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Published by: Editura MARTOR (MARTOR Publishing House), Muzeul Țăranului Român (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-22-2017/

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V. Book Reviews
This work edited by Christoph Brumann and David Berliner delivers what it promises, that is, a skilful bringing-together of two equally legitimate approaches: a top-down one, which investigates UNESCO's World Heritage Program as a global institution, and a grassroots one, which seeks for local applications and implications of patrimonial decisions taken “up there.” While Brumann has, as he himself admits, “never done such a World Heritage site study”, he has had extensive experience of “participant observation of accessible meetings of the World Heritage system” (Brumann 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014), very much as Marc Abélès had of the EU institutions some years ago (Abélès 1992). By contrast, David Berliner has had intensive experience of fieldwork at Luang Prabang in Laos (Berliner 2010, 2011, 2012). It is at the intersection of these views and interests that the general question of the book arises: “What does World Heritage actually do on the ground of the World Heritage properties, far away from the meeting halls where the committee takes its decisions?” The general answer, as Berliner puts it, is that “by attempting to preserve spaces, practices and objects, UNESCO experts and national heritage professionals effectively transform them.”

If patrimony/heritage is an old concern, its global dimension – greatly fuelled by UNESCO policies – is a rather more recent one. It is rooted, in a way, in a warm-hearted and broader UNESCO project inspired by its first president, Julian Huxley: the writing of a “History of Mankind”, leaving Euro-centrism behind and holding out an image of peace and understanding to traumatised post-war humanity (Duedahl 2011; see also Cameron and Rössler 2013). Ascribing global time and significance to local people was already in the air. The project as such failed, but the route of heritage proved to be much more successful in achieving the same goal. In convention after convention, UNESCO was opening up the field of patrimony, bridging natural and cultural patrimony, material and immaterial (that is, Oral and Intangible) patrimonies, and moving from legacy to heritage in order to link past with future and ensure sustainable development. Soon patrimony became an all-embracing “allegory” (Choay 1996), produced its own vocabulary and values (e.g. Harrison 2013; Samuels and Rico 2015), and called forth in return more and more critiques, theoretical and empirical alike. While they would normally have appeared in a range of different publications, such contributions to patrimony issues in general and UNESCO World Heritage ones in particular started to be more and more grouped together by common topics, cultural spaces or shared approaches in reference collected volumes (e.g. the Berghahn Key Issues in Cultural Heritage Series edited by William Logan and Laurajane Smith).

In this dynamic context, Brumann and Berliner’s collection of “ethnographies of encounters” stands out through the problematic unity it presents beyond/behind the diversity of empirical evidence, with each contributor tracking what happens between the UNESCO offices and the UNESCO protected heritage.....
site he/she is observing “on the ground”, and raising, from the point of view of his/her personal field experience, those “fundamental questions (UNESCO’s) bureaucratic machinery has often little time for asking.”

With only one exception, the case studies in this volume are chosen from around the non-Euro-American world, in remote places mainly approached through the “tourist gaze” (Urry 2002): the Medina of Fez (Morocco), the Mosques of Timbuktu (Mali), the old town of Lijiang and the Yin Xu archaeological site (China), Luang Prabang (Laos), Angkor (Cambodia), the Borobudur and Prambanan temples (Indonesia), Chichén Itzá (Mexico), the Kondo-Irangi Rock Art, the Tadrart Acasus, and the Valcamonica Rock Drawings sites (Tanzania, Libya, and Italy), the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove (Nigeria), and the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape (South Africa). The corresponding ethnographies are grouped in three categories: Cities, Archaeological Sites, and Cultural Landscapes. While all are critical – and sometimes even overwhelmed by disappointment (Jasper Chalcraft) – none of the authors are either “patrimony believers” or “patrimony atheists” as Brumann (2014) has it, but simply committed to the results of their in-depth ethnographies.

The eleven case studies stand for eleven different situations too, with their individual contexts, interests at stake, social actors and/or values. Nevertheless, in different ways and to different degrees, some fundamental criticisms and questions underpin them all. Up-stream, there is the fundamental question of “Whose patrimony?” as addressed, for example, by Noel Salazar. Traditionally, “world patrimony” belongs to the World; but how can a local/national patrimony be deterritorialised? Taking place “on the ground”, World Heritage literally makes place. In a complementary way, it also makes time, inscribing local stories in a global History, thus imposing a universalistic view – which Chalcraft does not hesitate to call “a kind of colonial imposition” – over local visions of both past and present, without UNESCO’s policymakers even being aware of the counter-memories they are thus oppressing (Di Cesari 2010). “Why are some stories told and others ignored? Who decides if, when, and how to tell a community’s story or how to interpret and present the history of a community for public consumption and representation for future generations?” (Jackson 2010). UNESCO’s World Heritage program thus reveals its hegemonic power dimension.

This is more visible in the multi-layer system of global-national-local interactions of actors and competing interests that interposes itself between global bureaucracy and local practices. When UNESCO policies hit the ground, they are filtered by national ones, and sometimes come into conflict with them. At other times the interaction may go in the opposite direction: unable to ensure the safeguarding of their particular outstanding heritage, countries may appeal for UNESCO protection. A recent example would be the Romanian government’s recent efforts to have Roșia Montana placed on UNESCO’s patrimonial list. A further issue is that World Heritage values do not necessarily match local understandings and interests. Generally, locals do enjoy the material benefits that come with patrimonialisation, but in most cases this is so for only some of them; staging World Heritage brings touristification, which in due course implies gentrification and in the majority of instances de-localisation of the traditional residents. The Cultural Landscape convention may conserve a history- and value-laden local space by converting it into a global framed heritage-scape, but it may also “save” it from the locals’ own concurrent and sui generis particular heritage-scapes (Gillot et al. 2013). As Manon Istasse highlights in an insightful manner when presenting the case of the Fez medina, such heritage-scapes are also a matter of “affect and senses.” Yet “World Heritage policies and heritage policies in general (...) miss both the sensory and the affective aspects of heritage” – what she terms, following Muriel Girard, “les émotions patrimoniales” (patrimonial sentiments). “This stance”, she concludes, “often leads (heritage experts) to deny any heritage competences to inhabitants. (They) are accused of not being educated about heritage preservation and of not taking proper
care of their houses; they are believed to simply let their houses deteriorate, to want to replace traditional mosaic with modern tiles and to have no taste.” This, once again, also applies to Romania, where country people find themselves accused of spoiling their peasant traditions, which have to be saved against them by state regulations. To state it as a norm, a heritage-scape is what it has to be for everybody, not what local residents actually feel about it.

A further issue is that UNESCO World Heritage policies and values face challenges from business interests, with “patrimony entrepreneurs” frequently having the last word in the local implementation of the heritage project. The question then arises: sustainable development for whom?

Last but not least, as dramatically shown by Charlotte Joy for the cases of Timbuktu and Gao, what if your heritage is my offence, if international protection of your sacred heritage is my “on the ground” blasphemy?

After reading the whole volume, the least one can say is that World Patrimony is not always a blessing for its local “owners.” In a world of “economy of experience” (Pine and Gilmore 1998) and “ethics of authenticity” (Taylor 1992), the “democratisation of heritage” promoted by UNESCO is of course being welcomed by millions of foreign tourists whose “exo-nostalgia it feeds”, but it is also overwhelming locals’ “endo-nostalgia”, as Berliner has it. Whatever its good intentions, UNESCO thus cannot be considered as totally innocent of what is taking place “on the ground.”

But does this mean that UNESCO is guilty? The editors make their stance clear at the end of the Introduction: “The chapters (in this book) should curtail over-enthusiastic belief in the idea that an appreciation for heritage can simply be transported intact over large spatial and cultural distances: what we present are mixed and often complex messages. They neither unanimously speak for demonising the World Heritage venture, nor do they encourage its glorification.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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