

# World Heritage Sites and the Culture of the Commons

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My research looks at whether there is a world culture and seeks to determine which places, monuments, artworks, or artifacts might be meaningful to large swaths of the global community. Since differences among cultures — or "clashes of civilizations" — have been extremely visible and well documented over the past forty or fifty years, I have tried instead to explain how and why the idea of a universal or global culture has retained some appeal during the same period.

One organization that has been particularly effective at the task of defining and protecting a global cultural heritage is the World Heritage Committee. Under the auspices of UNESCO, the World Heritage Committee has developed a process for designating sites of outstanding universal value and distributing funds that can help member nations protect these sites. This enormously popular program has brought recognition to many endangered sites, at the same time that it has weathered some complicated organizational and philosophical storms.

To come to an understanding of the World Heritage Committee's goals and methods, I visited its headquarters in Paris and studied the records of the Committee's annual meetings. Examining those materials has led me to conclude that both the success and the controversy associated with the World Heritage site program can be attributed to features it shares with many other organizations housed under the United Nations umbrella. The heritage site program is routinely underfunded, bureaucratically complex, and vulnerable to domination and criticism by influential member states (especially the United States). Nonetheless, the World Heritage Committee has successfully articulated standards of excellence that bridge differences between a European monumental tradition and non-Western concepts of culture. Also, the organization has over time developed an administrative culture that balances the interests of member states from all regions and political traditions.

While investigating the World Heritage Committee, I also discovered that protecting a global cultural heritage has led this organization to become increasingly vocal in its criticism of the neo-liberal economy. Its leaders initially adopted a fairly accommodating tone when the organization was founded in the 1970s, but following the crisis period of the 1980s (when the United States withdrew from UNESCO), spokespeople for the World Heritage Committee began to assert themselves more forcefully and critically in public. Since the 1980s, they have not only revised their own working documents several times and added new categories of "heritage," but they have also taken the lead in arguing for the protection of sites endangered by warfare, ecological damage, and development. For instance, they were prominently involved in arguing for the preservation of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. This new public role is in part the result of the increasing centrality, since the 1990s, of the concept of "the commons" in the World Heritage Committee's understanding of its mission. In its most recent projects, the World Heritage Committee has, with increasing frequency, described protection of the cultural commons as an alternative to its exploitation by proponents of a global neo-liberal economy.

In addition to documenting the interesting and impressive history of the World Heritage site program,

this research has also allowed me to come to some conclusions about how we might understand the political and economic aspects of globalization. First, if the case of the World Heritage Committee is in any way typical, then it suggests that the spread of neo-liberal policies may indeed weaken the authority and autonomy of some small or regionally disadvantaged states — states that have regularly struggled for recognition within the World Heritage Committee. Secondly, and at the same time, this case study illustrates the fact that globalization does not erode political authority in general. International governmental organizations such as the World Heritage Committee have arisen to fulfill some tasks that territorial nation-states now have difficulty completing on their own. The World Heritage Committee has, after all, been relatively successful in protecting an important public good: the preservation of cultural heritage. Finally, at the broadest level, this case study paradoxically suggests that a thriving global culture might turn out to depend on a continuing international commitment to administration. If we take the success of the World Heritage site program seriously, then we can responsibly conclude that although global cultures certainly vary enormously in their content, that variety can become widely available when it is coordinated by an expedient and instrumental system of management. A lessening of some forms of state autonomy might, in other words, allow for the emergence of new forms of institutional authority devoted to the protection and preservation of global culture.