

*Working Title*  
**The Erosion of UNESCO**  
**What are we preserving and why?**

*Simone FM Spinner, 30 May 2018*

Universidade Católica Portuguesa | FCT-Lisbon Consortium | International Doctoral Program in Culture Studies

*“Since wars begin in the minds of men and women,  
it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed”.*  
—UNESCO Constitution

*“National sovereignty is dangerous to global responsibility” José Manuel Durão Barroso*

In this day and age of fast food, fast entertainment, fast fashion, and prefabricated, remediated, diluted culture, UNESCO may seem like it is losing the battle to preserve the cultural history of mankind. When the press focuses on recent nominations of intangible cultural heritage such as Neapolitan pizza, and French baguettes, or UNESCO’s failures to protect precious world heritage in the Middle East, Africa, and even in Europe, along with the eminent exit of the United States and Israel over perceived anti-Semitic leanings, UNESCO seems to have lost its credibility as an agency. Largely misunderstood and underappreciated, the power and influence of UNESCO is rapidly eroding. Understanding what UNESCO, (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization)<sup>1</sup> does and where it has made missteps, may allow the agency to come to terms with its failures and repair its image and influence, while modernizing and broadening its ever-important purposes of fostering access to education, gender equality, scientific development, diverse cultural promotion, food insecurity and clean water initiatives across the globe.

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<sup>1</sup> Our Vision: Political and economic arrangements of governments are not enough to secure the lasting and sincere support of the peoples. Peace must be founded upon dialogue and mutual understanding. Peace must be built upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity.

In this spirit, UNESCO develops educational tools to help people live as global citizens free of hate and intolerance. UNESCO works so that each child and citizen has access to quality education. By promoting cultural heritage and the equal dignity of all cultures, UNESCO strengthens bonds among nations. UNESCO fosters scientific programs and policies as platforms for development and cooperation. UNESCO stands up for freedom of expression, as a fundamental right and a key condition for democracy and development. Serving as a laboratory of ideas, UNESCO helps countries adopt international standards and manages programs that foster the free flow of ideas and knowledge sharing.

UNESCO's founding vision was born in response to a world war that was marked by racist and anti-Semitic violence. Seventy years on and many liberation struggles later, UNESCO’s mandate is as relevant as ever. Cultural diversity is under attack and new forms of intolerance, rejection of scientific facts and threats to freedom of expression challenge peace and human rights. In response, UNESCO's duty remains to reaffirm the humanist missions of education, science and culture. (<https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco> Accessed 17 May 2018).

UNESCO is a specialized agency within the United Nations. The United Nations is an IGO (intergovernmental organization) and UNESCO is classified as a non-profit<sup>2</sup> type of IGO and NSA (non-state actor<sup>3</sup>) and is labeled as an INGO (international government organization). UNESCO is situated under the United Nations<sup>i</sup> umbrella along with seventeen other agencies including UNICEF, UNFCCC, WHO, WTO, IMF, IFC, FAO, and UNCCC: agencies focused on using global resources for global humanitarian activism.

According to its official website, UNESCO is a positive wave of humanitarian efforts focusing its activities, energy, and resources on ten themes<sup>ii</sup> including: education and freedom of expression, sustainability, clean water and oceans, literacy programs, supporting scientific exploration and climate science research, gender equality, reshaping cultural policies and fostering cultural diversity, and cultural promotion and protection. Founded on 4 November 1946, UNESCO is based in Paris, France, and is comprised of an Executive Counsel, The Secretariat including the Director General and a global staff of nearly 700 people, and the General Conference consisting of all 195 member and 13 associate states, which meets every two years to discuss and legislate world heritage amongst other topics. The European Union has a non-voting seat at the UN and UNESCO tables but is active and allowed to address the body along with being a strong financial contributor; cooperation between UN, UNESCO, and EU is critical to the success of all entities.

Along with UNESCO, the EU has long been focused on cultural diplomacy and in accordance with its 1991 Maastricht Treaty “creating a new EU competency for culture in order to respect the cultural diversity among EU states and promote cross-cultural projects among them.” (Hill: 2017, pg 181-182) Therefore, the EU participates fully in UNESCO just like any other member state. The EU spearheads its own cultural promotion and preservation programs, often aligned with UNESCO (Hill: 2017) that were designed to complement the work of UNESCO by “...promoting the dissemination of art and culture, intercultural dialogue, and knowledge of the history of the European peoples, and investing culture with social integration and socio-economic development role: promoting cultural cooperation and development in broader efforts in global diplomacy. The EU focuses on approaching diplomacy through culture.” (Hill: 2017)

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<sup>2</sup> Non-profits—media, religious, lobby-groups, education institutes, activist movements, paramilitary, etc are typically structured as non-profits. (Oxford Dictionary online, accessed 30 April 2018).

<sup>3</sup> NSA’s are “individuals or organizations that hold influence and which are wholly or partly independent of state governments.” (Hill & Smith: 2017).

### *What is World Heritage?*

The World Heritage Convention is the branch of UNESCO that is devoted to identifying, recognizing, promoting, and preserving global world heritage including famed sites such as Machu Picchu, the Ancient City of Damascus, the Portuguese town of Sintra, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids at Giza, the Grand Canyon, and the castles in Bavaria. However, UNESCO is more than recognizing world heritage sites and icons. Defining world heritage has been particularly tricky for the organization. In brief, world heritage (tangible and intangible) must be of universal value to humanity and the history of peoples and cultures in the world; universally relevant to culture and the development of culture globally. It seems that this universality doesn't apply stringently to the category of intangible culture.

### *How is World Heritage Status Achieved?*

Deciding what defines universally relevant cultural world heritage is a timely and tedious process. According to a recent report called *The Costs & Benefits of World Heritage Status in the UK*, a successful world heritage nomination process can take up to two years and cost up to five million dollars to complete.<sup>iii</sup> Structurally, the nomination methodology aims to remain objective and unbiased leading to layers of criteria and standards resulting in a wearisome, lengthy, and very costly nomination and application process, which is followed by rejections, rewrites, approvals, and implementation. (Assets: 2007) Inquiries into the fairness of the application process, recognition criteria, and regional and economic bias involved in the world heritage nomination process are frequent. One major complaint is that the status is most often bestowed on Euro-centric, economically elite sites that encourage the protection of nationalistic political overtones. Another criticism of UNESCO world heritage is a perceived white-washing cultural sanitation, including anti-Semitism and anti-African tones. In fact, in early 2018, the United States and Israel both announced their eminent departure from UNESCO on 31 December 2018 due to these perceived anti-Israeli sentiments and bias from the committee and organization based upon years of pro-Palestinian<sup>4</sup> support in the region. And, finally, UNESCO attempts at

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<sup>4</sup> ““This is a brave and moral decision, because UNESCO has become a theatre of the absurd and instead of preserving history, it distorts it,” Netanyahu said.... A report Thursday in Foreign Policy claimed the Trump administration's decision may also be tied to attempts to cut funding to the cultural agency, which it owes some \$500 million.... In 2011, under the Obama administration, the U.S. cut off most of its funding to UNESCO over its acceptance of Palestine as a member-state. ...The Trump administration reportedly wants to exit the organization entirely, citing a number of recent resolutions that have targeted Israel and the settlements, including a resolution which declared the city of Hebron, in the occupied West Bank, as a Palestinian World Heritage Site, and a resolution from October 2016 which was sharply critical of Israel's policies in Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup> (Tibon:2017)

conservation, education, and regeneration often lead to exposure, over-exposure and eventual destruction, followed by a subsequent regeneration/ remediation in a Disneyfied model.

### *Diluting UNESCO's Value*

In many ways, the current problems with UNESCO are world heritage centric. This branch of the organization casts a long and murky shadow over all of the other important humanitarian work that the agency participates in. I argue that the development of the Intangible Cultural Heritage category is where the main degradation lies. Since its inception in 2003 and implementation in 2008, the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage has identified and given a protected status to 470 intangible activities, urban and rural practices, specific concepts, traditions, or cultural elements in 117 countries.<sup>5</sup>

Intangible cultural heritage, unique elements of traditional culture, 2008, the “Convention for the safe guarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage” and its predecessor, the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”...customs, traditions, folk song, folk art and craft, calligraphy, rites of passage, rituals, festivals, even sports like falconry, traditional yoga, dance like traditional flamenco, tango, Japanese and Chinese folk music, African song and dance, and Arabic drumming. (UNESCO: 2018)

The concept for the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage was borne under the Director General Koïchiro Matsuura from Japan, tenure 1995-2009, and further developed during the 2009-2017 tenure of Irina Bokova from Bulgaria.<sup>iv</sup> It was during this time that classic and traditional ideas of world heritage began to shift to include more commerce focused forms of world heritage such as; oral traditions, cultural dances, skills, activities, and even pizza and baguettes. Things become muddy and ineffective in 2010 when the French gastronomic meal was ‘awarded’ followed by the Mediterranean diet in 2013. These concepts are tremendously vague. The nomination of beer culture in Belgium in 2017 gave way to the art of Neapolitan Pizzaiuolo in late 2017. These nominations lead Parisian bakers to nominate the ubiquitous French baguette in 2018.

Also in Paris in 2018, aware of the flood of commerce and visibility that comes with the gold star designation, 250 used book sellers<sup>v</sup> are attempting to apply for the intangible cultural heritage designation, less as a means of protection, and more as a source of increased income.

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<sup>5</sup> The program compiles two lists: the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*, comprises cultural practices and expressions [that] help demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness about its importance, and the *List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*, is composed of those cultural elements that concerned communities and countries consider require urgent measures to keep them alive.” (UNESCO: 2018 <https://en.unesco.org/themes>)

This move is an emblematic travesty of the gross misuse and mismanagement of the UNESCO world heritage convention.

“Known as Bouquinistes, there are 250 traditional book sellers that line the banks of the Seine River, each paying €100 in annual dues to schlep their mostly used books. Each seller is allowed four boxes of which three must be books while the fourth can be devoted to miscellaneous other goods. With reading on the wane and collecting books seems an outdated pastime, many sellers are scrimping on books and selling cheap souvenirs to increase their personal cash flow.”<sup>vi</sup> (McCarthy: 2018).

Hoping to cash in on the UNESCO world heritage status and its earnings potential, Jérôme Callais, the head of the *Cultural Association of Paris Bouquinistes* (McCarthy: 2018) initiated a campaign to establish the designation. According to Callais, sales have slumped and the public’s interest in French literature has waned. (McCarthy: 2018). “Jérôme has noted that his campaign has already sparked a flurry of renewed interest in the booksellers, something he hopes will translate into better sales and a more secure future for the stall owners. (McCarthy: 2018).” It matters naught that the Seine already has the designation of cultural world heritage. The book schleppers need money, so why not get a designation of their own?

#### *Threats to World Heritage: Conservation or Destruction?*

What made the UNESCO World Heritage Center initially interesting and valuable also set the seeds for its destruction. First, by bestowing a natural or cultural heritage site with the VIP status of UNESCO World Heritage, UNESCO set many sites up for inevitable destruction somewhat like a ‘cultural bulldozer’ (Wainwright: 2017). A major criticism of the UNESCO world heritage program has been its failure to protect sites, as increased tourism accelerates destruction of precious sites through often misguided attempts to accommodate ‘the feet of society’: (this is deemed Disneyfication which entails a loss of authenticity) most notably, in The Forbidden City and Great Wall of China, two prominent missteps resulting in tremendous loss of original heritage and structures which were intentionally destroyed and replaced with exaggerated replicas inevitably displacing Chinese citizens, culture, and meaning. Other notable failures include the destruction of world heritage sites in Dresden and Ireland to make way for commercial development and in the war torn regions of the Middle East including Syria, Iran, and Iraq, which underwent massive losses and destruction during the recent war conflicts.<sup>vii</sup>

(Wainwright: 2015). This failure to protect<sup>viii</sup> and preserve<sup>6</sup> world heritage is one of the main aspects that allowed for the corrupt shift toward increasing commerce and tourism dollars. One of the greatest threats to world heritage isn't due to political war or commercial dismantling of iconic sites to revision them with development or Disneyfication, but it is an issue affecting the globe indiscriminately. Climate change is possibly the greatest threat to humanity and life as we know it. It is one example for the desperate need of a common responsibility by all governments and citizens.<sup>ix</sup> Climate change, if forecast models are correct, will destroy many heritage sites and displace the people engaging in many intangible cultural expressions of world heritage.

*Conclusion: Where do We Go From Here?*

Recently, there has been a global weakening of international organizations, non-government organizations, international cultural diplomacy, and the apparent decline and degradation of UNESCO and its World Heritage Center. Once, considered the gold standard for conservation, protection, preservation, and subsequently promotion, there is a glaringly obvious shift in focus away from doing 'good' for humanity, history, and protecting universality in culture; now it just seems to be a strategic branding ploy aimed at capitalizing on tourism dollars. In the VIP list of important places (and now intangible culture concepts) universality no longer extends to these designations, rendering them not just impotent but misguided and corrupt. In 2018, it seems that the UNESCO brand has become nothing more than cultural capital, a tremendously seductive accolade that has become a pathway for increasing sales and commerce under the guise of preservation. In 2017, Audrey Azoulay of France took the helm as Director General from outgoing Irina Bokova and we must wait to see what adaptations and adjustments, if any, are made to the world heritage program. UNESCO has an opportunity to renew its commitment to the safeguarding of tangible and intangible, universally valued heritage, and the first step is to critically assess what their true aim is and should be going forward.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/> According to the UNESCO website, there are 54 properties in grave danger, many in war torn Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Yemen, in the Middle East and many in Africa including several in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya... There are also threatened properties in the UK, Europe, South and Central America, and various South Asian and South Pacific locations. Former Director General will be speaking at Climate Change Leadership Conference 2018 in Porto, Portugal in July about climate change and its threat to world heritage. (<http://www.climatechange-porto.com/>)

## APPENDIX A

### **UNESCO Institutes and Centres: UNESCO education institutes and centres**

- UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning  
IIEP, Paris (France) and Buenos Aires (Argentina)
- UNESCO International Bureau of Education  
IBE, Geneva, (Switzerland)
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning  
UIL, Hamburg (Germany)
- UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education  
IITE, Moscow (Russian Federation)
- UNESCO International Institute for Capacity-Building in Africa  
IICBA, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)
- UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean  
IESALC, Caracas (Venezuela)
- UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training  
UNEVOC, Bonn (Germany)

### **UNESCO science institutes and centres**

- UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education  
Delft (Netherlands)
- International Centre for Theoretical Physics  
ICTP, Trieste (Italy)

### **UNESCO Institute for Statistics**

- UNESCO Institute for Statistics  
UIS, Montreal (Canada)

### **UNESCO Category 2 institutes and centres**

- UNESCO has also designated 81 International and Regional Institutes and Centres under its auspices

### **Agencies of the United Nations**

1. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
2. International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)
3. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
4. International Labour Organization (ILO)
5. International Maritime Organization (IMO)
6. International Monetary Fund (IMF)
7. International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
8. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
9. United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
10. Universal Postal Union (UPU)
11. World Bank Group (WBG)
  - 11.1. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)
  - 11.2. International Finance Corporation (IFC)
  - 11.3. International Development Association (IDA)
12. World Health Organization (WHO)
13. World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
14. World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
15. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO or WTO)
16. Former specialized agencies
17. Related organizations
  - 17.1. Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization Preparatory Commission
  - 17.2. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)
  - 17.3. International Organization for Migration (IOM)
  - 17.4. Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
  - 17.5. World Trade Organization (WTO)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/about-un/index.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/themes>

<sup>iii</sup> “The Costs and Benefits of World Heritage Status in the UK .” *Assets Publishing Service*, Pricewaterhouse Coopers LLP, Dept of Culture, Arts & Sport, Dec. 2007, [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/78452/PwC\\_fullreport.pdf](http://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78452/PwC_fullreport.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/director-general>, <https://en.unesco.org/director-general/former-dgs>

<sup>v</sup> McCarthy, AnneMarie. “Riverside Booksellers in Paris Seek Unesco Status...and More Sales.” *Lonely Planet*, Lonely Planet, 10 May 2018, [www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2018/05/10/bouquinistes-unesco-paris-booksellers/](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2018/05/10/bouquinistes-unesco-paris-booksellers/).

<sup>vi</sup> McCarthy, AnneMarie. “Riverside Booksellers in Paris Seek Unesco Status...and More Sales.” *Lonely Planet*, Lonely Planet, 10 May 2018, [www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2018/05/10/bouquinistes-unesco-paris-booksellers/](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2018/05/10/bouquinistes-unesco-paris-booksellers/).

<sup>vii</sup> Wainwright, Oliver. “Unesco Impotence Takes Shine off World Heritage Status.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 2 July 2015, [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/02/unesco-impotence-world-heritage-status](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/02/unesco-impotence-world-heritage-status).

<sup>viii</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/>

<sup>ix</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre. “Climate Change and World Heritage.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, [whc.unesco.org/en/climatechange/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/climatechange/).