Who administers oblivion?

The de-listing hypothesis and the states and local communities' roles in shaping the UNESCO World Heritage Programme's Lists.

By Federica Falchetti

Abstract:

The work I am going to present originates from a series of reflections following the reading of an article by Rodney Harrison, published in 2013 and titled "*Forgetting to remember, remembering to forget: Late modern heritage practices, sustainability and the 'crisis' of accumulation of the past*"[1]. In the article, Harrison starts from the assumption that heritage - contrary to what the AHD[2] claims - is culturally determined and its value changes according to the relevance that the societies that bear it attribute to it. In such perspective, Harrison launches an apparently provocative proposal: he states that current mechanisms of heritage preservation and protection, such as lists and registers, have seen a constant accumulation of inscribed items to the point of creating a 'crisis' of accumulation of the past, and investigates whether we should de-list or stop preserving heritage elements where there is evidence that they are no longer relevant to present and future societies. My work investigates the actual provocativeness and potential applicability of Harrison's proposal within the specific UNESCO context and in particular with reference to two of the main instruments of its World Heritage Programme: the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage[3] and its List[4] and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage[5] and its Representative List[6].

I will firstly investigate the effective reality of the accumulation crisis denounced by Harrison, studying how the idea of the inherent and immutable value of heritage, typical of the AHD, still permeates UNESCO Conventions and Lists, causing an accumulation of elements, which remain inscribed even when they lose significance for their own bearers[7]. Subsequently, the analysis moves to the functioning of the current de-listing mechanism in the UNESCO World Heritage List and Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, investigating the presence or absence of delisting options in case the element loses its significance for the society that bears it, as Harrison suggested. Having ascertained the absence of such an option, I will then proceed to seek the reasons for such an absence and find them in the UNESCO structure itself, where the society that Harrison mentions is not represented by the communities of heritage

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[1] Harrison, R. (2013). Forgetting to remember, remembering to forget: Late modern heritage practices, sustainability and the 'crisis' of accumulation of the past, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19(6). Pp. 579–595.

[2] "Authorised Heritage Discourse". See Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London, Routledge.

[3] UNESCO General Conference (1972). Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

[4] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/

[5] UNESCO General Conference (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

[6] https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists

[7] Foster, M. D. (2015). *UNESCO on the Ground – Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

bearers but by the Member State that inscribed the element on the respective List. The analysis thus shifts to states' top-down and local bottom-up roles in the current and possible future UNESCO enlisting and de-listing mechanisms, which currently see states play a prominent role and local communities have no guaranteed space for the expression of their will and opinion[8]. This work will therefore demonstrate that the UNESCO state-centric structure makes states practically the exclusive actors legitimized to identify, interpret, nominate and inscribe heritage in the UNESCO lists, thus enabling them to take "*a priori*" exclusionary decisions based on AHD perspectives or merely on the pursuit of their own political and identity interests, thus already being "administrators of oblivion".

In the light of this finding, I will reconsider Harrison's proposal, acknowledging its validity but expressing the necessity not to leave the role of representatives of the societies solely to the states, and to guarantee to local communities structural and direct spaces within which they can exert a decisional authority over their heritage, both in the current enlisting procedures and in potential future de-listing mechanisms which, as Harrison proposes, could take into account the changing value attributed to heritage by its bearers over time.

In conclusion, my work attempts to imagine the potential opening, in the UNESCO context, of realistic spaces for the direct participation of local communities in the enlisting and management of heritage and - if necessary - also in its delisting, taking inspiration from another prominent intergovernmental institution in the field of heritage, the Council of Europe, and the mechanisms of direct participation of communities envisaged by its 2005 Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society[9].

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My name is Federica Falchetti and I am currently an independent researcher specialised in the study of issues such as multi-level relations and top-down and bottom-up approaches in the field of heritage governance, with a focus on the UNESCO context. I am currently advancing my studies autonomously, while also working in international relations as part of the School of Transnational Governance of the European University Institute (EUI), an intergovernmental organisation established by the EU Member States in 1972 and based in Florence, Italy. Before joining the EUI, I obtained a Master's degree in Public and Cultural Diplomacy from the University of Siena, Italy, with a thesis in Anthropology of Cultural Heritage. My latest publication is a paper titled “Transnational Organisation or Policy Tool? UNESCO and its World Heritage Programme as a Global Arena for the Exertion of State Power", which is part of the Working Paper Series in Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the University of Siena. In my research activities, my main aim and interest is to find solutions in order to guarantee local communities with the necessary space and authority to favour a more democratic and participative bottom-up approach to heritage governance in the UNESCO context, rebalancing the prominent state role and the AHD-centred approach to heritage that still lies at the very heart of some of the main UNESCO instruments for the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

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[8] Hafstein, V. Tr. (2014). Protection as Dispossession: Government in the Vernacular. *Cultural heritage in transit: intangible rights as human rights*, 25–57. Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press.

[9] Council of Europe (2005) *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*.