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Multilateral Ethnography: entering the World Heritage arena¹

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Abstract

Ethnographic fieldwork as a key anthropological method has been successfully applied to organisations, and this working paper argues that it can also be used profitably for the structured ‘arenas’ unfolding between organisations, in this case the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972. After a brief description of its rise to global prominence, I describe the constituent organisations and their patterns of interaction, refuting the idea of a centralised system. There are few obstacles to doing ethnographic research at World Heritage Committee sessions and meetings, and doing so is rewarding not only during official session time but also for following the intense informal conversations around it. Formal interviews with key participants both profit from session insights and motivate new observational sensibilities. Written documents remain a key source of information but omit important aspects of the sessions and read differently with background knowledge of the people and issues involved. Feeding back into the arena through one's comments and publications is impossible to avoid but adds only one further voice to a dense discursive field. Particularly when studying the constituent organisations in great depth is not an option, concentrating on the arena between them is therefore a fruitful ethnographic option.

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Introduction

Fieldwork is not an anthropological prerogative. Geographers and sociologists engage in it, too; combining ‘fieldwork’ or ‘field research’ with ‘marketing’ yields more internet search hits than combinations with ‘anthropology’; and it is perhaps primatologists who do the most demanding fieldwork when spending years on habituating themselves with wild-living apes. Yet still, anthropologists pride themselves on the depth and thoroughness of their fieldwork and generally believe it gives their insights a crucial edge over those of other disciplines interested in the human condition. Anthropologists have also successfully transplanted the method from the small villages and nomadic camps, where it was developed, to modern settings such as cities and organisations.

This working paper will argue that fieldwork is also useful for researching the more amorphous social environment of the UNESCO World Heritage that cannot be simply summarised as “an organisation”. The meetings of the World Heritage Committee take place only once a year, and although the sessions and after-hour events are very long and intense, they last a mere eleven days. With more than one thousand participants from more than 150 states showing up, it is difficult to determine, which culture and language is to be learned and deciphered here. During most of the session time, one is confined to sit silently in one's place, and during the breaks and side events, there are hundreds of parallel conversations and interactions of which a single fieldworker can only capture a tiny part. Also, everything revolves around written documents – up to 20,000 pages per session – and all that is said and decided will itself be officially recorded on hundreds of pages and posted online. Still, participant observation is possible and yields crucial insights. Before showing how exactly I go about multilateral ethnography, some familiarity with the World Heritage arena and its history is required.

The Rise of World Heritage

The idea of World Heritage goes back to the 1950s and 1960s when, after a devastating war, the heyday of architectural modernism and unprecedented environmental damages assailed the world's cultural and natural heritage. In 1959, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) orchestrated a safeguarding campaign for the Nubian monuments at Abu Simbel, which could eventually, with donations from more than 50 countries, be transplanted outside the reach of the Aswan Dam waters. Further such campaigns for Borobudur, Moenjodaro, and Venice strengthened the idea of global responsibility for humanity's most important sites so that, in 1972, the General Conference of UNESCO member states adopted the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” (whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext), innovatively combining cultural and natural preservation in one legal instrument (for the early history, see Titchen 1995). After this international treaty entered into force in 1976, the World Heritage Committee met for the first time in 1977, and the following year, it entered the first 12 inscriptions on the World Heritage List, reserved for those select sites that have “outstanding universal value” – “OUV” in short – according to at least one of six cultural and four natural criteria. Initial expectations were of around a hundred such sites and in any event, the list was not the only objective of a convention that also expects national conservation efforts from its signatory states. Yet with growing popularity, ever more states made use of their nomination right, and not a single year has passed without new inscriptions. The tally has reached

936 sites in 153 countries by now, and 189 states – almost all there are – have ratified the Convention, making it one of the most successful international treaties.

Clearly also, it is the single most popular activity of UNESCO these days, much as this UN specialised agency continues to present education as its core commitment. The number of internet search hits for World Heritage rivals that for other international distinctions such as the Nobel Prize or the Academy Awards; and for attracting tourists and boosting national or local self-esteem, the World Heritage badge can have a dramatic effect. World Heritage atlases, coffee-table books, TV documentaries, and specialised websites and apps allow for the virtual experience of the prized sites. Master programmes in World Heritage Studies are opening from Dublin to Tsukuba, establishing an academic sub-field in its own right with a considerable publication output. Even war has been waged over World Heritage: since the inscription of Preah Vihear in 2008, Cambodian and Thai troops have repeatedly clashed near this ancient Khmer temple to which they both lay a territorial claim. World Heritage is an important factor in present-day “world-making” (an expression I owe to Richard Rottenburg), that is the creation of globally shared standards and global consciousness. The stellar rise of the convention has exceeded even the most optimistic expectations.

A number of anthropological studies have already addressed the effects of World Heritage entanglements at the sites and candidate sites.³ What I myself try to do in my ongoing research is to scrutinise the central World Heritage institutions and their decision-making, and I see several good reasons for doing so. One is that despite a good deal of anthropological comments on UNESCO discourse and institutions and some research by geographers and European ethnologists (Rudolff 2010; Schmitt 2009, 2011; Turtinen 2000, 2006), nobody has studied the World Heritage arena in very great depth so far, and one rather sees a black-box treatment where – as in Di Giovine’s (2009) book – “UNESCO” is taken as an unproblematic collective actor doing or saying things. For a global institution drawing so much public and political attention, this is a poor record, in a general field – transnational institutions – that has not been at the heart of anthropological inquiry anyway.⁴

It is all the more so since ‘culture’, one of our key disciplinary concepts, is so central here: contrary to initial intentions, three quarters of all sites have been inscribed for their cultural rather than natural aspects, making the World Heritage system a major player in shaping public ideas of what this thing called culture actually is. In dealing with culture, the system has also had to fend off a (self-)accusation very familiar to anthropologists: the World Heritage List has been found to be Eurocentric, given that almost half of all sites are in Europe and North America where only one sixth of the world’s population lives. Reacting to this embarrassing fact, a number of reforms have been initiated. The “Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List” (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/globalstrategy>) adopted in 1994 calls for less emphasis on palaces, cathedrals, and historic town centres and more attention to the common person's everyday heritage “in a broad anthropological context”. In the aftermath, a number of categories such as prehistoric sites, cultural landscapes and routes, vernacular buildings, industrial sites, or 20th-century

³ See, for instance, Adams 2004, 2005; Berliner 2010; Breglia 2005, 2006; Breidenbach and Nyiri 2007; Buergin 2002, 2003; Collins 2008; Dahlström 2003; Hauser-Schäublin and Klenke 2010; Owens 2002; Peselmann and Socha 2010; Probst 2004, 2011; Green 2009; Joy 2011.

⁴ See Abélès 1992; Atlani-Duault 2007; Ben-Ari and Elron 2001; Ghosh 1994; Groth 2010; Koester 2005; Little 1995; Muehlebach 2001; Niedner 2005; Riles 1998, 2000; Rößler 2008; Shore 2000; Siebert 1997.

architecture have been newly introduced or significantly strengthened, and 53 countries had their first site inscribed.

The World Heritage List now features such entries as the sacred grove of Osun in Osogbo, Nigeria (a religious centre and major site of Yoruba artistic revival and cultural creolisation) or the domain of the last Roi Mata/paramount chief of Vanuatu (important in Polynesian oral traditions), both sites that were inscribed precisely for the features that would make them the province of anthropologists rather than art historians in most people's eyes. World Heritage frustrations were also a major force behind the adoption of a separate UNESCO convention for intangible cultural heritage in 2003, which has again captured both public and anthropological imaginations to a significant degree.⁵ Further evolution of World Heritage is to be expected, given the enormous pressure from all sides onto the system; the many challenges to the Committee's preservation mandate; the resentment against European dominance felt by many non-Western participants; and the critical shift of the Committee sessions of 2010 and 2011, where political lobbying and strong countries from the global South were taking over to an unseen degree. As a further justification, anthropologists the world over are increasingly bumping into people's engagement with the UNESCO heritage regimes and should know what they are dealing with.

An Organised Arena

Much as it is often implied, also by anthropologists, World Heritage is not the product of a single organisation. Rather, there is a whole array of such bodies, tied to each other through set procedures but with neither of them in exclusive control. UNESCO is only one player here and itself organisationally complex, befitting an institution whose unusually broad thematic portfolio covers education, natural and social sciences, culture, and communication. UNESCO is a UN "specialised agency" with headquarters in Paris and 65 field offices worldwide in which it employs a multinational staff of around 2000.⁶ These international civil servants and their countless temps and interns, headed by a Director-General (currently the Bulgarian Irina Bokova), form a typical bureaucracy with hierarchical ranks; segmentary sections, departments, and offices; a fine-grained division of responsibilities; and extensive procedural regulations. However, they are not more than the "secretariat", whose task it is to implement the policies and measures decided by others, namely the General Conference of all UNESCO member states (meeting biannually) and the Executive Board (meeting semi-annually) to which member states elect 58 from their own midst. The relationship between these governing bodies and the secretariat resembles that of parliament and ministries on a national level where to see these as a single, streamlined organisation would also be a simplification.

UNESCO is a 'standard-setting' rather than funding or implementing organisation, and the most binding of its 'normative instruments' are the conventions, 28 of which have been adopted by the General Conference, so far. Since these are international treaties, they must each be ratified separately by member states, and while some conventions have found favour with not more than two dozen states, others, such as the World Heritage Convention, have been almost universally ratified, even by non-member states of UNESCO. Reflecting this legal independence, the more

⁵ The International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) has set up a special scientific commission for it.

⁶ For a general although not very penetrating overview, see Singh 2010.

important conventions as well as some other UNESCO activities such as the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission have their own, separate governing system that exists parallel to the UNESCO General Conference and Executive Board. The secretariat and executive arm of the World Heritage Convention, responsible for running all its activities, is the World Heritage Centre, a branch of the general UNESCO bureaucracy, which occupies its own building on the headquarter premises. And just like the UNESCO bureaucracy in general, what the Centre will do or not do is decided by itself but in the annual session of the World Heritage Committee, composed of 21 states which the General Assembly of all “States Parties” (the signatory states) elect from among their own ranks in their biannual three-day session. The general UNESCO framework – a bureaucracy held to put into effect what a board of national state representatives decides – is thus replicated, and the same applies for the 2003 convention on intangible cultural heritage or the 2005 convention on cultural diversity, which also have distinct governing bodies and secretariats.

To participate in the work of all these governing bodies, member states appoint “permanent delegates”, either their ambassador to France (most smaller and poorer states) or a separate person of ambassador rank (most larger and richer states), and these representatives and their personnel are dispatched by the country’s foreign service (most Western states), by government ministries related to UNESCO topics such as education or culture (most non-Western states), or by both, for example career diplomats as junior staff backing up an ambassador from the cultural field. For special activities such as the World Heritage Committee sessions, these permanent delegations are usually joined by experts in the respective field, which may hail from yet other government agencies. Ambassadors are usually in charge of the strategy, but some states in the World Heritage Committee make a point of empowering their experts, leaving everything up to their decision. However, the internal balance is not made explicit: whoever speaks for a given state is considered to be expressing the state position rather than an individual or organisational one, and it is always the state, not a named individual, that is given the floor.

While the single delegation can thus be already organisationally complex, UNESCO has 195 member states and the World Heritage convention 189 signatories, all of them independent actors with their separate interests. Most people agree that UNESCO is more egalitarian than other UN agencies: consensus decisions are sought wherever possible, and while the general weight classes of global politics do hold, recognised opinion leaders include the representatives of states with smaller populations than a Parisian *arrondissement*. Political alliances and shared national language often translate into closeness in UNESCO activities, and since many UNESCO boards and other activities assign a fixed number of seats to each of the six electoral groups (roughly corresponding to world regions), there are often rotating arrangements and expectations of mutual support within these groups. For the more prominent activities such as World Heritage, however, these regularly break down. This means that if the World Heritage General Assembly is like a parliament with the state delegations as MPs, it is a parliament without parties to structure the interaction.

And as if this was not enough, there is also a kind of judicative in the case of World Heritage. As foreseen already in the convention, three “advisory bodies” are consulted for the evaluation of new candidates for the World Heritage List, the monitoring of inscribed sites, professional training, and contributions to expert meetings, special reports, etc. although their recommendations do not bind the Committee, which retains ultimate authority. Of these three bodies, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), responsible for culture, is a non-governmental international organisation with individual membership, national sub-committees in many countries worldwide,

and a relatively humble secretariat in Paris. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – known also for keeping the Red List of Threatened Species – is an organisation of organisations, which has both government agencies and NGOs as members. This is reflected in its rather more impressive headquarters near Geneva and its network of more than 45 field offices worldwide. And finally, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome specialises in conservation research, training, and advice. It is an intergovernmental organisation like UNESCO, with 130 state members.

To sum up, the World Heritage convention thus involves a part of the UNESCO bureaucracy; an intergovernmental committee elected by an assembly of States Parties; almost 200 national governments of States Parties, as represented through their permanent delegations to the UNESCO and task-specific technical experts; and three international NGOs and IGOs. All of these constituent organisations have a global reach through their embassies, field offices, or national committees. How these organisations interact in regard to World Heritage is governed by detailed prescriptions; in that way, this is certainly a highly ‘organised’ field. To see it as a single organisation to which the label “UNESCO” can be meaningfully applied, however, is misleading.

This is not to deny a great deal of informal interaction, cross-cutting personal ties, and a shared culture. Much of the World Heritage activities are centred in the two UNESCO complexes in Paris where not only the World Heritage Centre but also many permanent delegations have their offices, using the same corridors and restaurants and attending the same special events. All World Heritage General Assemblies, some Committee sessions, and occasional special meetings take place in the in-house meeting halls so that many technical experts are also regular visitors. There is certainly a special UNESCO style, for example, in the familiar forms of interaction (first names are commonly used, even among ambassadors and when speaking French) or in the attention given to attire (this is Paris after all). Most World Heritage Committee sessions, however, are held away from Paris in changing locations worldwide, hosted by Committee states competing for the honour, and there are a good number of people in the state delegations and among the advisory body staff, who have no other UNESCO business than with the World Heritage convention and who visit Paris only rarely. Even within the halls of UNESCO headquarters, the more junior diplomats, bureaucrats, and experts interact little beyond their own peer groups.

What unfolds around World Heritage is neither a single organisation nor an organisation of organisations in the way IUCN is. I rather prefer the metaphor of an arena. With its connotations of publicness and competition, I think this image does justice to what the participants experience as a familiar playing field with agree-upon rules, governed by standard spatial arrangements in the meeting room; detailed procedural routines; and set expectations of diplomatic rhetoric and etiquette. While the Committee makes ultimate decisions, the many independent organisations that meet in the arena have no formal authority over one another, their tasks and interests diverge, and they engage in sometimes rather conflictive exchanges that produce both winners and losers. But they remain distinct organisational players. To be sure, personal ties between the diplomats of different countries or between World Heritage Centre staff and advisory body experts develop when they cooperate in joint initiatives or go on monitoring missions together, and the culture and nature conservation experts in the Centre, the state delegations, and the advisory bodies belong to the same professional spheres. The culture expert who is seen attacking the unfavourable ICOMOS evaluation of his state delegation’s World Heritage nomination may himself be an ICOMOS vice-president and show more organisational loyalty on other occasions. Such double binds, however,

are regarded as problematic, and the separation of roles, for example between the Centre and the advisory bodies, and mechanisms against conflicts of interests have been strengthened in recent years (although the rather crucial issue of Committee members deciding about their own World Heritage nominations remains). So rather than blurring organisational boundaries – a phenomenon that has attracted some attention recently in such forms as outsourcing, networks, or inter-agency teams (e.g. Marchington et al. 2005) – the World Heritage arena actually reinforces the lines between the constituent organisations, leaving them fairly conventional and decidedly ‘non-fuzzy’. Hence, this is not a diffuse network (Riles 2000) or an entirely amorphous social field but indeed an arena that is predicated on clearly bounded organisational players and their structured, rule-governed, and often antagonistic interaction.

This is not the first time I study such a public arena although it did not occur to me to use the term earlier. In my 20 months of fieldwork about the townscape conflicts of Kyoto in 1998/99, 2001, and 2007 (Brumann 2006, 2012), public meetings – lectures, symposiums, panel discussions, etc. – also played a large role; in part, they made up for the relative powerlessness of the public at the time, providing at least the relief of debate. Here too, there were a variety of organisations – the city administration, citizens’ groups, neighbourhood associations, professional bodies, etc. – with diverging tasks and interests. And here too, there was contestation, about how best to reconcile modern-day development and high-rise ambitions with Kyoto’s historic built fabric and special atmosphere. Most of these meetings were just for discussion, not decision-making, and I did not only study organisations but also residential neighbourhoods (for the methodological details, see Brumann 2001, 2012: 4–10). Still, the two studies are comparable and I will point out parallels and differences in the following.

Entering the Arena

‘Classic’ organisational fieldwork within the World Heritage Centre, the permanent delegation of a UNESCO member state, or IUCN headquarters would be interesting in its own right. Access to top-level decision-making, however, would be hindered by the tacit or explicit conditions of confidentiality under which, for example, negotiations between UNESCO ambassadors, decisions in the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel, or official monitoring missions to problematic sites are undertaken. Also, the more obvious and intimate the researcher’s association with the selected organisation, the more difficult it would be to gain access to other organisations in the World Heritage arena, which, as outlined above, often have fraught mutual relationships. For these reasons, I concentrate on the arena proper, that is the relatively public sphere of the official meetings, and largely refrain from taking part in the internal, more ‘private’ life of the organisations. Over the years 2008–2011, I have attended three Committee sessions, two General Assemblies, one ICOMOS General Assembly, and a number of related meetings and conferences, including one committee session of the sister convention on intangible cultural heritage.

As I had to travel to Quebec, Brasilia, Seville, Istanbul, and of course Paris for these ethnographic assignments – the list will grow further and sufficient funding is evidently required – this is an example of what George Marcus, in a widely quoted article, has called “multi-sited fieldwork” (Marcus 1995). Yet, although locations change, the meeting room is similarly arranged with organisations, ranks and functions similarly distributed, and the personnel and practices of this arena endure to a considerable degree. One could therefore also see my fieldwork as a fairly

continuous presence at a single site, which just does not happen to be in the same place all the time but instead reconstitutes itself intermittently. This is familiar to some extent from Kyoto, where the 'townscape scene' also reassembled regularly, generally for shorter periods of time but much more frequently, also suggesting the idea of a continuous field site.

To enter the World Heritage field site is not entirely straightforward. In 2012, press will be admitted to World Heritage Committee sessions for the first time, and the presence of scholarly observers unattached to one of the participating organisations is a lacuna in the rules of procedure. Until the list of observers is accepted by the Committee – usually as the second agenda item and while the observers are already in the room – there is no certainty to be gained. I was refused participation a few days before the 2008 Committee session for lack of space but possibly also because I had not thought of backing up my online registration with supportive measures. Now I do, sending explanatory letters and alerting influential contacts when I sense obstacles, and I have been admitted ever since. Admission to other UNESCO activities – some of which are defined as public anyway – is often less problematic although the Executive Board and General Conference are entirely out of bounds, at least in theory.

Once granted, admission does not mean total freedom of movement. The meeting room is hierarchically ordered, with the chairperson wielding his or her gavel sitting in the centre of a podium, flanked by the rapporteur (responsible for recording the decisions), the director of the World Heritage Centre, the legal advisor, and – depending on the agenda item – further personnel from the Centre, other UNESCO branches, and/or the advisory bodies. The front rows or the central aisle of desks facing them are reserved for the Committee states, followed by other state delegations, the representatives of other multilateral organisations, accredited NGOs, and finally the unattached observers, who sit furthest back, usually unable to see what is going on in the front seats. The current speaker is often televised to a screen, but the Paris session of 2011 where I could actually face Committee members and the podium, looking down on them from a gallery, was nonetheless a new experience. Some movement through the room during session time is in order but too much of it would be disturbing and clash with other priorities such as taking notes.

Additional meetings take place alongside the plenary session, some in the morning or during the lunch break and others in parallel, and their accessibility varies greatly, with security personnel and other gatekeepers themselves being confused at times. The daily Bureau meeting that discusses procedural matters, endlessly readjusting the timetable, is open only to state representatives. The Committee usually also sets up a number of working groups to pursue urgent matters in depth and again, these may either be closed (for example the working group examining the World Heritage Centre's budget) or entirely open, as also are special information sessions about particular initiatives or for general orientation. There are internal meetings of the participating organisations, usually in their assigned rooms, that are closed to all non-members; and there are the so-called "side tables" for the politically most sensitive issues (Preah Vihear, Kosovo, Jerusalem and other Israeli and Palestinian sites) for which the diplomats of the concerned states try to negotiate a consensus decision for acceptance without debate by the Committee with no one except the designated mediator(s) present. Thus, participant observation is a relative term.

During most of the sessions and other meetings open to me, I sit behind my notebook computer, listening to what is being said or to the interpretation available over headphones – English and French are the official languages but Spanish, Arabic, and the language of the host country are usually offered too – and typing a rough summary. Official records are published only with long

delays, and then in condensed form and purged from the more incoherent and impulsive interventions, so that having my own notes is valuable. I also record as much of the emotional outbursts, interesting nuances of tone, revealing phrasings, spontaneous joking, procedural glitches, and off-stage interaction as I can, although the effort of acoustically understanding the speakers or interpreters and grasping and spontaneously translating their intent – I use a mixture of much German and some English when I have little time to think – can be quite absorbing. Typing away for what may amount to ten single-spaced pages per day probably gives me less time to suffer from what is often a rather tedious process, when uncontroversial agenda items are ticked off bureaucratically; diplomatic pleasantries or the obligatory expressions of political tension (as between Israel and the Arab states) consume time; speakers repeat yet again what has been amply pointed out already; obvious misunderstandings are not clarified; debate zooms in on the choice between “The Committee notes with concern” and “The Committee notes with regret” in a decision text, and session progress slows to a snail’s pace.

The most extreme experience in the latter regard was the debate over a new election procedure in the General Assembly of 2009: half of one morning session was spent on the question who, in the (stochastically rare) case of a tie in the second, simple-majority round of votes, will proceed to the third ballot – only the tied candidates or also those with less votes? Nobody was able to tell me who, short of finding oneself in this very specific situation, could possibly have a strong stake in either of these alternatives, but a heated debate developed nonetheless and could only be resolved with a time-consuming roll-call vote that, to top it off, produced a tie itself. (The matter was then settled and a consensus decision formulated through informal negotiations over the lunch break.) Given the ever expanding agenda and everyone’s wish to avoid still more night sessions running until eleven, many items are hardly introduced at all and cannot be followed without some familiarity with the respective documents, and quite a few matters remain undebated if no Committee member insists, meaning that the draft decision formulated by the World Heritage Centre and the advisory bodies stands. Not surprisingly, many participants’ attention lags during a good part of the proceedings, especially when the eagerly awaited discussion of new nominations is over, and one sees them turning to conversing with their neighbours, checking their smartphones, or chatting in the lobby. Nonetheless, there are also exciting and emotional moments when almost everyone is attentive, and there are jubilation, passionate words of thanks, and congratulation queues when the Committee decides to add a new site to the World Heritage List.

As soon as one leaves the hall to drink a coffee outside, one enters the different world of semi-private, informal communication that accompanies every moment of the session. In the lobby, over meals, in the shuttle buses, in the moments before and after the proceedings, at the evening events and receptions, or while queuing and waiting, it is no problem at all to have hundreds of conversations during a single session, both with people one already knows and with strangers whom to address out of the blue is considered entirely acceptable. It is here and after hours in bars and restaurants where one listens to the participants’ comments on, explanations of, and guesses about what is happening in the sessions and learns background details about persons, organisations, and debated issues. The participants’ need to talk is fuelled by the fact that many are emotionally involved – tense when their site is up for debate, relieved when all has gone well, angry about unwelcome decisions, or confused as to what a cryptic decision actually means. And as usual, a relaxed environment and alcoholic consumption make people less guarded. The extent to which these conversations can be steered varies greatly, particularly in group situations, but then, one

hears a lot of things one would never have thought of asking. Many of the bits and pieces collected here develop their full value only in the aggregate, when combined with the thousands of other puzzle pieces already picked up. Taking notes must often restrict itself to the occasional jotting down of keywords, for example during a visit to the bathroom, but I try to write down or tape my recollections as soon as possible when standing in a quiet corner or after returning to my session desk or hotel room.

There is an element of collective effervescence to the Committee and General Assembly sessions, given that this multinational crowd is stimulating; friends and acquaintances of long years' standing meet another time; food, drink, and music are often good and free; and Oscar Niemeyer's Palácio Itamaraty, the Alcazar of Seville, or the UNESCO top-floor restaurants with their spectacular view of the Eiffel Tower are inspiring settings. I find much of this comparable to the academic conferences I go to although more luxurious, with a greater 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, and people inhabit different national and professional spheres so that the details of their rank may not be apparent to each other. More than in the meeting hall, it is here where I would like to bring along a few clones of myself in order to fan out and maximise the harvest of contacts, views, and reported facts. Invariably, I find myself taping my field notes rather than typing them to catch at least some sleep. An inconspicuous digital recorder to dictate my observations accompanies me all the time, and I also carry a small camera.

For attending these meetings and events, I usually dress formally in suit and tie, just like most other participants do. I derive some pleasure from wearing something that I rarely use in my ordinary days and hope that it gives me added respectability although – just as for my academic titles and institution – I believe it varies greatly and will not do much to impress, for example, a senior diplomat or government minister. Speaking English is sufficient for the sessions and for most casual interaction although other languages such as my fluent Japanese and my somewhat rustier Spanish and French have been useful too in informal conversations and for picking up nuances in people's session interventions. Although participants hail from all over the world, they are similar to each other (and also to myself) in crucial respects: almost all have graduated from universities and quite a few still work there; many of the experts write and publish; almost everyone has travelled widely; and many are enviably multilingual and eloquent, belonging to a cosmopolitan stratum that, while usually well-paid, is perhaps richer in cultural than in economic capital (as this is UNESCO, not WTO). Most of them know what an anthropologist is, having a clearer idea of what I do than people in previous fieldwork, and most of them find my presence at least moderately interesting, joking that they are the mice in my laboratory. One also meets people who have an anthropological background themselves, and I was pleased to find one of my former students among the UNESCO staff. This means that my own sphere and those of my informants overlap, a point to which I shall return.

Many participants provide insightful comments on the World Heritage arena, and one has to take care to not just talk with the East European professor of architectural history who analyses everything so nicely but also with the South Asian national park manager who is there for the first time, knows little about the procedures, and is interested only in the few minutes when his own site might come up for debate. Where my informants differ most from myself, however, is in their relation to the subject matter: they are usually unafflicted by the cultural relativism of anthropologists, and the importance of heritage and the greatness of at least some of the sites is a

natural and obvious fact to them, not the product of social construction that I have been trained to see here (although as a former tour guide to the Roman and medieval monuments of Cologne, I know how it feels to be on their side).

Interviews and Texts

Alongside my participant observation, I meet World Heritage protagonists from all the above organisations for formal interviews. Most of these appointments are separate from the organised events, which leave little time for this, so I make separate trips or use the occasions offered by unrelated conference travel (leading me to Budapest, Geneva, Paris, London, Mexico City, and Tokyo so far). The interviews last between thirty minutes and three hours, taking place in the interviewee's office or in public places such as cafés, and are usually of the semi-structured variety where I have a list of questions and topics but am also quite willing to follow my interlocutors if they bring up other interesting things. While I meet some people for the first time, most interviews grow out of contacts made during the sessions with people who appear interesting, influential, representative of relevant viewpoints, and accessible. A verbal interview request is rarely rejected, and most people I ask are quite willing to produce their contact details although when I try to arrange concrete appointments by email, their readiness to respond can be a different matter. I usually tape the conversation, promising that the recording is confidential, and take notes whenever informants prefer that, either typing or recording an oral version of these notes as soon as possible after the interview. People are generally quite used to an interview format, as they were in Kyoto where I also extensively relied on this method.

These interviews are no less crucial than participant observation, not just for learning about the general mindsets and values behind people's session behaviour and how their observations confirm, or else differ from, my own but also for learning more about the inside life of their organisations, which – as already mentioned – I do not study directly. Of course, this is not a full alternative but many of my interlocutors are quite perceptive, reflecting about their surroundings in interesting ways. Even when there is no reason to assume that they are exceptionally gifted in the difficult task of accurately describing one's own social and cultural environment, combining independent sources and picking up the recurring topics yields what I think is a fairly realistic picture. Some participants are also dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, waiting for someone to expose it, and they quite willingly share even possibly embarrassing details. People's accuracy can be gauged to some extent by double-checking with other informants, inferring from their truthfulness about independently known facts, and considering their vested interests in particular versions and also their relationship to me (where closeness should translate into truthfulness at most times). But in the end, I will have to present much of what I hear as reported fact only, and others will have to do the exciting field studies that UNESCO or IUCN headquarters promise. I think that alternating interviews and participant observation is helpful, since meeting attendance produces new and finer tuned questions and interview insights direct my attention to previously overlooked aspects of the meetings. Interviewed persons are also often more candid when we meet again at the meetings. All this is no different from my Japanese fieldwork.

And just like there, a third important source of information comes in, and what I said above about the mutual fecundation of sources applies as well. These are texts of all kinds, generally more than I would wish for. Written World Heritage discourse is almost boundless and includes the tens of

thousands of pages of session documents; a vast production of anything from manuals and newsletters to magazine articles and protest letters by the involved individuals and organisations; more self-reflexive documents such as internal audit reports or the reminiscences of retired functionaries; and the vast trail of coverage and comments with which the outside world and its mass media honour World Heritage activities. Quite a lot of this is available online, allowing automated searches. Just like the conversations and interviews, these texts are important sources of factual information and explanatory hypotheses, as, on a different level, they are also part of a World Heritage discourse, which I examine for its recurring rhetorical figures, tacit assumptions, and blind spots. The statutory documents also embody the institutional memory of the arena, given that its personnel continue to be replaced over time and that people tend to forget the details. Texts are not all-powerful, however – certainly less so than in judicial institutions – and many an ambassador representing a Committee state performs effectively while having read hardly a line themselves, relying on their accompanying experts and networking skills instead. Skim reading is important both for my informants and for myself, and there is no hope to exhaust this universe, just as there is no hope to capture all that goes on at a Committee session.

Speaking to the Arena

Just like in Kyoto, where quite a few of my informants were professors and writers themselves, this discursive sphere and the one for which I myself write overlap. Important actors in the World Heritage sphere have started out as researchers with similar concerns as mine, and as noted above, the field of World Heritage studies is expanding. While a practical, applied interest is often constitutive here, this is not always true, and it does not rule out perceptive self-reflection. Evidently, my own writings will feed into this field, too, and they start to do so already now when I share first texts and statistics with my informants and then see them utilised in their reports. This parallels my Kyoto experience, where some of the most interesting developments and insights were kicked off by presentations of my research results to informants. It is impossible to remain just a fly on the wall, as I realise when the organisations' office-holders approach me to introduce themselves, having heard of my project, or when at a social meeting of the nature experts after a long session day someone introduces me as everyone's anthropologist and has me take a turn in the delivery of funny speeches the group is engaged in.

Even more so than in Kyoto, I thus find myself in a postmodern field situation with all kinds of feedback loops that will certainly increase further once my publications find a reading. I think that financial independence from the studied environment remains important, but otherwise both my Kyoto and my current World Heritage experience speak against too much concern with my own influence on what I study. Our informants' reactions to our interpretations of their utterances and actions are on a meta-level to these utterances and actions, but nothing prevents us from reflecting and writing realistically and conscientiously about them and our own eliciting role. Also, my voice is only one in a rather large chorus of outside comment on World Heritage and it is unlikely to be particularly loud.

Protection of informants becomes more problematic in such a prominent field, however. I try to conceal individual informants by blurring or slightly altering the details, and just like in my book on Kyoto, I will not point out when a mentioned informant is also the author of a text I cite. Hiding the central organisations of the World Heritage arena would render everything pointless, but these

are powerful organisations, not quite in the league of the US government, Microsoft, or the Security Council but used to public scrutiny and to defending themselves when treated unfairly. I also see with some relief that quite a bit I could divulge is becoming public knowledge anyway, through the publication of candid audit reports, an increasing number of press articles carrying details of the unprecedented political manoeuvring of the last two committee sessions (The Economist 2010; Stührenberg 2011), and not least Cablegate, which revealed interesting facets of World Heritage diplomacy. Compared to the effect of a full-length critical article in a magazine with a print run of one million (such as Fichtner 2008), whatever I write can only have modest repercussions. Or so I tell myself, curious about what will actually come of it.

Conclusion

Fieldwork is not the only source of authority for what I plan to write, and it will be significant in different ways for different parts. My planned book cannot do without a detailed look at how World Heritage has arisen and changed over time in such matters as conceptions of authenticity, immaterial aspects, or human-rights considerations. For these longer-term developments, reading past decisions, session records, programmatic statements, as well as the work of other scholars will be more important than my fieldwork, which covers only the last stage of a 40-year history. Contingent as some World Heritage decisions and texts are on the specific dynamic of their production – sometimes a point where everyone involved is at a loss to explain them in retrospect – these texts and decisions then become a baseline for further production. A purely textual approach to these sources is therefore legitimate; after all, they were produced for this purpose.

I remain convinced, however, that my fieldwork – the interviews and even more so participant observation – does make a difference, starting with how I read the texts. A session record is not the same when one knows the personalities and agendas behind the utterances, and many interesting aspects are just too trivial, sensitive, or embarrassing to enter into the record. I received confirmation for this when meeting a seasoned anthropologist for whom my third session was the first: while she had studied previous records extensively, she still said that these had prepared her in no way for the – to her rather shocking – session reality. Also, the World Heritage arena is a travelling village in many ways, and just as fieldwork in a real settlement, prolonged presence gives one the usual rewards of habituation and trust from fellow inhabitants. My insight, closeness to informants, and general feeling of belonging have grown in a similarly non-linear way as in my more ordinary fieldwork in Kyoto, certainly not to the same overall extent but quite considerably for the only one and a half months I spent observing meetings and conferences so far. I am a familiar face to many now, discovering shared acquaintances creates closeness when I meet new people, and importantly, informants no longer hold back among themselves as much when I am within earshot. I learn more that way and could not think how else I could get into this position, other than by coming again and again. I draw confirmation from precisely the more ambitious press articles such as those cited above, which unearth a lot but still misinterpret crucial details.

All this speaks strongly for the value of ethnographic fieldwork not just inside organisations but also in the structured, more or less public arenas situated between organisations. Even when studying the constituent organisations in equal depth is not an option, concentrating on the arenas – intermittent though they may come into existence – can yield crucial insights. This does not speak at all against interviewing key actors and scrutinising the textual production; on the contrary, the

latter is as indispensable as in any organisational environment, and interviewees become friendlier when one has met them before. But the most effective strategy will be one in which all three methods – participant observation, interviews, documentary analysis – are applied in parallel, in an ongoing effort of triangulation that mutually enriches their use. Where the arena is a public and much observed one, there is no way of not becoming a public figure oneself due to one's presence and publications – interpreting the other is certainly not the fieldworker's privilege here. But in a time “when they read what we write” (Brettell 1993), this will increasingly become our shared professional destiny.

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