

RECENSIONI

Cristoph BRUMANN, David BERLINER (eds) | *World Heritage on the Ground. Ethnographic Perspectives*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Publishers, 2016, pp. 327.

The book edited by Christoph Brumann and David Berliner is offering what it promises, meaning a perfect articulation of two equally legitimate approaches: a top-down one, investigating UNESCO's World Heritage as a global institution, and a grass-roots one, searching for local applications and implications of patrimonial decisions taken up-there. As he confesses, Brumann has «never done such a World Heritage site study» but has a huge experience in «participant observation of accessible meetings of the World Heritage system» (Brumann 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). On the other side, David Berliner has an intensive fieldwork experience with Luang Prabang in Laos (Berliner, 2010, 2011, 2012). At the crossroad of these views and interests arises the general question of the book: «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 has 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 rather a more recent one. It is rooted, in a way, in a warmhearted and broader UNESCO project inspired by its first president, Julian Huxley: the writing of a *History of Mankind*, leaving Eurocentrism behind and offering an image of peace and understanding to the traumatized post-war humanity (Duedahl, 2011; see also Cameron and Rössler, 2013). Ascribing global time and meaning to local people was already in the air. The project as such failed, but the road of heritage proved to be much more successful for achieving the same goal. Convention after



convention, UNESCO was opening up the field of patrimony, bridging natural and cultural patrimony, material and immaterial ones, and shifting from legacy to heritage in order to link past with future and ensure sustainable development. Soon it became an all-embracing «allegory» (Choay, 1996), produced its own vocabulary and values (e.g. Harrison, 2013; Samuels and Rico, 2015), and provoked in return more and more critics, theoretical and empirical alike. Usually dispersed in different publications, such contributions to patrimony issues in general and UNESCO World Heritage in particular started to be more and more packed together by common topics, cultural spaces or shared approaches in reference collective volumes (e.g. the Berghahn Key Issues in Cultural Heritage Series edited by William Logan and Laurajane Smith).

In this flourishing context, Brumann and Berliner's collection of «ethnographies of encounters » stands out by its problematic unity beyond the diversity of empirical evidences, every author tracking what happens between UNESCO offices and UNESCO protected heritage 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 one single 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 in Timbuktu (Mali), the old town of Lijiang and the Yin Xu archeological site (China), Luang Prabang (Laos), Angkor (Cambodia), Borobudur and Prambanan temples (Indonesia), Chichén Itzá (Mexico), The Kondoa-Irangi Rock Art, the Tadrart Acacus, and the Valcamonica Rock Drawings sites (Tanzania, Libya, and Italy), Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove (Nigeria), and Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape (South Africa). The corresponding ethnographies are regrouped in three parts: Cities, Archeological 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 just committed to the results of their in depth ethnographies.

The eleven case studies are eleven different situations too, with their particular contexts, stakes, social actors and/or values. Nevertheless, in different ways and degrees, some fundamental critics and questions passes all of them. Up-stream, there is the founding question about «who's patrimony? », explicitly addressed by Noel Salazar. Traditionally, «these

outstanding sites ‘belonged’ to the world» (Barthel-Bouchier and Hui, 2007, apud Salazar, p. 147); but how can a local/national patrimony be deterritorialized? Taking place «on the ground», World Heritage literally makes place. Complementary, it makes time, inscribing local (hy)stories in a global History, thus imposing an universalistic view – which Jasper Chalcraft does not hesitate to call «a kind of colonial imposition» (Chalcraft 2016: 219) – over local visions of both past and present. Then come a multi-layer system of global-national-local interactions of actors and competing stakes. Coming to the ground, UNESCO policies are filtered by national ones, sometimes conflicting between them. Sometimes, interaction may go also the other way around: unable to ensure the protection of their own outstanding heritage, states may call on UNESCO protection. Further on, World Heritage values are not necessarily fitting with local meanings and interests. Most of the locals do enjoy the material benefits that come with patrimonialization, but in most of the case this is true just for a part of them: staging World Heritage brings touristification, which further on implies gentrification and in most of the cases de-localization of the traditional residents. Cultural Landscape convention may conserve a history and value-laden local space by turning it to a global framed heritage-scape, but it may also “save” it from the locals’ own concurrent and *sui generis* particular heritage-scapes. As Manon Istasse highlights in an insightful manner when presenting the case of the medina in Fez, such heritage-scapes are also a question of «affect and senses». Or, «World Heritage policies and heritage policies in general (...) miss both the sensory and the affective aspects of heritage. (...) This stance – she concludes – often leads (heritage experts) to deny any heritage competences to inhabitants» (Istasse 2016: 37): a heritage-scape is what it has to be for everybody, not what residents do feel about it.

On another side, UNESCO’s World Heritage policies and values are challenged by business interests, «patrimony entrepreneurs» having frequently the last word in the local implementation of the heritage project. The question then arises: sustainable development for who?

Last but not least, as dramatically exposed by Charlotte Joy in the cases of Tinbuktu and Djenné, what if your heritage is my offense, 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”. The “democratization of heritage” promoted by UNESCO is welcomed, of course, by millions of foreign tourists and is feeding their “exo-nostalgia”, but is also

overwhelming locals' «endo-nostalgia», as Berliner has it. Whatever its good intentions, UNESCO cannot be considered thus as totally innocent of what's going on «on the ground».

But does this mean that UNESCO is guilty? The editors make it clear at the end of their 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 demonizing the World Heritage venture, nor do they encourage its glorification» (Brumann, Berliner 2016: 28).

Vintilă MIHĂILESCU

National School of Political Studies and Administration, Bucharest
mihaillescuvintila@gmail.com