliferate: people expect wonders from the World Heritage institutions, which these, given their limited power and resources, are almost certain to disappoint (e.g. Istasse 2016: 43, Marquart 2015: 85–95). A detailed assessment of the local consequences of the World Heritage title is beyond the scope of this book. However, without any doubt, the designation is a weighty factor in the transformation of many locations in the contemporary world, including some of the most prominent ones.

The rise of World Heritage also feeds the academic interest in heritage and the formation of a new interdisciplinary field. Overall, the bulk of heritage research is still done on heritage items proper and on the practical problems of their conservation and protection, in such fields as art history, architectural history and archaeology for cultural heritage, and geology and biology for natural heritage; geography features in both camps. Yet, more so than applied concerns, it is the reflection on the social, political and economic contexts of cultural heritage and its conservation that fuels the recent expansion. For the purposes of distinction from the more technical and/or affirmative studies, this approach is often labelled ‘critical heritage studies’ (e.g. Winter and Waterton 2013), for example, in the Association of Critical Heritage Studies,³ which grew to a membership in the thousands within just a couple of years. Not all that is discussed in this context and in such venues as the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, the *International Journal of Cultural Property* and the *Journal of Social Archaeology* is new; older arguments about the invention of tradition (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Hanson 1989; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Lenclud 1987; Ranger 1993), for example, are sometimes reiterated with surprisingly little awareness of these predecessors. And not all of it is quite so critical either, with quite a few protagonists still committed to the intrinsic value of heritage and its conservation, at least if properly cleansed of nationalist, capitalist and classist abuses.

One may question how much of this is due to World Heritage proper, as a general ‘heritage boom’ was already diagnosed when World Heritage was not yet the big buzzword (e.g. Merriman 1989: 14; Walsh 1992: 94) and modernity’s obsession with culture loss has been described as a more encompassing phenomenon (Berliner 2018, 2020). However, if only for the space that general introductions to and overviews of cultural heritage dedicate to World Heritage (e.g. Graham and Howard 2008; Harrison 2012; Logan, Nic Craith and Kockel 2016; Meskell 2015a; Smith 2006; Tauschek 2013; Waterton and Watson 2015) and the frequency with which educational programmes and book series prefix ‘world’ to ‘heritage studies’ – such as at the Universities of Minnesota, Dublin, Birmingham, Cottbus, Turin and Tsukuba – I think its impact can hardly be overestimated. World Heritage is perhaps less momentous in Europe, North America and Japan, where institutionalized conservation goes back to the nineteenth century. There, World Heritage tends to add prestige rather than concrete protection measures to what are already fairly elaborate legal, technical and administrative apparatuses. However, World Heritage plays a larger role in the considerable number of often postcolonial countries where conservation regimes were substantially enhanced or even freshly established in the last few decades. The missionary effects of World Heritage have spread everywhere, and likewise around the world, the wish to be part of a global movement and to meet global standards has become a strong motivational force. Yet in ‘old Europe’ too, World Heritage continues to stir high-flying ambitions and emotions: for example, the candidacy of the Francke Foundation in my workplace, the city of Halle in East Germany, was accompanied by a highly visible public relations campaign and event calendar, down to announcements of the candidacy in every tram that passed by the buildings.⁴ Similar phenomena of mobilization abound, particularly at sites whose fame stands to gain significantly from a World Heritage title. Without doubt, the venture is more than a purely academic matter, and large numbers of people expect something from it, although not necessarily all the same thing.

The Research Context

In dealing with World Heritage and addressing the puzzle outlined above, I build on prior studies of UNESCO and other organizations within the UN system. Primarily investigated by specialists in political science and international relations, these bodies have seen increasing anthropological scrutiny in recent years, building on earlier work about the European Union (EU) (Abélès 1992; Shore 2000) and on a more general trend in anthropology to explore modern organizations. In addition to articles and

monographs, this has brought forth specialized meetings and conference panels, edited overview volumes (Müller 2013; Niezen and Sapignoli 2017) and ethnographic team studies of the World Trade Organization (Abélès 2011) or the ‘Rio+20’ global summit of 2012 (Foyer 2015). Aside from human rights processes (e.g. Billaud 2014; Cowan 2014; Kelly 2011; Merry 2006), anthropologists have been most drawn to UN processes that touch on what is commonly seen as their area of competency, particularly the very interesting and legally innovative activities on indigenous peoples and their rights and traditional knowledge (e.g. Bellier 2013; Groth 2012; Koester 2005; Muehlebach 2001; Oldham and Frank 2008; Rößler 2008; Sapignoli 2017, 2020: 159–207; Siebert 1997) and the aforementioned intangible cultural heritage convention and the way it deals with more ephemeral ‘cultural expressions’, so the term goes, such as performative arts, rituals, folk crafts and cuisines (Arizpe 2011; Arizpe and Amescua 2013; Bortolotto 2007, 2011b; Bortolotto et al. 2020; Hafstein 2004, 2007, 2009, 2018; Kuutma 2007; Nas 2002; Rudolff 2010; Savova 2009). The ‘2003 Convention’ and its list entries are frequently referred to as World Heritage too, but despite such slippages and other mutual influences, it is nonetheless a legally and administratively independent venture.

The central organs of World Heritage proper – the ‘1972 Convention’ – have attracted prior ethnographic curiosity as well (see below). However, few of these studies have been conducted by social and cultural anthropologists. The fact that World Heritage sites are often seen as falling within the province of other disciplines may play a role here. Yet many anthropologists are also unaware how World Heritage has shifted perspective over the years by turning to the remnants of everyday life such as vernacular architecture, industrial plants, trade routes, railway lines or ‘cultural landscapes’ – rice terraces, sacred groves, former maroon hideouts – instead of just focusing on palaces and pyramids. Conservation architects certainly have no edge over anthropologists when it comes to, say, understanding Chief Roi Mata’s domain, a collection of sites connected with the eponymous semi-mythical figure that became Vanuatu’s first World Heritage property in 2008. And some World Heritage bids build on anthropologists’ active involvement, such as that of Marilyn Strathern, who privately contributed funds for nominating the Kuk Early Agricultural Site, which has been Papua New Guinea’s only World Heritage site since 2008.⁵ World Heritage is thus closer to disciplinary concerns than many anthropologists might expect.

Such closeness is also fostered by World Heritage being dominated by cultural rather than natural heritage. The culture concept has been key to the anthropological endeavour: the very formation of the discipline built on extending a term previously reserved for elite achievements to all the everyday ideas, habits, customs, rules and material products shared by the

members of a given group or society. Subsequently in their crusade against scientific racism, Franz Boas and his famous students such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead convinced the educated world that these shared features are in fact socially transmitted rather than biologically inherited. Yet precisely because such a broad, non-elitist notion of ‘culture’ has spread in everyday usage so that people no longer think only of going to the opera when hearing the word, many anthropologists are uneasy with the term. They argue that it lends itself to drawing boundaries and exaggerating differences between groups of people in quite the same way as ‘race’ once did, and there are calls for dropping the concept altogether from the disciplinary toolkit. The lively debate about this issue (Abu-Lughod 1991; Boggs 2004; Borofsky et al. 2001; Brightman 1995; Fox and King 2002; Goody 1994; Keesing 1994; Kuper 1999; Lentz 2016; Rodseth 1998; Sahlin 1999; Trouillot 2002; Wikan 1999; Wimmer 2005), to which I myself have contributed a cautious position (Brumann 1999), may never reach a consensus. Yet it attests to the fact that popular appropriations of ‘culture’ and its uses and abuses through ‘cultural fundamentalism’ (Stolcke 1995) and ‘culturespeak’ (Hannerz 1999) are a relevant concern for most anthropologists, as of course they also are to many related disciplines. World Heritage is a key institution shaping popular understandings of culture today and an intellectual project that, by having opened up to the everyday life of ordinary people and its vestiges, has unwittingly followed anthropology’s own foundational trajectory.

World Heritage, just like other UN bodies and initiatives, also invites reflections on the nature of contemporary globalization. Much discussed in the 1990s (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Brumann 1998a; Friedman 1994; Hannerz 1996; Kearney 1995), globalization seems to have become more of an expected presence in the new millennium, and anthropological debate has shifted towards specific constituent phenomena such as migration, transnationalism, export production, commodity chains and neoliberal regimes, and global mass media. But the principal questions such as whether the cultures of the world are converging or not remain with us, and here the study of the World Heritage arena has insights to contribute. It has been argued that globalization has raised people’s imaginary potential to a new level (Appadurai 1996: 3–11). In this vein, World Heritage properties and their media and virtual representations are key anchors for ‘world-making’ (Brumann 2014b; Meskell 2016: 72; Meskell, Liuzza and Brown 2015: 438), that is, creating and structuring the world in people’s minds and directing their actual and imagined movements through it. World Heritage is a ‘global dream’ in the way outlined by Anna Tsing (2000: 342) and as a virtual global collection and mapping exercise, it has few equals. In the words of Ulf Hannerz, it is one of ‘those interfaces where the confrontations, the interpenetrations and the flowthrough are occurring, between clusters of meaning and ways of

managing meaning; in short, the places where diversity gets, in some way and to some degree, organized' (1989: 211). For an anthropological understanding of globalization, World Heritage therefore has much to offer.

Multilateral Ethnography

For my own approach to the World Heritage arena, I have employed anthropology's special methods, most of all ethnographic field research. In a play on 'multisited ethnography' (Marcus 1995), I have called this 'multilateral ethnography' (Brumann 2012a), given that UNESCO and the governing organs of its conventions are multilateral bodies that transcend the bilateral framework of state-to-state interaction. Of the official meetings of the World Heritage institutions, I attended the World Heritage Committee sessions of Seville (2009), Brasilia (2010), Paris (2011), Saint Petersburg (2012) and most of the Committee session of Bonn (2015), all of which lasted between nine and thirteen days; the three-day World Heritage General Assemblies in the Parisian UNESCO headquarters of 2009 and 2011; one day of the Workshop on the Future of the Convention, also in Paris (2009); and the week-long Closing Event of the Celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in Kyoto (2012). I also participated in one of the week-long annual sessions of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Istanbul (2008) and one day of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris (2011). For all these events except for the General Conference, where my World Heritage General Assembly badge sufficed to get past the doormen, I applied for participation as an observer, a recognized status that many others – including academics interested in heritage and the colleagues mentioned below – also use.⁶ Universal media access to World Heritage Committee sessions was only granted in 2012, but even before this, I did not have the feeling that observer participation was tightly controlled. If anything, lack of space slowed down acceptance for what is the one group of participants on which the proceedings least depend, and I had to appeal to a sympathetic permanent delegation (i.e. embassy of a member state to UNESCO) to speed up admission in one year. The identification badges of all participants are colour-coded, making it obvious to everyone that observers such as me are not state representatives, let alone Committee members with decision-making powers. But once granted access, there are no particular strings attached to participation in the public functions such as the plenary session – where theoretically I could even have asked for the floor – and those receptions and special events that are open to all participants. To what degree this also included food, drinks, shuttle services and the customary excursion differed from year to year, with

Turkey, Spain, Brazil and Russia being particularly generous hosts, whereas other countries appeared to be more closely watched by the taxpayer. For uncovered needs and for travel and hotel accommodation, I used my own research funding.

None of what I did in my field research was particularly unique for an anthropologist. I followed the plenary session from the back seats or the gallery, usually typing a summary of what was happening on my notebook computer, and attended the sessions of working groups and many of the special ‘side events’ outside plenary time. I also made my observations and engaged in informal interaction and countless conversations with other participants over coffee in the lobby outside, in the shuttle buses to and from the events, over lunches, dinners and the conference hotel breakfast, during receptions, on excursions, in bars after hours, in hotel corridors or at the front desks and at the airport. The exchange of emails and text messages came on top of this.

Contrary to other researchers of UN organizations, I made no attempt to do fieldwork in the UNESCO Secretariat or any other contributing organization. I am sure that doing so might have yielded additional insights, but it would also have placed me with the body in question, constraining my interaction with the members of others. I was sometimes included in more special circles, such as social events of the German Committee delegation or the ‘Green Machine’ social meeting of the World Heritage nature experts, but cannot claim to have become an insider to any of them. On average, I reached less closeness to my informants than in my earlier, more continuous fieldwork in Kyoto, even when some friendships developed. However, there is hardly anyone at the World Heritage meetings for whom this is the most intimate social environment.

The meetings are nonetheless very intense events. Precisely because they are finite, people have full schedules and socialize almost around the clock. For many participants, these are much-anticipated high points of their years, where they go to interesting cities, reconvene with colleagues, friends and acquaintances of long standing, and enjoy what is often rather good food, drink, music and artistic performances in inspiring locations such as Oscar Niemeyer’s Palácio Itamaraty, the Alcazar of Seville or the top-floor restaurants of the UNESCO headquarter building with their spectacular view of Eiffel Tower. Most participants will also rarely be in a more multinational environment. I find this comparable to international academic conferences, although World Heritage Committee sessions (sometimes) offer more luxury, a greater professional diversity of participants and perhaps less sense of hierarchy: outside the meeting hall, there is no spatial segregation and – if it is not a private reception to begin with – no gradation of access. Also, since people inhabit different national and professional spheres, the details

of one another's rank are not obvious to everyone. Parts of the meeting have a festive, sometimes even effervescent atmosphere that the slowness of the official session procedures does not entirely kill off, and striking up conversations with strangers is expected behaviour in a setting where most participants spend much more of their time talking than in their usual work-days. Many of them are also deeply invested in specific issues arising and are eager to share their triumphs and frustrations. Time spent in the 'World Heritage village' is thus significantly fuller and more communicative than in less special and high-strung settings. This also meant that in almost all sessions, I ended up dictating rather than typing my fieldnotes in order to catch at least some sleep.

My participant observation was complemented by more than fifty formal interviews with individuals from all contributing organizations, sometimes at the sessions proper, but most often on separate occasions. For these encounters, I often made use of other research and conference travel to locations as diverse as those of the meetings, from Mexico City to Tokyo. I used English, German, Japanese and (for one interview each) Spanish and French, and I taped most of these conversations, assuring my informants that I would not identify them in my presentations and publications. In most cases, I had a list of topics to cover, but was also very willing to follow my interlocutors to whatever they considered meaningful.

When around 20,000 pages of documents are prepared for a single Committee session, much of it in two languages (English and French), the study of texts is indispensable. Alongside the official meeting documents, reports, draft decisions and records, these include a vast production of anything from manuals over newsletters and magazine articles to protest letters by the involved individuals and organizations, self-reflexive documents such as internal audit reports and retired officials' reminiscences and the unending trail of media coverage and comment with which the outside world honours World Heritage activities. Quite a lot of this is available online. Skim reading is essential for everyone intent on not drowning in this flood of words and numbers, and there is no hope of exhausting it, much as there is no hope of capturing everything that goes on in parallel at a Committee session. Just like the conversations and interviews, texts are important sources of factual information and explanatory hypotheses, but they are also part of a World Heritage discourse, which I examine for its recurring tropes and rhetorical figures, tacit assumptions and blind spots. The statutory documents also embody the institutional memory of the World Heritage arena, given that its personnel continues to be replaced over time and that people tend to forget the details. However, texts are not all-powerful here and certainly less so than in judicial institutions. Diplomats heading Committee delegations can be active and effective players while having read only a minimum of the

session documents, relying instead on networking skills, the input of the delegation's experts or simply the political weight of their country. Also, and as in any other institutional environment, texts reflect only part of what goes on: much is too delicate or too self-evident to be put into writing, and the actual meaning and import of documents can only be gauged by observing the social practice they both reflect and engender. There are substantial synergies between these three groups of sources, such as when reading the draft decision text helps in understanding the session debate or when individuals encountered at the meetings are open to interview requests. However, some may be less obvious, such as when hints about the meaning of texts and where to find them in the first place stem from informal session conversations. As an anthropologist, I see my participant observation and interviews as crucial, but it is evidently the triangulation of all sources that has led me to the presented insights.

In general, I felt attracted to the cosmopolitan environment of the World Heritage meetings and not too intimidated by it. I do not mind dressing up and using my foreign languages, including the ones in which I am more limited. I did have the occasional moment of self-consciousness in the beginning when it seemed I was the only person not to know anyone in the crowd, but this was mild when compared with the initial stages of other ethnographic fieldwork. Only once did I have a moment of acute panic of feeling out of place. This was when I joined a couple of delegates who, one evening of the World Heritage General Assembly of 2011 in Paris, suggested attending the reception at 'the Orsay'. I thought they meant the Musée d'Orsay, but when our taxi arrived, it dawned on me that it was the French Foreign Ministry we were about to crash. When the initially sceptical security staff had let us in – a phone call inquiry seemed to produce no clear reason to the contrary – an Australian delegate taunted me that as an anthropologist worth my salt, I had to stick this through, adding that we were all impostors anyway. And so I did, reassured by the observation that other participants no more eminent than me had also made their way into the majestic rooms where Foreign Minister Alain Juppé would welcome us.

This was one of several occasions where my interlocutors engaged with my professional identity. I was open about my anthropological research interest and my home institutions throughout, and most people seemed to find this mildly interesting. To what degree they actually understood my agenda no doubt varied, but the presence of researchers – most of them more strongly invested in what goes on in the arena (see below) – is expected and does not surprise anyone. Occasionally, people would play with my identity, such as the World Heritage Centre official who pointed to other Max Planck Institutes' research on primates when introducing me to the participants of a nature experts' social gathering. Also, a sympathetic International Council on

Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) official joked about people such as herself being the mice in my lab; an ICOMOUSE that would be, I replied, and pointed out that unlike in a laboratory setup, I was a fellow mouse.

However, commonality went beyond the shared humanity of observer and observed in ethnographic fieldwork, in that most participants have a university education and are familiar with modern organizational settings too. Many of them write and speak publicly as well, travel widely and are impressively multilingual – in Laura Nader’s (1972) time-honoured terms, I was ‘studying up’ (cf. also Hølleland and Niklasson 2020). And then also, there is a large grey zone between the social actors in the World Heritage arena and academia, with many moving back and forth; sometimes, I thus wondered whether the scholarly conferences on cultural heritage I attended were occasions to present my research results or rather extensions of my ethnographic field. When a professor inviting me to an international workshop turned out to be a past UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture, when a high-ranking ICOMOS official came to listen to and comment on an academic conference presentation of mine or when a state representative to the Committee, after moving to a university, invited me to give a guest lecture in his heritage studies programme, the feedback circuits were significantly shortened. And so they were when a diplomat of a Committee state told me that after having read one of my publications, his delegation would be a bit more cautious with me from now on. One participant cited me with regard to the contents of a previous incarnation of Table 0.1 (Terrill 2012: 69) and through a natural heritage expert whom I had sent them, my statistics about how current Committee member states receive a disproportionate share of new World Heritage listings (see Table 5.3) ended up in a critical external audit of the World Heritage venture,⁷ to then be taken up repeatedly in subsequent Committee debates I witnessed.

Similar to earlier fieldwork in Kyoto (Brumann 2012b: 9), I thus contributed to and influenced the social and discursive field I was observing. However, there are myriad other influences on the UNESCO World Heritage arena, both from within academia and the wider world, and nothing indicates that mine has been particularly momentous. I doubt that what I write will please everyone in the arena, but several informants encouraged me to be candid, particularly the more critical minds who hoped that what I will disclose will provoke reform.

Important as participant observation was, it is a relative term in meetings such as these. As I did not belong to any of the involved organizations, I took part in informal interaction, but not in ‘backstage’ processes such as the specialized working meetings of these groups or their internal electronic communication. In particular, I was not privy to the diplomats’ and other state representatives’ informal interaction and lobbying, on which a lot of

the decision-making rests, learning about it only through hearsay and candid participants. However, this does not differ from the experience of most others at the sessions, and the scope and span of my fieldwork still led to a wealth of information. Institutional and financial independence also spared me from the dilemmas discussed at the ‘Collaborative Dilemmas’ workshop in 2016, convened by Chiara Bortolotto at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris.⁸ Fellow participants at that event included researchers with all kinds of engagement with the global organizational field – alternating between detached observation of and paid work for their UN body, coming with a specific political agenda, acting as their country’s official representative, even doing an ethnographic study commissioned by the target organization. Obviously, these approaches offer valuable opportunities. What is gained in terms of insider knowledge of specific contributing organizations may then be lost in terms of capturing the bigger picture and of the license to write freely, however, so I do see merits for my own kind of positioning as well.

In the burgeoning literature on UNESCO World Heritage, there are works that share intellectual concerns or methodological approaches with this book and my prior publications (Brumann 2011, 2012a, 2013, 2014b, 2015, 2016a, 2017a, 2017b, 2019a, 2019b; Brumann and Berliner 2016a, 2016b; Brumann and Meskell 2015), so I should outline how I relate to these. As already stated, this is not a study of one or several World Heritage sites; rather, I approach the World Heritage arena through its central institutions. In doing so, I place less emphasis on the exegesis of official texts than some others (e.g. Harrison 2012: 63–67, 114–39; Smith 2006: 88–114). I work from the assumption that what these texts mean in practice and what binding power they have can only be uncovered by scrutinizing institutional practice in depth, not by treating World Heritage or ‘UNESCO’ as a kind of black box to which a unified agency and voice can be unproblematically ascribed (as in much of Di Giovine (2009)). Others have employed fieldwork too, but at earlier stages that do not extend to the period at issue here (Schmitt 2009, 2011; Turtinen 2000, 2006), with different disciplinary backgrounds that place less emphasis on ethnography (Rudolff 2010; Schmitt 2009, 2011) or over a shorter timespan (Hølleland and Wood 2019; James 2016; James and Winter 2015; Schäfer 2016) and with a more limited thematic interest (Larsen and Buckley 2018). There are sophisticated statistical studies of trends in World Heritage Committee decision-making (Bertacchini, Liuzza and Meskell 2017; Bertacchini and Saccone 2012; Bertacchini et al. 2016; Meskell et al. 2014; Meskell, Liuzza and Brown 2015; Reyes 2014) and the underlying expert evaluations (Schmutz and Elliott 2017); others combine statistics with session documents (Claudi 2011) or rely exclusively on the latter (Braun 2007). Still other works try to read World Heritage policies indirectly, from the selection and treatment of World Heritage sites (van

der Aa 2005) or from the nomination dossiers that treaty states submit for their candidate properties (Labadi 2010, 2012). There is a book-length legal commentary on the World Heritage Convention (Francioni 2008). The early period of the Convention is the subject of historical studies and personal reminiscences (Batisse and Bolla 2005; Cameron 2008; Cameron and Rössler 2011, 2013; Gfeller 2013, 2015; Logan 2013, Meskell 2013b; Stott 2011, 2012, 2013; Titchen 1995). And finally, arena insiders and officials have at various points reflected about or defended its contemporary policies in academic contexts (e.g. Cameron 2008; Cameron and Rössler 2013; Rao 2010; Rössler 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Terrill 2014a, 2014b), with this particular genre itself becoming an object of study (Hølleland and Johansson 2019).

The single-authored part of archaeologist Lynn Meskell's work (2012b, 2013a, 2014, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2018) is closest to my own approach, as it is also based on ethnographic fieldwork at the sessions and with the contributing organizations, and makes many similar observations, so much so that we have coauthored one overview (Brumann and Meskell 2015). However, Meskell points to a very large number of explanatory factors for recent transformations, and nation-state 'pacting', corporate interests, global power differentials, regional geopolitical alignments as well as transregional ones (such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) alliance) take turns in being emphasized in individual publications, with no clear theory as to how precisely they interact. I believe that more precision is possible. In her book (2018) in particular, Meskell also treats World Heritage and UNESCO as a continuous social field, suggesting at least implicitly that long-term trends within UNESCO can explain what happens inside the World Heritage Committee – here, I also disagree. Yet, what most distinguishes Meskell's work from my own is that she does not accord the question I raise and the period I highlight special significance; rather, the developments she describes are undated or attributed to longer time periods. If the latter are subdivided, then with different separating dates than the all-important 2010 Committee session that is the key turning point in my account. Needless to say, I draw on all this scholarship and will engage with it in more detail while I proceed, often in the notes; however, I am convinced that none of it explains the puzzle initially outlined.

Given my prior interest in globalization, the anthropological concept of culture and its public usage, and cultural heritage policies in Japan (Brumann 1998a, 1999, 2002, 2009, 2012b; Brumann and Cox 2010), World Heritage has been an obvious topic to get involved with. The commons aspect of what is stylized as the 'common heritage of mankind' was also important in my studies of the survival of common-property arrangements in utopian communes and of the problems of protecting Kyoto's historic townscape as

a collective resource (Brumann 1998b, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2012b). Moreover, introducing the cultural heritage of Cologne to its visitors as a tour guide back in the 1980s and 1990s has given me some understanding for the position of ‘heritage believers’, my term for people sympathetic to conservation and convinced of the intrinsic merits of cultural heritage (Brumann 2014a). But much as all this has drawn me to the World Heritage arena, I align myself with the venerable Boasian anthropological tradition of cultural relativism, that is, providing ethnographic description and explanation without passing judgement. I try to take other people’s investments in and/or criticisms of it seriously – practising the ‘heritage agnosticism’ I preach (Brumann 2014a), not ‘heritage atheism’ – but I am not committed to the World Heritage endeavour myself. As is expected from an anthropological study, this book refrains from accepting the self-presentation of the World Heritage organizations and their personnel at face value, and looks behind the formal side of things. Inevitably, this leads to the deconstruction of received understandings and the identification of gaps and discrepancies between official representations and actual workings. Readers invested in the official representations may therefore feel under attack. At times in my account, I also wonder why specific obvious alternatives to the established measures and procedures were never tried out, which readers might understand as promoting these alternatives. However, this is not my intention, and neither do I wish to formulate a ‘critique’ of the World Heritage system, write ‘for’ or ‘against’ World Heritage or its components, subject them to a systematic assessment or evaluation, or launch a reform agenda. If ‘critical heritage studies’ implies any of these commitments, this book is not a contribution to that field.

I think that such a detached position is unremarkable for a social anthropologist, but I am all the more surprised that it is far from common when World Heritage comes into play. Take, for example, the comments to a recent contribution to one of anthropology’s leading journals (Meskell 2016): David Byrne warns that ‘the field of heritage conservation practice ... needs to take a big step back from World Heritage’ (ibid.: 85); Martin Hall claims that ‘an insistence that the World Heritage list is “above” and “outside” everyday conflicts ... is dangerous’ (ibid.: 87); Charlotte Joy wonders if ‘the World Heritage List [is] merely an empty and cynical exercise’ (ibid.: 88); and Chiara de Cesari asks: ‘Do we really need such a list?’ (ibid.: 86). Meskell herself, in other work, states that ‘World Heritage ... may be deeply imperfect and in need of serious revision’ (2013a: 492) and sees it as in ‘gridlock’ (2015b) and a ‘current crisis’ (Meskell et al. 2014: 13). If the topic were, say, cross-cousin marriage, pastoralism or shop-floor strategies of resistance, I would be surprised about a similar urge to ring alarm bells and I wonder where it comes from. Note that neither of these comments bothers to define the standard against which World Heritage is dangerous, empty, not needed,

imperfect, cynical or in crisis, as if this were self-evident. There seems to be an assumption that heritage conservation is principally desirable or could be so if only conducted properly, and that a less politicized World Heritage system allowed to fulfil its official function would be preferable to the current one. Also, I find it striking that the onus is mostly on perceived deficiencies regarding the uses and abuses of heritage sites and site communities – the World Heritage arena might be accused of letting down global equity just as well, but this is raised much more rarely.

Many a reader, particularly from the heritage field, may be disinclined to question the intrinsic value of heritage and of a multilateral body dedicated to its protection. However, let me be clear that I do not share this view. Whether conservation in general and World Heritage in particular benefit the world is a complex question I do not intend to answer; anyone venturing into doing so would need a clear sense of what is good to begin with. I admit to have been rather pleased when an ICOMOS official, after listening to one of my presentations, expressed her surprise at how fond my description of the arena appeared to her. A sympathetic relationship to the people populating the research field is a precondition for thorough ethnographic research, as even colleagues working with the most challenging subjects (Hedlund 2019; Smith 2011) personally confirmed to me. Yet I neither root for World Heritage nor do I long to bring it down, and while global fairness strikes a stronger chord in me, this penchant should also be no criterion for judging this book. My simple goal is to explain how the World Heritage arena works and why it has changed in the way it has.

The Structure of the Book

For some initial familiarity with the setting, Chapter 1 takes the reader through the twists and turns of a World Heritage Committee day, including both the formal proceedings and the informal interaction unfolding around it. Chapter 2 spells out the utopian premise of World Heritage, namely the idea that the world's most important sites do not just belong to the country in which they are located, but also to humanity as a whole, a new idea in international law. It then describes the path towards the adoption of treaty based on this idea in 1972. Chapter 3 tells the story of how the utopian premise and promise was put into practice, through increasing growth and elaboration, reform of what was perceived as Eurocentric bias and increasing Committee self-assertion against recalcitrant nation states. This culminated in the deletion of Dresden in 2009, which probably saw World Heritage at its multilateral apex. Chapter 4 turns to the immediate aftermath, the Brasilia session of 2010, which redefined the World Heritage game, and how a new

mode of Committee operation more in line with treaty state wishes was normalized over the next few years.

The search for the causes of this transformation begins in Chapter 5, which describes the strong identification of actors in the World Heritage arena with their nation state, the ascendancy of career diplomats, which has boosted national self-assertion, the clear evidence of national self-serving and the lengths the Committee goes to in terms of trying to stay out of other nations' business, particularly when the latter is contested between two or more of them. Chapter 6 shows that established procedures for submitting World Heritage nominations, watching the condition of listed sites and taking decisions in the Committee session are vulnerable, offering multiple entry points for vested interests. Chapter 7 demonstrates that vaguely defined and applied core concepts and a surprising degree of case-based improvisation likewise do little to give nation states pause. Chapter 8 penetrates to what I see as the root cause of dissatisfaction and rebellion, the vastly uneven representation of Global North and South on the World Heritage List and the reasons why even in the aftermath of the rebellion, fundamental revision is pending and Southern solidarity is weak. The Conclusion then looks at the root cause of the root cause, the absolute definition of World Heritage value, which, in the absence of numerical limitations, was destined to provoke 'prize inflation' at some point, as it also did in the allocation of other famous distinctions. After all, the World Heritage arena and its actors depend on growth, and despite all complaints, nobody strongly presses for the closure of the World Heritage List, making a fundamental turnaround unlikely.

But let us first take a closer look at Committee business, travelling to the Russian summer for this purpose.

Notes

1. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list> (retrieved 25 August 2020).
2. Cf. <https://books.google.com/ngrams> with input 'world heritage,world map,world record,world news,world peace'; option 'case-insensitive' ticked; time range from 1970 to 2007, corpus 'English' and smoothing of '0'.
3. www.criticalheritagestudies.org (retrieved 25 August 2020).
4. Disappointment was all the greater when the expert evaluation was so negative that the bid had to be withdrawn before the 2016 Committee session.
5. Cf. <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/887.pdf>, p. iii (retrieved 25 August 2020).
6. Representatives of 'non-profit-making institutions having activities in the fields covered by the Convention, according to criteria defined by the World Heritage Committee, may be authorized by the Committee to participate in the sessions of the Committee as observers' (Rules of Procedure, 2015 version, § 8.3). Different versions of the Rules of Procedure from the first to the current 2015 version can be found at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/committee> (retrieved 25 August 2020). Curiously, the admission of observers is

only fully approved in the respective Committee session proper, as item 2 on the standard agenda, when observers are usually already in the room.

7. WHC-11/35.COM/INF.9A, p. 83. Wherever possible here and in the following, I cite the official document code, not the URL. These documents are online, but their URLs tend to change over time, so that a web search for the code is the surest route to the document.
8. See <http://frictions.hypotheses.org/47> (retrieved 25 August 2020).