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Capturing the Supra-State: the World Heritage Committee in 2021¹

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Abstract

This paper offers a close analysis of the 2021 session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and its outcomes, including the decision to delete the Liverpool historic port and docks area from the World Heritage List. In recent years, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee has abandoned its once strict standards for the inclusion of sites and instead has catered to the self-interests of the treaty states – namely, maximising World Heritage titles while minimising Committee interference with the sites. By looking at the interactions during the session, it is shown that the removal of Liverpool does not indicate a change in course. Bilateral lobbying and deal-making were conducted more openly than ever and the much-deplored dominance of European sites on the World Heritage List continued, while states from the Global South were complicit in sustaining what they officially question. As demonstrated by comparison with another property up for deletion, Liverpool was an outlier that might well have been avoided, had the United Kingdom done more for orchestrating support among Committee member states. In analogy to state capture, most members practice what can be termed supra-state capture: they harbour no multilateral ambitions, but rather than merely constraining the UN body, they appropriate its benefits for their own interests and that of their allies and clients.

¹ I wish to thank Danaé Leitenberg, Oscar Saleminck, Dittmar Schorkowitz, and Bénédicte Selfslagh for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. The views expressed are my own and not necessarily shared by these colleagues.

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Introduction

The World Heritage Committee session in July 2021 did not fail to leave its mark. Three days before the start of the session, the Italian government announced a ban on cruise ships entering the San Marco canal, the San Marco basin, and the Giudecca canal in Venice. Previously, these vessels used to sail right past St. Mark's Square on their way to anchor in the port in the city centre, towering over gondolas and palazzos and endangering the sinking foundations of the city. The world press reported that this measure was to discourage the Committee from putting *Venice and its Lagoon*³ on the "List of World Heritage in Danger", with the removal of the World Heritage title being a possible next step.⁴ Later, in early September, the International Hydropower Association (IHA) promised to refrain from projects that would affect World Heritage properties, a considerable number of which are nature reserves. In making this commitment, member corporations, which together are responsible for one-third of global hydropower capacity,⁵ followed the example of leading mining businesses organised in the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) and other major firms in the extractive industries.⁶ But the most dramatic measure was taken by the World Heritage Committee itself when it deleted *Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City* from the World Heritage List in its session. The property had already been transferred to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2012, but this had not stopped rampant construction activities that the Committee saw as destroying the historical features. The deletion was only the third in the Committee's history and the second to be forced on an unwilling country.

All these incidents might give the casual observer the idea that the World Heritage Committee is playing its expected role as the stern guardian of humanity's most valuable heritage, one who is not to be provoked by governments and big business, but to be treated with respect instead. This is markedly different from how recent scholarly literature and press articles have painted the Committee, particularly its recent decisions: heritage conservation demands, technical expertise, and objective standards are reported to be liberally ignored, with sessions instead being dominated by national interests and deal-making (Bertacchini et al. 2016; Bertacchini et al. 2017; Brumann 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021; Brumann and Gfeller 2021; Hølleland et al. 2019; Hølleland and Wood 2020; James 2016; James and Winter 2015; Liuzza 2021; Meskell 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; Meskell et al. 2014; Meskell et al. 2015). The 2021 session was unique, coming after the cancellation of the 2020 annual session due to the Covid-19 pandemic (the first year since 1977 in which no annual session was held); it was also the first to be conducted as a video conference rather than as a live meeting. Did this coincide with a more general turnaround, away from "politicisation" – the label that session participants often use for the reign of national interests – and towards standing its ground in its defence of the world's heritage? And does it contradict my own analysis, published just months earlier, that had rejected the possibility of another World Heritage property being deleted against the wishes of the site country – as had happened in 2009 with *Dresden Elbe Valley* in Germany – as being "out of the question" (Brumann 2021: 3)?

³ Here and in the following at first mention, I refer to World Heritage properties with their official names as spelt and capitalised in the World Heritage List (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list>), indicated by the use of italics.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/13/world/europe/venice-italy-cruise-ship-ban.html>.

⁵ <https://www.hydropower.org/news/hydropower-sector-makes-no-go-commitment-on-world-heritage-sites-with-duty-of-care-for-protected-areas>; <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2335>.

⁶ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/extractive-industries>.

In the following, I shall argue that this is not the case. As a detailed reading of the session will show, 2021 did not mark a new direction for the Committee; rather, tendencies of recent years were continued and even taken to new extremes. Decisions catered even more intensely to national self-interests, and bilateral lobbying and deal-making were conducted more openly than ever. European sites continued to dominate new World Heritage listings despite officially declared intentions to encourage a more equal distribution, and, yet again, states from the Global South were complicit in keeping the List “Northern”. In this context, the decision to delete the Liverpool property was an outlier: as a comparison with the treatment of a similarly threatened property that ended up being retained will show, the deletion of Liverpool might well have been avoided, had the United Kingdom done more to orchestrate support among Committee member states. Thus, in spite of isolated actions that might suggest otherwise, the World Heritage Committee continues its transformation into a partnership of convenience whose members are busy pursuing their self-interests, firmly resisting any attempts to bind them to fulfilling their multilateral mandate. In analogy to state capture – that is, a condition that results when elites harness public bodies to their private interests – here we see what may be referred to as supra-state capture.

This paper is, in a sense, a postscript to my recent book (Brumann 2021), which provides a more extensive analysis of the World Heritage Committee sessions. For this reason, an in-depth discussion of the history, organisational setup, conceptual framework and anthropological significance of that arena is beyond the scope of this paper. While a brief overview of the World Heritage Committee and its workings is provided below, readers who wish to know more are referred to my book and other publications (such as Brumann 2019).⁷

The World Heritage Committee and Its Recent Transformation

The World Heritage List was launched in 1978 with the first 12 entries. Since then, the World Heritage Committee has added between 7 and 61 properties in each of its annual sessions, for a current total of 1154 properties in 167 countries.⁸ The key requirement for inclusion is laid out in the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage⁹: the candidate site must have “outstanding universal value” (“OUV”). In the Operational Guidelines,¹⁰ the rulebook of the Convention, this is defined as the fulfilment of at least one of ten criteria – six for cultural and four for natural sites. The Committee allocates moneys from its World Heritage Fund for conservation activities. Financial sharing through this system is modest, however, so that the main incentive is clearly the prestige that comes with inclusion on the World Heritage List. This honour readily converts into tangible capital through attracting tourism and investments, boosting local and national pride, and improving conservation at the sites. Most of this occurs in a decentralised way, however, outside the control of the transnational World Heritage framework that only intervenes in the most urgent cases brought to its attention. In many ways, World Heritage is a franchise: it leaves

⁷ My observations are based on the archived web stream of the Committee session (at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/44com/records>; they can also be accessed on UNSECO’s YouTube account). In spite of the online format of the session, it still was familiar terrain in many ways, as I have conducted on-site ethnographic observation of five past Committee sessions (Seville 2009, Brasilia 2010, Paris/UNESCO headquarters 2011, Saint Petersburg 2012 and Bonn 2015). Citations of specific comments made during the session are referenced in this paper using the time and date stamp as well as a link to the corresponding section of the relevant YouTube video.

⁸ Cf. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat>.

⁹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext>.

¹⁰ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines>.

substantive action to national and subnational forces and to more resourceful global bodies (cf. Brumann and Berliner 2016) but offers a reputation and brand value that stirs grand ambitions the world over (Brumann 2021: 4–9).

Once a nomination for World Heritage inscription is submitted to the secretariat of the Convention – the World Heritage Centre housed within the Parisian headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – an evaluation process takes place. Experts commissioned by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) examine the candidate site, by way of desktop reviews based on the nomination dossier and an inspection visit. They then recommend either inscription on the List, postponement to future sessions – called “referral” (when minor revisions of the bid are required) and “deferral” (when major revisions are required) – or rejection. Once a property has been inscribed on the World Heritage List, the state of its conservation is regularly assessed by ICOMOS and IUCN, together with the World Heritage Centre and occasionally also the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM, the third “Advisory Body” provided for in the Convention text). The assessment is based on information provided by the site country as well as third-party sources and the Centre’s and Advisory Bodies’ own monitoring missions to properties threatened by various developments. Since 2003, the Centre and the Advisory Bodies have followed the practice of other UN bodies by compiling their input into draft decision texts: for almost all agenda items, these form the baseline for debate in the long session days (for more on the nomination, inscription and monitoring process, see Brumann 2021: 155–178).

All these activities are considered advisory in nature, however, and ultimate power rests with the “States Parties” to the Convention – that is, the countries that have joined and declared themselves bound by it; at present 194 countries have signed. Only treaty states can nominate properties on their territory for World Heritage inscription. Decisions are the prerogative of the Committee, whose 21 members are themselves States Parties elected by their peers in the biannual General Assembly of the Convention. During their staggered four-year terms, there are few constraints imposed on these member countries: their delegations must not engage in advocacy for their own national sites in the sessions, but they can still nominate candidate sites and apply for other benefits of the Convention. They also do not have to waive their vote when their own sites are concerned.

For a long time, the Committee by and large followed Advisory Body and World Heritage Centre advice in the sessions, with deviations being the exception rather than the rule. This changed with the 2010 session in Brasilia, however, when a Committee majority challenged the draft decisions to a hitherto unprecedented degree, lowering requirements for List inscription and demands for conservation measures according to the site country’s wishes. Resistance by the Advisory Bodies, the Centre, and a minority of Committee members was brushed aside. This pattern hardened over the next years when lenient countries replaced the few strict ones on the Committee. By 2015, outright conflict was largely gone, flaring up only in bi- or trilateral skirmishes over contested territories and difficult pasts. Overruling expert advice in the session and swapping pre-negotiated support for this purpose have become common practice from which only a small minority of Committee members refrain. These diplomatic deals are most often arranged by the “Permanent Delegates” (i.e. ambassadors) to UNESCO stationed in Paris, who usually head the national delegations at the World Heritage Committee sessions wherever in the world these take place. In consequence, disappointment

over what matters most to treaty states – their own national sites – has become a rare experience (Brumann 2021: 83–127).

Avoiding the Danger List

Ignoring the wishes of the country affected was, if anything, even rarer in the 2021 session than in the past, despite what the Liverpool deletion might suggest. The Committee (composed of Australia, Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, the Russian Federation, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, and Uganda) left *Selous Game Reserve* in Tanzania on the World Heritage List, even though the draft decision had also proposed deletion (see below). Likewise, none of the seven World Heritage properties that the experts recommended to transfer to the List of World Heritage in Danger were actually moved there.¹¹ The only addition to this list was *Roşia Montană Mining Landscape*, a candidate site for which Romania itself had asked that the World Heritage inscription be combined with an immediate Danger Listing.¹² For the other cases, however, the site countries opposed the proposal, in yet another demonstration of deep ambivalence regarding the Danger List. Delegates regularly reiterate the official position that it is a positive tool for the mobilisation of international attention and support, and whenever a state voluntarily seeks to have its site added to the “Red List” (often in order to put pressure on subsidiary government levels), it is met with praise. Most often, however, countries object, seeing the Danger List as a mark of shame and fearing a drop in tourism to sites declared threatened (Brumann 2021: 70–77, 193–194; Hølleland et al. 2019). When this is the case, the discourse of Committee members supporting these countries takes on a very different tone: in the 2021 session, delegates could also be heard to describe the Danger List as a “pillory”, a “penalising instrument”, and a “punishment”. Already on the very first day, the Brazilian and Russian delegation heads wondered whether the Committee should avoid such “drastic” and “extreme” measures altogether during the current session, given that it was being held under extraordinary circumstances online in the midst of a pandemic.¹³

Reluctance also was evident when the Committee individually addressed each of the seven properties up for Danger Listing. Concerning Venice,¹⁴ Committee members lauded the cruise ship ban and other recent improvements. The plethora of remaining problems – such as the burden of mass tourism, the dwindling residential population, problematic construction projects, continued access for large vessels to the surrounding lagoon, and the increase in flooding driven by global warming – did not stop them from dropping the suggested Danger Listing. For the other properties as well, members preferred to see the sunny side, citing the positive steps made or announced by the respective States Parties and praising their general commitment to World Heritage. At the same time, concerns such as unapproved construction projects, some of them well advanced, or an obvious lack of capacity and resources to meet the challenges were downplayed. Accordingly, Hungary was not

¹¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/danger>.

¹² Compare the draft decisions in WHC/21/44.COM/7B (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/187771>), WHC/21/44.COM/7B.Add (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188005>), WHC/21/44.COM/7B.Add.2 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188268>) and WHC/21/44.COM/7B.Corr (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/187881>) with WHC/21/44.COM/18 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188949>), the record of decisions. Currently, the documents of the 2021 session can be retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/44COM/documents>.

¹³ 17 July, 3:24:00–3:27:05 (<https://youtu.be/BH9xNhHxCB0?t=12240>),

3:30:45–3:36:20 (<https://youtu.be/BH9xNhHxCB0?t=12647>).

¹⁴ 22 July, 3:42:25–4:11:35 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=13345>).

taken to task for activities that severely affected the property *Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrásy Avenue*. Here the Orbán government is engaged in pushing forward its “National Hauszmann Program”, despite a construction stop that the Committee had demanded in 2019.¹⁵ This major facelift to the castle hill – a core part of the property – tries to recreate prewar Budapest, complete with conjectural reconstructions, a practice outlawed by the Operational Guidelines of the Convention. While the Committee decision deplored that “the property has been negatively impacted” and demanded that plans be assessed before implementation, it praised the high-rise ban freshly imposed on the city centre, even though that ban excludes one tower already under construction. Hungary, a member of the 2021 Committee, got away with promising due dialogue with the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS in the future.¹⁶ Regarding *Volcanoes of Kamchatka*, fellow Committee member Russia displayed a similarly meek demeanour that contrasted with some past sessions (Brumann 2021: 99). The nature reserve was facing a plan for a large-scale tourism development, complete with a cruise ship marina, with legal protection already removed from part of the property. Nevertheless, Committee members were satisfied with the abandonment of other projects and Russian assurances that no construction would go forward at this point.¹⁷ In Nepal, *Kathmandu Valley* is struggling to recover from the devastating 2015 earthquake, with ongoing deterioration of damaged buildings, loss of traditional housing stock, reconstruction in problematic materials and styles, unplanned building activity, and a problematic ring road project all progressing apace. In the experts’ eyes, this warranted the Danger Listing that had only narrowly been averted in the last session. Yet the Committee members chose to see a number of measures being undertaken by the Nepalese government as signs of hope and pointed to the country’s heavy dependence on tourism, which a Danger Listing might undermine.¹⁸ In *Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid Region*, Albanian and North Macedonian efforts at conservation appear to be losing out against the onslaught of tourism, pollution, and urban development on Lake Ohrid. Here as well, the seemingly sincere assertions by the two States Parties regarding their commitment to protect this transborder property and the excellent cooperation confirmed by the World Heritage Centre were sufficient for the Committee to postpone the consideration of Danger Listing to the next session.¹⁹ In *W-Arly-Pendjary Complex*, a nature reserve straddling the borders of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger, guards had withdrawn from areas where terrorist groups were now operating. However, the Committee was reluctant to diagnose “in Danger” status in a situation that could not be blamed on negligence of the States Parties.²⁰

In one of the most widely reported-on controversies of the session, the Committee also did not put Australia’s *Great Barrier Reef*, the third-largest property on the World Heritage List, on the Danger List. In their introductory briefings, the Centre and IUCN reported accelerating degradation across the reef: three mass bleaching events in five years have affected two-thirds of the corals and the water quality has deteriorated, as documented in Australia’s own 2019 report. It is difficult to not see the reef as objectively threatened. Yet Australia, itself on the Committee, hastened to argue that the Danger List was not appropriate for a problem caused by climate change – a global issue beyond any

¹⁵ https://pestbuda.hu/en/tag/national_hauszmann_program.

¹⁶ 22 July, 3:08:35–3:41:50 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=11315>).

¹⁷ 23 July, 4:14:00–4:54:30 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=15240>).

¹⁸ 21 July, 1:49:25–3:10:00 (<https://youtu.be/OvPxZLLJG1s?t=6565>).

¹⁹ 23 July, 2:53:00–3:31:20 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=10380>), 23 July, 3:37:40–3:38:10 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=13058>), 25 July, 0:00:30–0:00:40 (<https://youtu.be/rWLjoswVStE?t=8>), 25 July, 3:10:55–3:19:25 (<https://youtu.be/rWLjoswVStE?t=8>)

²⁰ 23 July, 3:32:55–4:00:45 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=12775>).

single country's control, the delegate argued, not mentioning the outsized contribution of the Australian coal and gas industry to this development.²¹ Other Committee members followed this reasoning, praised Australia's efforts to mitigate damage to the reef as a sign of commitment and ultimately discarded the "Red List" proposal.²² Of these seven decisions averting Danger Listing, six were followed by statements from NGO representatives that deplored the Committee's failure to put sites in critical condition on a list where they properly belonged.²³ However, the measure is no longer understood as a declaration of emergency, but rather as an accusation of negligence, and treaty states were unwilling to force this verdict upon each other.

Committee members also took lenient positions on other World Heritage properties opened for debate under the agenda item "State of Conservation". When Danger Listing is not proposed, discussion of a site's state of conservation is now conditional on the formal request of a Committee member made well in advance, so it usually concerns only a minority of the many properties for which the Centre, ICOMOS, and IUCN prepare draft decisions.²⁴ In past sessions, Committee members opened debate regarding specific properties for a whole range of reasons. This time, however, except for a single case of minor clarifications (*Auschwitz Birkenau*, Poland²⁵), such requests were invariably coupled with a draft amendment submitted by one or several Committee members that softened the decision in some way. Some of this concerned the wording only, such as toning down critique, adding praise for positive steps taken, or not naming specific problematic projects. In most cases, however, the amendment also attenuated substantive demands for improvement, such as by postponing or entirely striking building stops and rectification measures; delaying or dropping the prescribed advance notification of building projects, impact assessments, progress reports, and other documents; or expunging mention of Danger Listing as a future option. While changes were minimal in two cases,²⁶ in the other five, the Committee moved the decision substantially closer to the preferences of the respective State Party and away from what the Centre and the Advisory Bodies had recommended.²⁷ The reverse – i.e., the Committee adding more stringent demands to the draft decision – did not happen a single time. In all these debates, most Committee members aligned their statements with the wishes of the concerned treaty states, whether these were themselves on the Committee or not. In past sessions, this has been coordinated through advance communication prior to the session and explicit requests by the countries involved; it is reasonable to assume that 2021 was no different (cf. Brumann 2021: 98–127).

²¹ 18 July, 0:37:40–0:39:45 (https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=2255).

²² 23 July, 0:32:00–1:35:20 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=1920>).

²³ 21 July, 3:07:15–3:10:00 (<https://youtu.be/OvPxZLLJG1s?t=11225>); 22 July, 3:39:00–3:41:50 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=13127>); 22 July, 4:06:10–4:11:35 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=14770>); 23 July, 1:31:40–1:35:20 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=5495>); 23 July, 4:52:35–4:54:30 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=17555>), 25 July, 3:18:10–3:19:20 (<https://youtu.be/rWLjoswVStE?t=11889>).

²⁴ For unopened items, drafts remain unchanged, which usually means that decisions follow the stricter proposals of the experts, a dynamic of which newcomers are often unaware (cf. Brumann 2021: 170).

²⁵ 22 July, 4:11:40–4:21:25 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=15095>).

²⁶ *Trang An Landscape Complex*, Viet Nam, where this concerned only a single sentence (23 July, 0:15:10–0:30:55; <https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=910>) and *Western Caucasus*, Russia (24 July, 0:05:30–0:21:10; <https://youtu.be/u56ci9ahYBI?t=330>), where a measure that had been stipulated was reported as already adopted.

²⁷ *Lalibela*, Ethiopia (22 July, 2:25:25–2:59:20; <https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=8725>); *Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi*, Kazakhstan (21 July, 0:25:15–1:49:20; <https://youtu.be/OvPxZLLJG1s?t=1512>); *Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore*, Pakistan (22 July, 0:04:25–1:00:00; <https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=268>); *Borobudur*, Indonesia (22 July, 1:00:00–1:59:35, <https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=3600>; 24 July 0:21:15–0:25:35, <https://youtu.be/u56ci9ahYBI?t=1275>) and *The Sundarbans*, Bangladesh (23 July, 1:35:30–2:29:40; <https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=5723>). The longest debate involved *Borobudur*, with Committee members being concerned about various unapproved building activities in and around the property, and it was ultimately delegated to a drafting group of six members. The resulting decision was a compromise but still watered down the draft text.

Expediting Inscriptions

Likewise, just as in previous years, the area where the Committee allowed itself the most liberty was in its assessment of nominations to the World Heritage List. Not only did it inscribe the 20 candidate sites recommended in the ICOMOS and IUCN evaluations on the World Heritage List; it also added 14 sites which the Advisory Bodies had recommended postponing, 7 as referral and 7 as deferral.²⁸ In fact, the only recommended referral that was upheld by the Committee was for *Deer Stone Monuments and Related Sites, the Heart of Bronze Age Culture*: in a short statement after the adoption of the resolution, Mongolia, a state not currently on the Committee, simply promised to work on the nomination and come back with a stronger case.²⁹ For all others, the Committee overruled the experts, resulting in an unprecedented balance of just a single postponement.

The session debates that preceded the decisions also followed patterns familiar from recent years (Brumann 2021: 169–177): Committee delegates would declare themselves impressed by the sites and convinced of their greatness, taking mere OUV potential suggested by ICOMOS or IUCN as established fact or deploring shortcomings in the evaluations. The concerned countries, whether on or off the Committee, were given ample room to speak, even when they overran their time limits and disputed Advisory Body judgments, instead of restricting themselves to answering Committee questions in accordance with the official ban on advocacy. Last-minute fulfilments of protective demands were liberally accepted, even when these had been submitted long after the statutory deadline, leaving the Advisory Bodies no time for examination. In some cases, such leniency seemed to have tacit ICOMOS and IUCN approval because of credible last-minute concessions, but in most, it clearly did not. This included the 7 properties with deferral recommendations, all cases where the Advisory Bodies considered OUV not demonstrated.

None of these strategies was entirely new; they were, however, even more common than in previous sessions. They also included cases that stretched established practice to the limits. One of these concerned the nomination of *Frontiers of the Roman Empire – The Danube Limes (Western Segment)*, a segment of the Roman border running from Germany across Austria and Slovakia to Hungary that includes the archaeological remains of military installations and civil settlements. Such “serial” properties, that is single entries with multiple discrete components that may even straddle national borders, make up a growing portion of the World Heritage List. A mere two weeks ahead of the session, however, Hungary had announced its withdrawal from the joint bid, thereby reducing the number of nominated components from 175 to the 77 located in the remaining three countries. This was not a first: in 2019 as well, Hungary had made a surprise withdrawal from the same serial property, although this affected only a single component. Nevertheless, in 2019 the Committee had opted for a referral, and this was what ICOMOS proposed now as well, meaning that inscription could only happen the following year. The written evaluation, which had been finalised and published before the withdrawal, recommended inscription, yet ICOMOS representatives were adamant that halving the nominated property rendered that text null and void. Committee member Norway also emphasised that inscription without proper evaluation would constitute an unacceptable breach of Committee procedures and set a dangerous precedent.

²⁸ Cf. WHC/21/44.COM/8B, p. 3–4 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/187795#page=3>) and WHC/21/44.COM/8B.Add (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/187989>) and compare the record of decisions in WHC/21/44.COM/18 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188949>).

²⁹ 25 July, 2:57:05–3:10:55 (<https://youtu.be/rWLjoswVStE?t=10625>).

In a long and ultimately acrimonious debate, however, the Committee majority opted for inscription, a decision that was, I believe, what most members felt to be fair – the candidate property had been positively evaluated several times and the three remaining countries would otherwise be punished for Hungary’s antics. But a List inscription without evaluation was indeed a first – and all for a candidate site whose nomination could have been revised and resubmitted with relatively little effort for certain acceptance the following year. As in the previous cases, treaty states’ interests prevailed, and states seemed more impatient than ever.³⁰

States Helping States

As may have been noted, when the Committee overruled draft decisions, the states who benefitted were frequently Committee members themselves: the Committee prevented the Danger Listing of the properties in Australia (Great Barrier Reef), Hungary (Budapest), and Russia (Kamchatka volcanoes) – 3 of 7 such cases – and softened draft decisions on *Lalibela* (Ethiopia) and *Western Caucasus* (Russia) – 2 of the 5 substantially amended decision about the state of conservation. It also inscribed *Himā Cultural Area* (Saudi Arabia), *Petroglyphs of Lake Onega and the White Sea*

³⁰ The debate touched on fundamental and largely unsettled questions about how value is distributed in serial properties (cf. Brumann 2021: 184–190): can the subtraction of the Hungarian components really impair the OUV of the remainder, Brazil and South Africa asked; wouldn’t ascribing OUV to the remainder imply that the Hungarian part has no value, Norway wondered. Several delegates brought up the nomination strategy as a mitigating aspect: in a way, the original nomination was in itself incomplete, as the eastern segment of the Danube Limes in Croatia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria is to follow as a separate nomination in future. Moreover, the ultimate goal is a whole chain of World Heritage properties encompassing the entire Roman border as it runs through Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa – a series of serial properties, so to speak. One link of that chain, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (UK and Germany), has already been on the List for a long time, originally inscribed as *Hadrian’s Wall* in 1987 but then renamed when appending the German Limes in 2005 and the Antonine Wall in 2008 to the (discontinuous) property (cf. Brumann 2021: 86). Another border section, *Lower German Limes* (Germany and the Netherlands), was inscribed without any objections on the day following the opening of Danube Limes (27 July, 4:02:40–4:12:15; <https://youtu.be/BLXLR9CM9EU?t=14560>). So, what was the problem of inscribing what remained of the Western Danube Limes nomination after Hungary’s withdrawal and have the Hungarian segment go with the Eastern Danube Limes in the future, Ethiopia and Spain wondered – the Roman frontiers are to be included in their entirety anyway. Yet ICOMOS, the Centre, and their supporters insisted that, regardless of the broader nomination strategy, the reduced property under consideration was simply not the one the experts had looked at (26 July, 3:44:30–4:56:10; <https://youtu.be/TAW9Ip0YUOU?t=13470>).

The drafting group that met outside plenary hours did not come to an agreement and ultimately created a lot of bad blood (27 July, 0:00:40–0:01:20, <https://youtu.be/BLXLR9CM9EU?t=40>; 29 July, 3:10:50–4:18:50, <https://youtu.be/-0TVnk3fCWY?t=1145>; 30 July, 0:03:55–0:16:55, <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=235>). As reported in the plenary session, in the group’s penultimate meeting, the participating committee members had agreed to submit an amendment for inscription to the Committee, but this shifted during the final meeting to proposing referral. Three of the ten members were no longer present by that time, however, and Ethiopia complained that they had not been invited, suspecting deliberate action – an allegation that Norway as a co-chair angrily rejected. The ensuing debate saw the Committee members switch their positions – Ethiopia was no longer so sure about the invitation and others swung from referral to inscription or, in the case of Spain, back to inscription, driven mainly by sympathy for the other nominators who had been let down by Hungary. Waxing metaphorical, the Chinese ambassador to UNESCO likened the nomination to a car that had lost one wheel so that it could not be allowed to drive (29 July, 3:55:30–3:57:30; <https://youtu.be/-0TVnk3fCWY?t=14130>); his Brazilian colleague saw a train instead, with one wagon gone but the locomotive still in place, pulling the other ones (29 July, 4:00:15–4:01:15; <https://youtu.be/-0TVnk3fCWY?t=14415>). In the end, Guatemala’s proposal of deciding the matter by secret ballot was seconded. The outcome of the vote, which was conducted the next morning in UNESCO headquarter offices, was clearer than the positions in the debate: of the 19 members voting, only 3 opposed inscription while 15 were in favour, yielding the required two-thirds majority. The Norwegian delegate made a bitter statement, expecting the next three-wheeled train to derail the Convention (30 July, 0:07:05–0:07:40; <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=425>), but other delegates were more conciliatory; it is likely that they yielded in response to Austrian, German and Slovakian pleading that, based on my past session experience, must have gone on in the background. What had brought Hungary to withdraw was never clarified – Guatemala wanted to hear the delegation’s views, but before there was an opportunity, the chair had delegated further deliberation to the drafting group and moved to the next agenda item. All involved States Parties had been consulted, the drafting group reported, but they did not say whether this included Hungary or what it had told them.

The special strategy of splitting a very long series into shorter but still transnational segments as formally separate World Heritage properties was first applied with the nomination of two segments of the Silk Roads in 2014. Of these, only one was inscribed (Brumann 2021: 189–190) and the other referred; it is still waiting for resubmission at present. Preparations for the nomination of further Silk Roads segments are ongoing.

(Russia), *Paseo del Prado and Buen Retiro, a landscape of Arts and Sciences* (Spain), and *Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex* (Thailand) on the World Heritage List, even though the Advisory Bodies had recommended referral for the first two and deferral for the last. Thus, of the 14 such inscription “upgrades”, as they are known, 4 went to Committee members. Given that fewer than 1 out of 9 States Parties can serve on the Committee at any given time, all the above ratios are skewed in favour of Committee members and against non-members. In the case of a further 3 properties nominated by Committee states,³¹ membership mattered little, given that the Advisory Bodies had recommended inscription, which is almost never opposed. But 12 members had further properties on the Danger List or with draft decisions on the state of conservation.³² While these were left unopened and unchanged, it must still have been reassuring to sit on the Committee, just in case. Only 4 members were entirely free from national site-related concerns in the session: Guatemala, Norway, Oman, and Saint Kitts and Nevis.

The fact that Committee members come to the session with their own self-interests clearly discourages them from needlessly getting in one another’s way, and, just as in previous sessions, it is clear that tacit or explicit deals of mutual support occurred. What was new was the open manner in which Committee members admitted to these. In a press interview, the Spanish delegation head confirmed that he had supported Australia in preventing the Danger Listing of the Great Barrier Reef, in return for their backing for the inscription of *Paseo del Prado and Buen Retiro* that ICOMOS opposed. He shrugged off critical questions, saying that this was what international diplomacy demanded of him and it should not surprise anybody.³³ Australia had in fact lobbied Committee peers extensively: the Minister for the Environment toured many of these countries’ capitals before the session, all in the midst of a strict Covid-19 lockdown that barred her less highly-placed compatriots from re-entering the country once they had left it. Australia had also invited Canberra-based diplomats to a day of snorkelling in the reef, with nine ambassadors from Committee states joining the occasion.³⁴ When the Australian government was confronted by the press with a statement in which they had promised firm commitment to expertise in the 2018 meeting,³⁵ the answer was evasive. Nobody even attempted to deny that multilateral principles had been sacrificed to national interests.³⁶

Other Committee members were more careful to veil their self-interests, but the policy of not thwarting other countries’ strong wishes was followed by almost everyone. Norway was the only

³¹ *Sítio Roberto Burle Marx* (Brazil), *Quanzhou: Emporium of the World in Song-Yuan China* (China) and the addition of a component in Bosnia-Herzegovina to the already inscribed serial property *Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe* (a transborder property now shared by no fewer than 18 European countries).

³² Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, Spain, and Uganda.

³³ <https://www.climatica.lamarea.com/andres-perello-gran-barrera-de-coral>.

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/14/australia-to-fly-ambassadors-to-great-barrier-reef-ahead-of-in-danger-list-vote>; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/21/coalition-believes-it-has-numbers-to-stop-great-barrier-reef-being-listed-as-in-danger>. Committee members Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, themselves oil producers, were reported as supporting the amendment against Danger Listing even before the session began (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/14/fossil-fuel-friends-saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-back-australias-lobbying-on-great-barrier-reef-unesco>), and Bahrain did indeed present the amendment. Given their manifold current diplomatic tensions, Australian authorities expected China to back the Danger Listing proposal for the reef (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/19/chinese-unesco-official-defends-plan-to-list-great-barrier-reef-in-danger>) and were worried about a Chinese national chairing the proceedings. The Chinese delegation kept a comparatively low profile in the debate, however, and did not object when other members struck from the decision text its proposal to mention the possibility of future Danger Listing for the site.

³⁵ “We will not support an inscription placed on the World Heritage List where the advice before us is that it should not be inscribed”, a representative had then announced (WHC/18/42 COM/INF.18, p. 40; <https://whc.unesco.org/document/171357#page=40>).

³⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/06/low-point-in-world-heritage-committee-history-as-politics-tramples-human-rights-of-the-karen-people>.

member to consistently support the recommendations of the Advisory Bodies and the World Heritage Centre, joined sometimes by Guatemala, more rarely by Bahrain, and only very occasionally – and almost never if it meant a confrontation with Committee peers – by Australia, China, Oman, and Spain. Somewhat paradoxically, this led to Norway featuring on every drafting group convoked for informal deliberation on difficult decisions, as its presence ensured that the entire spectrum of opinions was represented in the search for compromise. However, this did not prevent the others from having their way in cases such as the Danube Limes above.

Pre-negotiated support was not restricted to Committee peers: both in terms of submitted amendments and verbal broadsides against expert advice, “observer States Parties” – that is, states in attendance at the session but not currently serving on the Committee – were no less likely to benefit. The amendment co-authored by the largest number of Committee members (15),³⁷ for example, was the one downplaying building projects implemented without prior Committee approval near *Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi*, despite Kazakhstan being a mere observer. Moreover, while only one Committee member went so far as to officially co-submit an amendment on its own site (Thailand on *Kaeng Krachan*),³⁸ the states that let it slip in their statements that they themselves had authored the amendment officially submitted by different member states included both a Committee member (Australia on the *Great Barrier Reef*³⁹) and an observer (Pakistan on *Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore*⁴⁰). The Covid-19 pandemic did little to restrain anyone: in a revealing moment, the Chinese Permanent Delegate, relatively new to UNESCO,⁴¹ expressed the pleasure of communicating with his colleagues, meeting them in person in Paris, and exchanging WhatsApp messages with them “hundreds of times in the last half year”.⁴² I take this to mean that for countries with a UNESCO headquarter presence, the pandemic-related obstacles to lobbying and deal-making in the session run-up were negligible.⁴³

Also in line with this pattern of cooperation, there was a notable absence of a dynamic that has, in the past, been the cause of some of the most notorious Committee headaches – namely, when the interests of two or more states collide over contested borders and histories. *Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls* and the three Palestinian properties⁴⁴ remained unopened: in tried and tested fashion, the adversary countries had privately agreed on a decision to be adopted without debate by the Committee. They had also decided to forego statements after the decision,⁴⁵ sparing everyone the verbal hostilities of the 2015 and 2017 sessions (Brumann 2021: 95, 137–138, 149n56). Hungary had *Medieval Monuments in Kosovo* (officially still a Serbian property, as Kosovo is neither a UNESCO member nor a Convention treaty state) opened for discussion, but only to propose adjournment to the

³⁷ Cf. WHC/21/44.COM/7B.31, p. 1 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188516>).

³⁸ Cf. WHC/21/44.COM/8B.7 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188730>); <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/44COM/documents/#amendment>.

³⁹ 23 July, 1:15:00–1:15:20 (<https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=4500>).

⁴⁰ 22 July, 0:58:05–0:58:30 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=3485>).

⁴¹ Cf. https://unesco.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/ms/en-US/EXFYEN3tL9BMgJWNU3O1abIBS7Lg_jAy9ajA3glwnXP30w?e=5xKw9E.

⁴² 31 July, 2:05:25–2:06:25 (<https://youtu.be/27FR3LhKyzQ?t=7528>).

⁴³ It should be noted, however, that Spain and Ethiopia withdrew nominations for which the Advisory Bodies had recommended non-inscription – that is, the verdict that denies any potential for OUV (“Ribeira Sacra” and “*Holqa Sof Umar*: Natural and Cultural Heritage [Sof Umar: Caves of Mystery]”). In doing so, they followed what has long since established itself as customary practice, avoiding the extremes of other Committee members who used their position to push through inscription of such properties in 2018 (*Al-Ahsa Oasis, an Evolving Cultural Landscape*, Saudi Arabia) and 2019 (*Historic Centre of Sheki with the Khan’s Palace*, Azerbaijan).

⁴⁴ *Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem; Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir and Hebron/Al-Khalil Old Town*.

⁴⁵ 18 July, 2:41:40–2:43:30 (https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=9700).

next session – the customary action in this case, which was seconded by other members without further ado (cf. Brumann 2021: 138).⁴⁶ Japan and South Korea agreed on a negotiated text and on not giving statements on the site that had sparked the biggest battle of the 2015 session, namely *Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining* (Brumann 2021: 128–135).⁴⁷ Several recent confrontations did spill over into the session, but they took the relatively mild form of statements read after the draft decision had been adopted without debate, and none of these items took more than fifteen minutes of the Committee's time.⁴⁸

One site did divide the Committee more deeply, however. Observer country Poland had submitted a nomination for “Gdańsk Shipyard – the birthplace of ‘Solidarity’ and the symbol of the Fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe” that built on earlier unsuccessful bids in 1997/98 and 2005. The ICOMOS evaluation found the former Lenin Shipyard unremarkable in technical terms and the association with the Solidarność union and its historic strike not reflected in the physical structures. As in a number of similar cases in the past (Brumann 2021: 174–175, 192–193, 217n52), the experts argued that the World Heritage Convention is based on sites, not associations, adding – perhaps unnecessarily – that opinions about Solidarność and its historical significance are divided, recent as the events still are. ICOMOS therefore recommended outright rejection. The ensuing debate put postsocialist tensions on stark display: Russia as the main successor of the Soviet Union backed ICOMOS, accusing Poland of an ideological approach; Hungary objected, finding the technical monument important and citing evidence for the crucial role of Solidarność, such as the Nobel Prize awarded to Lech Walesa.

Hungary, together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Oman, and Uganda, had therefore submitted an amendment for deferral, wishing to give Poland and everyone else more time to work on the proposal. The positions of Committee members were likewise divided, with some even changing sides during

⁴⁶ 18 July, 2:58:55–3:02:55 (https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=10735).

⁴⁷ 22 July, 2:00:00–2:00:35; <https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=7200>. Japan apparently did not mind that the decision adopted without debate included the statement that the Committee “[s]trongly regrets” Japan’s failure to fully implement the promised measures to highlight Korean wartime forced labour at the sites (WHC/21/44.COM/18, p. 118; <https://whc.unesco.org/document/188949#page=118>). Another famous bone of contention, *Preah Vihear* (inscribed by Cambodia but claimed also by Thailand; Brumann 2021: 138–142), did not feature at all in the session; it has been dealt with this way for more than a decade. In effect, oversight has been delegated to a different intergovernmental body, the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and the Development of Preah Vihear (ICC-Preah Vihear; <https://icc-preah-vihear.org>) founded in 2014.

⁴⁸ Two of these conflicts involved Turkey. Citing national sovereignty, the Turkish UNESCO ambassador distanced himself from paragraphs of the decision for *The Ahwar of Southern Iraq: Refuge of Biodiversity and the Relict Landscape of the Mesopotamian Cities* (Iraq). These asked Iraq, Iran, and Turkey to coordinate their water strategies and upstream dam projects to prevent any harm to the property. Both Turkey and Iran felt that they had been insufficiently consulted, although Turkey affirmed its readiness to cooperate with Iraq in future (23 July, 2:30:45–2:39:40; <https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=9045>). Turkey likewise distanced itself from paragraphs in the decision on *Historic Areas of Istanbul* that “[d]eeply regret[s]” the lack of dialogue about the “change of status” of the Hagia Sophia and Chora museums included in the property – both of them former mosques originally built as churches that were controversially reconverted into mosques by President Erdoğan in 2020 (WHC/21/44.COM/18, p. 150; <https://whc.unesco.org/document/188949#page=150>). The ambassador deplored an “extremely aggressive” choice of words, given that the Operational Guidelines require prior notification only for major restoration or construction works, none of which had taken place. This was followed by statements from observers Greece and Cyprus, guardians of Byzantine Orthodox heritage as it were, who said that these buildings belonged to all humanity and to inter-religious tolerance. Cyprus also mentioned its own “tragic experience” as a motivating force, meaning that here again, sovereignty disputes (about Northern Cyprus occupied by Turkey) were at play (23 July, 0:04:25–0:10:05; <https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=265;0:11:30-0:15:05>; <https://youtu.be/BsyYCARCrXI?t=692>).

Finally, after the draft decision on *Canaima National Park* in Venezuela was adopted without debate, the NGO World Heritage Watch, speaking both in its own name and on behalf of the NGO SOS Orinoco, deplored ongoing gold mining in the reserve. In response, observer Venezuela denounced the statement as the work of US political interests, and supporting statements from members Russia, China, Ethiopia, Egypt, Brazil, and South Africa – a line-up that included all BRICS states on the Committee – asked the NGOs to avoid “politicisation” (24 July, 0:31:40–0:40:35; <https://youtu.be/u56ci9ahYBI?t=1900>). On the final day under “Other business”, observer USA took the floor, asking for its written statement on the park to be added to the official record. In return, Venezuela then reprimanded the USA for imperialism, terrorism, and violation of international law, but this time Committee members did not voice an opinion (30 July, 0:58:45–1:04:05; <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VfK?t=3525>).

the debate.⁴⁹ In the end, the day was carried by the united efforts of three parties opposed to the enshrinement of anti-communist resistance: Russia, China, and the Chinese session chair, who clearly bent the procedures.⁵⁰ On the whole, however, bi- and trilateral conflicts were but a sideshow – in contrast to other recent sessions in which such conflicts dominated the mood. In my analysis, this is largely because the concerned states were not on the Committee, and it is telling that the single rift developed about a site where Committee members, though not directly connected with it, were invested in its political meaning.

A Members' Committee

This observation aligns with what I see as the dominant trend of the 2021 session: more than ever before, the Committee insisted on being accountable only to itself – more precisely its constituent units, the member countries – and not to any other bodies, general principles, or customary precedent. When justifying the many overrulings, Ethiopia in particular, but others as well, kept re-affirming that the experts' recommendations and draft decisions do not bind a sovereign Committee. This has been the tenor of all sessions since 2010 but was, if anything, even more pronounced this time. Committee largesse was not limited to Committee members, and observer countries benefitted too. But they did so as the clients of Committee patrons whose dominance was unquestioned.

The Committee did not allow its actions to be dictated by sub- or supranational forces. NGOs present as observers were given the floor quite liberally in 2021, compared to some previous sessions,

⁴⁹ Hearing the arguments, Oman and Uganda, in an unusual move, withdrew from their own amendment, while Norway and Australia began to favour deferral, despite their initial support for rejection of the nomination.

⁵⁰ The session chair – the Vice Minister of Education of the People's Republic of China – was a friendly, upbeat, and relatively rule-conscious master of proceedings for most of the session, aside from not suppressing advocacy of States Parties for their own sites, which has become more or less expected behaviour. On Gdańsk, however, he clearly departed from his expected neutrality and must have been aware of it. First, he pressed for adoption of the draft decision by claiming there was a “growing consensus” when no such consensus had emerged, as Hungary objected (28 July, 1:51:05–1:52:30; <https://youtu.be/ApKNIIDTLIo?t=6665>). Second, after initiating procedures for a secret ballot on Hungary's deferral amendment, he subsequently cast them aside, taking up the suggestion of the Legal Advisor (a UNESCO official standing by for consultation on procedural matters) that what the Chinese state delegate had proposed just moments earlier – postponement for two days until the separate agenda item on “sites of recent conflicts and other divisive memories” had been discussed – could be seen as a motion for adjourning the debate. By the Committee's Rules of Procedure, such a motion had to be decided first, the Legal Advisor recalled, and the Chair jumped on the occasion, taking only seconds to establish that there was no objection to adjournment (28 July, 1:53:20–2:11:30; <https://youtu.be/ApKNIIDTLIo?t=6800>). Third and most significantly, the Chair suppressed usual procedures when the debate was resumed two days later. Russia moved for another adjournment, now *sine die*, with China seconding it, while Hungary and Australia insisted on having their proposed vote now. When a different UNESCO official acting as Legal Advisor clarified that the adjournment motion must be decided first, the Chair misunderstood her: taking this to mean that the Russian motion stood, he sealed it by striking the gavel (30 July, 1:14:50–1:36:40; <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=4490>). The Chair cannot have been ignorant of the difference between moving a point and adopting it; I rather assume he deliberately played dumb, and continued to do so in the aftermath: a full five times on that day and twice on the next, several parties – a bewildered Legal Advisor, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Oman, and most doggedly Australia – interrupted subsequent agenda items to argue that there had been no proper decision regarding adjournment on the Gdańsk Shipyard nomination and, when this failed, to ask to convert adjournment *sine die* to adjournment to a specific date, namely the 2024 session. When not simply ignoring these calls by having the next speaker continue on the interrupted item, the Chair insisted that the Rules of Procedure prevented him from re-opening an already adopted decision (30 July, 1:34:30–1:36:40; <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=5670>; 1:38:20–1:47:35, <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=5900>; 1:53:45–1:54:35, <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=6825>; 2:05:50–2:06:40, <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=7550>; 2:56:00–2:59:10, <https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=10560>; 31 July, 0:44:40–0:58:30, <https://youtu.be/27FR3LhKyzQ?t=2680>; 1:00:00–1:01:40, <https://youtu.be/27FR3LhKyzQ?t=3600>). He might have acted otherwise had the protests been stronger, particularly right after his first closure of the debate. In addition, nobody pointed out the obvious fact that the adjournment of an item means that there is *no decision* – the official decision record of the session (WHC/21/44.COM/18; <https://whc.unesco.org/document/188949>), for instance, makes no mention of Gdańsk. And if so, there should have nothing that prevented the Chair from re-opening in the first place. But as matters now stand, the nomination is caught in a procedural limbo, with uncertain prospects of being resumed. Since the Russian delegation's main speaker was elected Committee Chair for the 2022 session in Kazan, which has now been postponed indefinitely after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this is unlikely to happen very soon.

and the video conference format seemed to lower the threshold for attending and seeking the floor, unlike live sessions in which NGO representatives often appeared uncertain how to proceed (Brumann 2021: 105–106). Invariably, however, this only happened after the decision had already been taken for the property they were concerned with, and the two minutes initially assigned to such statements (one less than for Committee members) were cut down to just one when the Committee fell behind schedule. The chair remained polite to these speakers and did not enforce the time limit too strictly. Coming when matters were already settled, however, the NGO's scathing condemnations of Committee inaction elicited almost no responses, with the chair simply moving on to the next agenda item.⁵¹

This also held for statements by the representative of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on World Heritage (IIPFWH). The World Heritage Committee has long been accused of neglecting Indigenous Peoples' concerns in favour of those of their national governments and has a history of rejecting initiatives for indigenous representation, most markedly the proposal to install the World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE) as a consultative body in 2001. Since the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, thereby committing UN bodies to supporting "free, prior and informed consent" for all measures affecting indigenous territories, this stance has become increasingly untenable. Accordingly, the foundation of IIPFWH parallel to the Committee session of 2017 – albeit as a mere NGO with no statutory role – was explicitly welcomed by several Committee members (Brumann 2021: 125–127). In the 2021 session, however, there was no sign that particular weight was being given to the IIPFWH's concerns: their representative was given just as short shrift as other NGOs.

Somewhat more surprising was the fact that the Committee was equally unconcerned about ignoring supranational bodies, despite the fact that other UN organisations and their emissaries are given priority among the non-state observers, featuring first, for example, in the Rules of Procedure and the list of participants. During the debate on the *Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex*⁵² nominated by Thailand for its remarkable biodiversity, Norway asked to hear the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples who attended the session. This was because for many years, the indigenous Karen have been protesting against actual and threatened eviction and the violation of their rights to land and subsistence in the reserve – to which the Thai military is reported to have responded with human-rights violations and the enforced disappearance of protest leaders. Unlike the 2015, 2016, and 2019 sessions, when this issue thwarted inscription of the site, however, this time Thailand was a Committee member. It assured everyone that all conflicts had been amicably settled, even when the IUCN evaluation recommended yet another deferral because of the unresolved question of the Karen. It was at this juncture that Norway proposed to hear the Special Rapporteur, receiving support from Spain, Brazil, and Guatemala, while others wished to take the decision first. Here as well, however, the Chair exploited his privilege: declaring – in my assessment, incorrectly – that a majority was in favour of hearing the Special Rapporteur after the decision, he just took seconds to note the absence of objections and move on.⁵³ The Committee inscribed the property in the end, and only Norway dissociated itself from the decision for the record. Only then were the Special Rapporteur and the IIPFWH representative given the floor: both condemned the decision and the

⁵¹ Objections to NGO statements on their properties came from observers Venezuela (cf. note 48) and Syria (18 July, 2:50:55–2:53:10, https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=10255; 2:50:55–2:58:55, https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=10255), but Committee members generally did not feel an urge to react.

⁵² 26 July, 1:05:00–2:16:10 (<https://youtu.be/TAW9Ip0YUOU?t=3900>).

⁵³ 26 July, 1:44:45–1:46:35 (<https://youtu.be/TAW9Ip0YUOU?t=6285>).

latter called it a low point in the history of the Convention and UNESCO,⁵⁴ but Committee members did not respond. When Australia, which had also remained silent on the matter throughout, was quizzed on this by the press, a government spokesperson declared that since “advisory bodies and consensus of the committee” had recognised the OUV of *Kaeng Krachan* (in actual fact, IUCN had not), the delegation saw no need for objection.⁵⁵ In 2019, Australia had still firmly resisted the inscription of this property, even demanding that any revised nomination dossier should be examined by the UN Office of the Commission for Human Rights.⁵⁶ Now, however, sticking to the hard line against a Committee peer could have invited retaliation over what mattered most to Australia, namely keeping *Great Barrier Reef* off the Danger List.

The Committee also asserted its independence vis-à-vis the body that elects it, the General Assembly of States Parties. The single most divisive issue of the 2021 session was the treatment of “sites of recent conflicts and other divisive memories”.⁵⁷ World Heritage bodies have been slow to take a general position regarding locations of twentieth-century wars and genocides. While *Auschwitz Birkenau* was inscribed in 1979 with a comment that it should stand for other sites of a similar nature whose inscription should be restricted, in subsequent years the World Heritage List has come to include *Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome)* (Japan), *Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site* (Marshall Islands), *Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar* (Bosnia and Herzegovina) with the iconic bridge that UNESCO helped to reconstruct after its deliberate shelling in the Balkan War, *Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley* (Afghanistan) with the empty niches that once held the monumental stone buddhas blasted by the Taliban, as well as numerous sites connected with slavery, coerced labour, and apartheid such as *Robben Island* (South Africa) or the *Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution*. With a new spate of nominations from recent history in the pipeline and worries that these might divide the concerned countries even more strongly than Gdańsk, the matter has become more pressing in the past decade. Yet expert meetings set up for developing a general policy ended up merely calling for more meetings, and in my book, I conjectured that, just like for other World Heritage innovations, fundamental matters would only be settled in the process of dealing with nominations that involve these matters and under the special pressures created by these nominations (Brumann 2021: 208–209). And indeed, when Belgium and France submitted “Funeral and Memorial sites of the First World War (Western Front)”, the 2018 session adjourned consideration of the nomination for two years, commissioning another expert meeting and a follow-up report. This meeting finally resulted in a statement of position, concluding “that such properties do not relate to the purpose and scope of the World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines”⁵⁸ in 2019, and the 2020 report reaffirmed this view.⁵⁹

The 2021 session was the first occasion at which the Committee could discuss the report, and the African members complained that their experts had not been properly represented in the process. They therefore had convened their own meeting of experts and ministers in spring 2021, and this meeting had come to a contrary conclusion, no doubt in awareness of the fact that nominations for sites of the Rwandan genocide, an Angolan memorial for anti-colonial resistance, and a colonial penal colony in Cape Verde are in preparation (ICOMOS 2018: 16, 17–18, 22–23). ICOMOS and

⁵⁴ 26 July, 2:12:00–2:16:20 (<https://youtu.be/TAW9Ip0YUOU?t=7920>).

⁵⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/06/low-point-in-world-heritage-committee-history-as-politics-tramples-human-rights-of-the-karen-people>.

⁵⁶ WHC/19/43.COM/INF.18, pp. 335, 344 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/180393#page=335>).

⁵⁷ Cf. also note 50 above.

⁵⁸ WHC/21/44.COM/INF.8.1, p. 5 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188011#page=5>).

⁵⁹ WHC/21/44.COM/INF.8.2, p. 31 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188013#page=36>).

the World Heritage Centre denied that anyone had been excluded from their process, but it became obvious rather quickly that there was no alternative but to engage in further discussion in an intersessional working group.

What then divided the Committee was the question to whom this working group – itself “open-ended”, that is, accessible for all treaty states – should be reporting. Norway, Spain, Hungary, Australia, and Bahrain favoured the General Assembly of States Parties, arguing that this was a matter close to many countries’ hearts, not just those of current Committee members. Yet Ethiopia and most other members, mainly from the Global South, objected: it was the role of the Committee to take decisions on the Convention’s behalf, they argued, and handing this back to the General Assembly would only be shirking one’s duties. Also, the schedule of future General Assembly sessions meant that they would either come very soon (three months later in 2021) or not until 2023, thus unduly delaying things. In the end, this group prevailed, meaning that the Committee denied a say to the body whose collective will it is supposed to serve. To some degree, the question was symbolic, given that all treaty states are free to propose topics for General Assembly meetings. Yet here as well, Committee member states were unwilling to relinquish their privileged position on a matter that touched on their own and their allies’ vested interests.⁶⁰

The Return of Eurocentrism

The 2021 Committee also did not adhere to another official commitment, namely striving to make the World Heritage List more balanced and representative of humanity’s achievements. In 1994, after complaints arose about the dominance of European cathedrals, palaces, and historic town centres on the List, the Committee adopted the “Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List” to correct this imbalance, and reviewing its progress has been a standing agenda item of Committee sessions ever since (Brumann 2021: 53–55). Yet while the thematic range of cultural heritage (roughly four-fifths of the List) has broadened and the number of countries with World Heritage properties has increased, the proportion of European sites remains largely the same. As I have looked at in my previous work, this contradiction has given birth to frustration among delegates from the Global South and triggered the new mode of operations initiated in the 2010 session in Brasilia. That session normalised the practice of overruling the Advisory Bodies and resulted in the European share of new World Heritage inscriptions dropping to the lowest in 28 years; but by 2015, it had recovered to former levels (Brumann 2021: 224–256). In 2014, however, the General Assembly revised its election procedures, introducing electoral groups familiar from other UNESCO bodies. Now, 16 of 21 seats are distributed among the six UNESCO electoral groups according to a fixed formula; these groups roughly correspond to world regions (Brumann 2021: 118–119, 146n19). With outgoing members replaced according to this scheme in the 2017 and 2019

⁶⁰ 24 July, 0:44:20–1:32:20 (<https://youtu.be/u56ci9ahYBI?t=2660>); 26 July 0:01:45–0:04:00 (<https://youtu.be/TAW9Ip0YUOU?t=105>); 28 July, 3:23:55–3:25:00 (<https://youtu.be/ApKNIIDTLIo?t=12235>); 30 July, 0:16:55–0:24:40 (<https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=1016>), 1:31:50–1:34:20 (<https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=5510>), 1:36:50–1:38:30 (<https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=5810>), 1:47:40–1:53:50 (<https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=6460>); 1:54:50–2:12:20 (<https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=6890>); 2:59:20–4:26:25 (<https://youtu.be/jg35zUK4VFk?t=10760>); 31 July, 0:03:00–0:44:25 (<https://youtu.be/27FR3LhKyzQ?t=180>), 1:07:30–1:11:35 (<https://youtu.be/27FR3LhKyzQ?t=4047>), 1:14:15–1:15:50 (<https://youtu.be/27FR3LhKyzQ?t=4455>). The debate is difficult to follow, as it kept being interrupted by other substantive issues included in the same agenda item and, ironically, by the aforementioned attempts to re-open the debate on the Gdańsk nomination. Gdańsk thus provided for a vivid demonstration of the divisive potential of recent history, even though nobody commented on this coincidence.

elections, this yielded a Committee for the 2021 session with only 4 OECD countries,⁶¹ members from the African continent outnumbering the European ones,⁶² and no less than four of the five BRICS countries⁶³ – often perceived as the geopolitical counterweight to dwindling North Atlantic hegemony (but cf. Brumann 2021: 255n11). Coupled with the general liberties members were taking, this session might thus have been well suited to reversing European/Western/Northern dominance of the World Heritage List.

The African group, representing the world region widely regarded as having been awarded the smallest share of World Heritage glory, was indeed vocal and well organised. Eloquent in both English and French and with the most confrontational style of all the speakers, the Ethiopian ambassador to UNESCO (and France) in particular stood out as an opinion leader, with the South African ambassador following closely. This group was able to prevail regarding the above-mentioned sites of recent conflict where the positions did not strictly align with North-South tensions, as European countries were also invested (cf. also ICOMOS 2018: 16–25). On the purely African matters of concern, the African members presented a no less united front that allowed them to achieve their goals, including the avoidance of List deletion for *Selous Game Reserve* (see below) and of Danger Listing for the *W-Arly-Pendjari* complex; the removal of *Salonga National Park* (Democratic Republic of Congo) from the Danger List;⁶⁴ less demanding decisions regarding the state of conservation of *Lalibela*⁶⁵ and *Royal Palaces of Abomey* (Benin);⁶⁶ and World Heritage inscription upgrades for *Sudanese Style Mosques in Northern Côte d'Ivoire* (Côte d'Ivoire)⁶⁷ and *Ivindo National Park* (Gabon).⁶⁸ African delegates and others hailed the latter two listings as crucial for rectifying the deplorable lack of African entries, and it was the African members who throughout the session most strongly insisted on harmonising conservation requirements with what they described as the legitimate development needs of the Global South.

Yet in parallel with this, European properties made for half of all new inscriptions – a striking proportion that has not been seen for 20 years.⁶⁹ The European List leaders Italy, Spain, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia were all able to celebrate new titles, with Germany alone scoring a staggering five, the highest single-year figure since the five Spanish inscriptions of 2000.⁷⁰ A good part of the remaining titles went to other usual suspects – of the top 13 countries, all but the USA (which had no nominations) scored again, either with new inscriptions⁷¹ or a new component added to an already listed serial property (Mexico). The 15 candidate sites proposed for referral and deferral were distributed amongst all world regions, and I could not detect any differences in rhetorical fervour and argumentative inventiveness when upgrading 14 of these to inscription.

⁶¹ Norway, Spain, Hungary, and Australia.

⁶² Nigeria, Mali, Uganda, South Africa, Ethiopia, and (as part of the Arab group) Egypt, as against Norway, Spain, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Russia.

⁶³ Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa.

⁶⁴ 19 July, 0:40:40–1:33:00 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=2440). The World Heritage Centre and IUCN had obtained last-minute concessions from the State Party and did not resist the removal.

⁶⁵ 22 July, 2:25:25–2:59:20 (<https://youtu.be/HJwTY0TlSM8?t=8725>).

⁶⁶ 21 July, 3:10:00–3:51:15 (<https://youtu.be/OvPxZLLJG1s?t=11400>).

⁶⁷ 27 July, 0:41:20–1:42:50 (<https://youtu.be/BLXLr9CM9EU?t=2480>).

⁶⁸ 28 July, 3:24:55–4:22:50 (<https://youtu.be/ApKNIIDTLIo?t=12294>).

⁶⁹ Cf. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat#d6>. In 2015 and 2019, the aggregate figures for Europe and North America included US American and Canadian inscriptions.

⁷⁰ One nomination per country and year is the agreed limit, but with the 2020 session cancelled, 2021 was a double session, and Germany's three multinational nominations for the Danube Limes, the Lower German Limes and *The Great Spa Towns of Europe* were counted toward the quota of a partner country. In the overall count, Germany now ranks third, outnumbered only by Italy and China. For a country that has suffered heavy wartime destruction and is not known for spectacular nature, this is a striking achievement.

⁷¹ In addition to the European list leaders, by China, India, Iran, Japan, and Brazil.

Rather, nearly all Committee members backed almost all amendments, teaming up against the ICOMOS and IUCN spoilsports. Yet the lack of positive discrimination by world region meant that the countries and continents best trained in churning out nominations of increasingly inconspicuous sites kept their lead and that there is no reason to see Africa and other parts of the Global South as any less overlooked by the venture than in the past. Yet while this state of affairs continues to provide strategic arguments in debates about specific sites, the very countries resorting to these arguments were at the same time key in sustaining the imbalance. It is obvious that for them as well, implementing the Global Strategy is of secondary importance to the deals and diplomatic goodwill to be accrued by extending bilateral support, be it to the Global South or North (cf. Brumann 2021: 224–256).

Liverpool and Selous

But why then was a lenient Committee so seemingly unrelenting on Liverpool? Here comparison can shed light on the case, and there was another property on the List of World Heritage in Danger for which the Advisory Bodies had advised terminal deletion, *Selous Game Reserve*. As IUCN reported when opening the debate,⁷² the nature reserve had been added to the Danger List because of elephant poaching in 2014 and was now further endangered by the construction of the Julius Nyerere Dam in Stiegler’s Gorge, which was scheduled for completion in 2022. Tanzania had not responded to the Committee request to invite a monitoring mission in 2018 – when the dam was still in the planning stages – and to conduct impact assessments before moving forward. The resulting reservoir will inundate 1250 square kilometres, part of which has already been cleared; construction work and its infrastructure of roads and transmission lines will also affect other parts of the reserve. Tanzania already had a different part of the property excised through a controversial “minor boundary modification” in 2012, but that area, which was destined for uranium mining, had been smaller and on the edge of the park, not smack in the centre (Brumann 2021: 224–225). Moreover, the new dam will affect the Rufiji River, which is central to the ecology of a large part of the property. The IUCN reminded the Committee of past decisions – the last in 2016⁷³ – affirming that hydroelectric dams with large reservoirs are incompatible with World Heritage status. It therefore proposed deletion of the property, with no position taken as to whether undisturbed parts could be re-nominated in the future.

While Norway and Guatemala supported this recommendation, other Committee members downplayed the impact of the dam, saying that it would flood less than two percent of Africa’s largest park (which covers an area larger than Switzerland), so that its OUV could not be considered completely gone. Backed by strong support from the other African countries, the Ethiopian delegate raised the heat in the debate by making it a North-South issue – “you cannot ask us to remain poor and underdeveloped and take punitive measures when development projects are implemented, that is just not anymore acceptable”.⁷⁴ Uganda pointed at the 1982 IUCN evaluation that had not objected to a dam plan existing at the time because it affected a “relatively small” area.⁷⁵ Positive signs such

⁷² 19 July, 1:45:00–3:35:30 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=6301).

⁷³ WHC/16/40.COM/19, p.10 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/154913#page=11>).

⁷⁴ 19 July, 2:38:00–2:38:15 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=9480).

⁷⁵ “There are plans to harness the flood waters of the Rufiji River, with a dam to be constructed at Stiegler’s Gorge, but this would affect only a relatively small part of the Reserve and should not be a matter of serious concern unless the reservoir draws in large numbers of settlers” (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/152961>, p. 1).

as the cancellation of prospecting licenses or the growth of the elephant population were also praised, even though the latter was within the statistical margin of error of the estimation method, as a World Heritage Centre official objected, with numbers not more than 15 percent of what they used to be. In the end, Norway was steamrolled once again, with the decision dropping any mention of Danger Listing as a future option.

While all this was taking place, the concerned country made a point of demonstrating how much importance it placed on the status of its World Heritage Property: the Tanzanian delegation made an appearance twice, first for answering questions and then for a statement after the decision.⁷⁶ It broadcasted from a room where about twenty formally dressed participants and a TV crew had assembled, and the senior official addressing the Committee in suit and tie sat next to the national flag. While his dismissal of mere “speculations” about the property might seem to be a rather strongly worded criticism, the whole arrangement signalled that the country was taking the matter and the Committee seriously.

All this was different in the case of Liverpool.⁷⁷ To start with, it is very difficult to dismiss the impact of recent activities to the site however one looks at it: the visual impact of new construction on the property is massive, concessions to Committee complaints in the past years have been minimal, and on top of this there are recently announced plans for a new Everton FC football stadium to be built into one of the historical docks – once again, without the required prior consultation with World Heritage bodies. In a single statement,⁷⁸ the UK state minister for culture emphasised the country’s commitment to World Heritage and the sums invested into Liverpool heritage buildings; however, she did not back this up by providing a sign of hope on the order of a recovering elephant population or a cruise ship ban.

The statement also could not be more different from the Tanzanian ones in terms of formality: the minister was informally dressed and spoke from what looked more like a room of a home than an office space, without the trappings of state officialdom such as a flag or portrait of a head of state. She also addressed the Committee alone, with no representatives from the Foreign Office, the UK’s heritage institutions, or Liverpool in evidence – in fact, except for one delegate from Historic England, none of these bodies had even registered for the session.⁷⁹ Liverpool representatives last attended in 2018 and no UK ambassador to UNESCO has attended since 2017,⁸⁰ despite Liverpool having been up for decision in every session. By the time the item was opened, the 2021 session was well underway and anyone following the proceedings would have had ample time to note the more formal style of self-representation adopted by most countries.

I doubt, however, that anyone had bothered to check, and public comments by the UK protagonists confirm this impression, as government representatives demonstrated lack of awareness of the activities of the World Heritage Committee in other ways as well: The state minister and later, after

⁷⁶ 19 July, 2:50:10–2:54:55 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=10215), 3:51:05–3:52:50 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=13865).

⁷⁷ 18 July, 3:03:00–4:04:25 (https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=10980); 19 July, 0:03:55–0:36:00 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=235); 21 July, 0:04:20–0:08:05 (<https://youtu.be/OvPxZLLJG1s?t=260>).

⁷⁸ 18 July, 3:38:00–3:44:25 (https://youtu.be/gBtkkN-fQ_g?t=13083).

⁷⁹ WHC/21/44.COM/INF.2, p. 55 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188513#page=55>).

⁸⁰ Cf. WHC/19/43.COM/INF.2, p. 105 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/179192#page=106>); WHC/18/42.COM/INF.2, p. 75 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/168531#page=75>); WHC/17/41.COM/INF.2, p. 82 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/165632#page=82>); WHC-15/39.COM/INF.2, p. 84 (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/137687#page=84>). No list of participants for the 2016 session – interrupted because of the attempted coup in Istanbul and then continued in UNESCO headquarters – has been published.

the deletion of the property, the city mayor,⁸¹ complained that no monitoring mission had visited Liverpool since 2011. Yet in actual fact, a monitoring mission met the city council, the local World Heritage site steering group, and English Heritage representatives in 2015,⁸² and the mission report confirming this is readily available on the World Heritage Centre web page for Liverpool.⁸³ The city mayor announced that the city council was considering lodging an appeal,⁸⁴ oblivious of the fact that no such procedure is foreseen in Committee operations. The metro mayor of the Liverpool city region dismissed “a decision taken on the other side of the world”,⁸⁵ thus equating geographical distance with ignorance of local conditions. However, the only people in attendance from Fuzhou, the official host city of the session, were the Chair and the director of the World Heritage Centre, given that due to the pandemic, China had sealed its borders almost completely. People familiar with UNESCO must have noticed that the rapporteur of the session and World Heritage Centre officials were speaking from one of the meeting halls in the headquarters in Paris, while other participants sat in offices, meeting rooms, private homes, log cabins, or even cars in unidentified locations, some in what looked like the UNESCO buildings, others presumably in their home countries – but nobody in Fuzhou where they would have been in the meeting hall together with the chair. The physical vote by secret ballot took place in UNESCO headquarters, as was explicitly announced,⁸⁶ meaning that most of the action happened within a couple of train hours from Liverpool, even if the gavel was struck in China. This cannot possibly have escaped the attention of someone following the web stream, so the likely conclusion is that nobody among the UK authorities cared to do so.

Even so, several Committee members argued in the debate for postponing the deletion and Hungary suggested adjournment to the next session. The Chinese ambassador to UNESCO forcefully objected, however, insisting that despite its unusual format, this was a formal Committee session that should not shy away from taking responsibility.⁸⁷ Strained bilateral relations over such matters as the Uyghur camps and China’s clampdown on Hong Kong civic liberties may have added their weight here. Norway called for a secret ballot, seconded by Guatemala, and may even have done the UK a (most likely unwitting) favour by demanding that the vote should be about the draft decision.⁸⁸ But while 8 members had spoken in favour of leaving Liverpool on the List,⁸⁹ the next morning only 5 members voted so, with 13 of 18 valid votes supporting the draft decision of deletion – just a single vote more than the required two-thirds majority. Had members stuck to their public positions, Liverpool would still be on the World Heritage List.⁹⁰

⁸¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/21/unesco-strips-liverpool-waterfront-world-heritage-status>.

⁸² <https://whc.unesco.org/document/137607>, p. 3.

⁸³ Cf. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1150/documents>.

⁸⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/21/unesco-strips-liverpool-waterfront-world-heritage-status>.

⁸⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/21/unesco-strips-liverpool-waterfront-world-heritage-status>.

⁸⁶ 19 July, 0:30:15–0:31:25 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=1815).

⁸⁷ 19 July, 0:07:10–0:09:15 (https://youtu.be/9EsqE-Qa_Fg?t=430).

⁸⁸ Matters of World Heritage inscription or deletion require a two-thirds majority of members present and voting in order to stand. Had the delegate waited for someone else to submit an amendment to the draft decision – the only way to avert deletion – and then proposed the vote, a simple majority would have sufficed to bring that amendment down, producing the same practical result of deletion. As similar confusion in the lengthy debate about the German nomination “Schwetzingen: A Prince Elector’s Summer Residence” in the 2012 session (Brumann 2021: 24–27) demonstrates, this is a difficult point to comprehend, and I assume that the Norwegian representative calling the vote was not aware of it, just as it eluded Swiss delegates in 2012.

⁸⁹ Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Brazil, Oman, Australia, and South Africa, with Spain making an ambivalent statement in favour of maintaining Liverpool’s status while deploring the absence of an amendment to the draft decision.

⁹⁰ In contrast to the two deletions made in past years, and to the chair’s surprise, his sober announcement of the decision elicited no comments (21 July, 0:05:55–0:06:30; <https://youtu.be/OvPxZLLJG1s?t=355>).

Had the UK invested in serious lobbying, I suspect that this gap between support on the floor and in the ballot booth would have been smaller; the country could also have gained votes by offering at least one concrete measure that could be taken as a sign of goodwill. The special conditions of the session may have made lobbying advances more difficult, but as the other upgrades demonstrate, this was not an insurmountable obstacle. Thus, lack of interest by Liverpool authorities must be seen as the key factor in the failure to engage in such activities. The UK cannot be considered to have abandoned its interest in World Heritage as such, as in the very same session, *The Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales* was newly listed and the earlier World Heritage property *City of Bath* was made a part of the new transnational inscription *Great Spas of Europe*.⁹¹ Yet a rift between national authorities and the local Liverpool ones had been apparent as early as 2010 (Brumann 2021: 147n30) and the national conservation authority Historic England, while deploring the deletion, did not fail to condemn the local stadium plan in its public comment.⁹² In sum, then, had Liverpool authorities made their national representatives fight for the World Heritage title just like Tanzanian officials did, it seems likely that they would have kept it.

Conclusion: supra-state capture

At first glance, the World Heritage Committee seems to have embarked on a new course in 2021. Not only did the Italian government and the dam-building industry bow to its power in much-noticed ways, the Committee itself sanctioned failure to meet its requirements by striking Liverpool's historic port and docks from the World Heritage List in its session. Given the general climate of previous meetings, this measure in particular came as a surprise. My analysis reveals, however, that these incidents were exceptions only: the 21 state members of the Committee continued to interpret their multilateral mandate in the interest of mutual satisfaction and did little to defend the collective will of treaty states, general values such as indigenous rights to which the Committee and the UN profess commitment, and other overarching concerns. Instead, for the most part, Committee states helped Committee states realise their vested interests, and the route for the countries not currently represented to realise theirs was that of seeking the patronage of Committee member states. Even for potentially explosive matters, such as the World Heritage listing of sites of recent violent and genocidal conflicts that might pit treaty states against treaty states, this stance prevailed, with the stakes in ongoing World Heritage nominations of this type already too high to keep the debate on the level of fundamental principles. The clientelist constellation also perpetuated Northern hegemony on the World Heritage List: half of all new World Heritage inscriptions – the largest share in two decades – went to European countries. While a Committee majority hailed from the Global South, these members continued their split strategy of denouncing European hegemony while sustaining it through their decisions.

⁹¹ Since both inscriptions had ICOMOS backing, they were probably not seen as requiring national-level vigilance. The customary acceptance speech in response to the property in Wales was delivered by local authorities (28 July, 2:23:30–2:26:20, <https://youtu.be/ApKNIIDTLIo?t=8610>) and the one for the spa property was delivered by a Czech representative, with mayors from all involved cities, including Bath, delivering no more than a polite sentence in a pre-recorded video screened during the speech (24 July, 3:02:40–3:06:35, <https://youtu.be/u56ci9ahYBI?t=10962>). Unlike earlier instances such as Hadrian's Wall, mentioned above, which was subsequently absorbed into the serial *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, the separate World Heritage property *City of Bath* has not been superseded by the serial property but continues to feature independently on the List and in the official number of UK World Heritage properties. The ICOMOS evaluation mentions the pre-existing entry but does not discuss the ramifications, and Bath is now the clearest proof that properties can feature on the World Heritage List in parallel incarnations; for other, less obvious cases, cf. Brumann 2021: 214n34, 214–215n36.)

⁹² <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/statements/liverpool-world-heritage-site-deleted>.

Not all observer states agreed with this mode of operation, and in fact, two joint statements made by coalitions of countries pressed for a different approach: on the second day, Switzerland, speaking also on behalf of Sweden, the Netherlands, and Colombia, exhorted Committee members to adhere to the rules, given that the General Assembly had assessed recent practices as endangering the credibility of the Convention.⁹³ A week later, with the state of conservation review finished, Sweden, speaking for the same group and an additional eight countries,⁹⁴ declared reliance on expertise to be fundamental and found the trend of avoiding Danger Listings and monitoring missions worrying. With nominations coming up next on the session agenda, they urged caution in inscribing properties for which the OUV had not been established.⁹⁵ However, such general pleas from groups of observer states did nothing to stop Committee states' support for the concerns of *individual* observer states.⁹⁶

After the upheavals of the 2010–2015 transition period described in my book, the Committee has reached a new equilibrium. Its members jealously guard Committee prerogatives against other bodies and forces, only to then use them in favour of their self-interests and those of their allies and clients, and they are unwilling to be restrained by general policies, official procedures, customary precedent, or diplomatic decorum. This stance includes countries that in past Committee tenures have advocated for expertise, proper procedures, and multilateralism. Once they become strongly invested in a particular agenda item, such as Australia was in keeping the Great Barrier Reef off the List of World Heritage in Danger, all other concerns take a back seat.

Yet while Committee members thus practice *realpolitik*, they still have not dispensed with the basic mode of doing business. They keep discussing a long series of threatened World Heritage properties and candidate sites for the World Heritage List one by one and keep engaging with the draft decision texts and introductory presentations provided by the Advisory Bodies and the secretariat. This also continues to take the form of reasoned debate: members do not simply rewrite the proposed decisions and be done with it, as has occasionally occurred in the past (Brumann 2021: 91), but present justifications of their amendments. When the goal is a specific outcome, these arguments often violate agreed principles and talk past others' objections. Sometimes, they do not even seem to fully convince the speaker – the exchanges often have a theatrical quality. Still, proper form is maintained and nobody has proposed to do away with it yet; given that the sessions are recorded and preserved indefinitely through web-streaming and minute-taking, appearances must be upheld. The procedures are not explained to first-timers and may appear opaque, but I do not think that the conduct of sessions can possibly fool any attentive observer. However, much as in the Committee proper, most spectators of the web stream will be invested in specific sites and issues, caring little about the general mode of

⁹³ 17 July, 3:41:20–3:43:30 (<https://youtu.be/BH9xNhHxCB0?t=13280>).

⁹⁴ Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Mexico.

⁹⁵ 24 July, 0:40:40–0:42:35 (<https://youtu.be/u56ci9ahYBI?t=2440>).

⁹⁶ The pleas did not even hold back all countries making them: ICOMOS advised against accepting the “significant boundary modification” that added new components to the *Defence Line of Amsterdam* (the Netherlands), now to become *Dutch Water Defence Lines*, as that proposal excised specific sections from the original property at the same time. (This double strategy may have been inspired by a similar alteration proposed by China for its *Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas* in 2010; Brumann 2021:88.) Against Norway's resistance, the modification was approved, and the Dutch statement made after the decision expressed no concern about the overruling of expert advice (26 July, 3:18:05–3:44:30; <https://youtu.be/TAW9Ip0YUOU?t=11883>). Other involved countries – in particular Switzerland, Sweden, Lithuania and Belgium – have indeed been relatively rule-abiding during past Committee tenures, but Mexico was one of the leaders of the “Brasilia rebellion” in 2010. Moreover in past sessions, Mexico, Colombia, and Belgium had little compunction about accepting the inscription of properties even when the Advisory Bodies were not convinced of these properties' OUV (Mexico for *Tehuacán-Cuicatlán Valley: originary habitat of Mesoamerica* in 2018 and for *Prehistoric Caves of Yagul and Mitla in the Central Valley of Oaxaca* and *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* in 2010; Colombia for *Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia* in 2011; and Belgium when having components added to the multinational property *Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe* in 2017).

operations or about aggregate outcomes such as the skewed global distribution of World Heritage honours.

While the above-mentioned joint statements of observer states indicate growing concern with Committee mores, it is difficult to see how a majority might form in the Committee in favour of limiting its own powers, given that most treaty states standing for election do so with their own nomination projects and other self-interests in mind. Although the General Assembly of States Parties elects the Committee, it has no formal tools to impose anything on it, and when members do not live up to what they promise prior to election, they cannot be held accountable either. At the same time, no country has yet rejected the Convention or renounced its right to nominate further properties for the World Heritage List. The likeliest future for the Committee, therefore, is the continuation of current practices.

For the parties to the treaty, this is no tragedy: on balance, countries must be happy with what they get out of the World Heritage Convention, since sustained dissatisfaction would ultimately lead to change, even in an equilibrium situation that is difficult to tilt. The awe inspired by the World Heritage name and the public weight it holds appear unaffected, however, and the boost provided by World Heritage inscriptions and candidatures is often impressive, lending itself to the pursuit of all kinds of objectives, ranging from the realisation of quick profits to improved protection for sites that many people hold dear.

Those hoping for just and rational global governance often deplore the powerlessness of UN bodies and processes: vetoes cripple the Security Council; states ignore the commitments they have made to Millennium Goals, human rights, or biodiversity with impunity; Blue Helmets must stand by when atrocities are committed. It is tempting to see the World Heritage Committee in this light when it fails to restrain states that neglect what is supposed to be heritage of global significance within their borders. But this is not the full story, as the Committee keeps awarding a cherished symbolic prize whose lustre has not yet substantially diminished. I therefore argue that rather than supra-state failure or demise, what we see here can be considered supra-state capture. My use extends state capture, a concept coined after the early postsocialist transition of the 1990s⁹⁷ to describe how the new governments often failed to deliver their promises to the public while enabling oligarchs and other elites to line their pockets. In other words, in such cases the state was not weak or absent, but it served those who bent its rules, legislation, and decisions to their own advantage, not the entire citizenry (Hellman et al. 2000). In analogous fashion, the World Heritage Committee continues to be influential, but not necessarily in terms of furthering the goals of the Convention and the collective interest of the States Parties. Instead, the small elite of elected Committee member states captures the benefits offered by the supra-state institution, reaping List inscriptions and conservation exemptions for themselves or their clients. The oligarch role is merely rotated: members' tenures have been shortened, mandatory breaks prolonged, and most seats tied to world regions in recent years (Brumann 2021: 118–119). The manoeuvring space of the states currently serving on the Committee, however, is left untouched.

A half century after its adoption, the weight of the World Heritage Convention remains considerable, and none of the remarks presented here are meant to question its consequentiality. It is obvious, however, that the World Heritage Committee is neither willing nor able to control much of what is being done in the Convention's name – at any given point in time, a majority of Committee

⁹⁷ I thank Dittmar Schorkowitz for pointing me to the potential of the term.

members have other interests that they consider much more pressing. In other words, it is not a case of a multilateral institution being dismantled by states insisting on their sovereignty; rather, the institution is captured by the small and rotating group of states tasked with governing it. While this paper has looked at the World Heritage Committee, the dynamics illustrated here are not unique. Many of its structures are shared by other UN bodies as well, and the concept of supra-state capture may prove analytically fruitful for insights into these organisations.

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