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A FUTURE IN RUINS

UNESCO, WORLD HERITAGE, AND
THE DREAM OF PEACE



Preface

The past rules us absolutely. These dreams—

—H. G. WELLS, 1905

ON NOVEMBER 16, 1945, forty-four nations gathered in London to forge an international body for educational and cultural cooperation under the aegis of the United Nations. Their project was no less than the intellectual and moral reconstruction of a world in ruins. At the San Francisco Conference that gave rise to the United Nations, President Harry S. Truman stressed the importance of a new international commitment to cultural and educational cooperation. This was in large measure inspired by his predecessor Franklin D. Roosevelt's conviction that "civilization is not national—it is international."¹

When British prime minister Clement Attlee uttered those famous words that "wars begin in the minds of men," he captured what many had said already in the 1930s. In his speech at the Conference for the Establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), he declared that "the peoples of the world are islands shouting at each other over seas of misunderstanding." Attlee recognized that in the future "we are to live in a world of democracies, where the mind of the common man will be all important."² However, it was the New Zealand delegate, Arnold Campbell, who made the linkage between peace, democracy, and education.³ This became the chief objective of the new organization, to contribute to peace and security throughout the world by "promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, culture and communication in order to further universal respect for justice, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the Charter of the United Nations."⁴ As the president of the conference, Ellen Wilkinson, saw it, "We need the organization of something positive—the positive creation of peace and the ways of peace."⁵ But what philosophy would inspire such a venture and how international solidarity might be manufactured were just some of the concrete challenges they faced with the dream of peace.⁶

The foundational aspirations of UNESCO rest upon the modernist rhetorics of progress, development, and uplift that many critics consider its fatal flaw. Forged in the twilight of empire and led by the victors of the war and major colonizing powers, UNESCO's founders sought to expand their influence through the last gasps of the civilizing mission. Beginning as a program of reconstruction for a war-ravaged Europe, UNESCO soon set its sights on the developing world. Its aim was to formulate and disseminate global standards for education, science, and cultural activities.⁷ However, it would remain a one-way flow, later to prove problematic, from the West to the rest. Within a matter of years the philosophical appeal for cultural understanding and uplift, a culture of peace no less, would be sidelined by the functionalist objectives of short-term technical assistance.⁸ Nevertheless, it would be churlish to overlook UNESCO's achievements internationally, from the protection of refugees to freedom of expression and freedom from oppression, its confrontation of racism and apartheid, and its committed stance on education, rights and fundamental freedoms.⁹ It would also be misguided to expect that one organization could effectively resolve all the problems of the world. Dag Hammarskjöld, the much-revered Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 to his untimely death in 1961, put it best when he said that such organizations were created not to bring us to heaven but in order to save us from hell.

It is not possible to fathom the creation of UNESCO's programs without understanding the history of UNESCO itself, its dystopian beginnings, and its utopian promise. In autumn 1942 the Allies set up a Conference of Allied Ministers of Education in London and assembled authorities from the field of education from eight governments then in exile.¹⁰ They were there to plan the reconstruction of education systems in a liberated Europe. Libraries and books were needed, coupled with an ideological program to combat the fascist propaganda that had poisoned the continent.¹¹ Cultural reconstruction was also on the agenda in the face of international outrage at Nazi looting and the decimation of Europe's artistic treasures and heritage.¹² By 1943 the idea of a permanent organization addressing educational and cultural reconstruction began to take shape. In an attempt to sum up the vision and mission of UNESCO in a single sentence, one historian replied, "Following the catastrophes of the twentieth century, there is a need to reconstruct and above all to educate, in a scientific frame of mind, human beings that are equal and different, possessing the means to communicate, in order to protect and safeguard peace, the diversity of

cultures and ultimately life itself."¹³ There is still much in this explanation that remains relevant today.

Ruins were also on the agenda for reconstruction. But it was not simply that great buildings, museums, and art were affected by the war and required rehabilitation. It was the regulation of the past itself, and how it might be recovered, that was deemed part of a new world order. How archaeological excavations were conducted around the world and the resulting discoveries disseminated also required restructuring. Ultimately, archaeology's spoils were to be divided up for Western advantage, echoing earlier recommendations made by the League of Nations and its International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation. The past would be managed for the future. UNESCO capitalized upon an already existing momentum for a world-making project devoted to humanity's heritage. What followed was an inevitable progression from the vast conservation and restoration efforts needed in the wake of destruction after two world wars toward a more lasting project of rehabilitation and recovery.

Many critical accounts and analyses of UNESCO have been written, coupled with official histories and narratives by well-placed insiders.¹⁴ Together they tell the story of an imperfect organization that began with midcentury optimism but rapidly devolved from an assembly of statesmen to a tyranny of states. Originally a globally oriented organization, UNESCO was transformed into an intergovernmental agency, a mere shadow of its former ambition for a world peace and mutual understanding between peoples. The overreach of powerful governments has come to permeate all aspects of its functioning. This is reflected in the workings of many of its high-profile programs, including World Heritage--the program that seeks to identify, protect, and preserve outstanding cultural and natural heritage sites around the world. While there are considerable problems, as this book reveals, they should not detract from UNESCO's achievements in creating a planetary concern for heritage preservation and its ability, however circumscribed, to exert pressure on its Member States to honor the treaties that they have ratified.

Entreating the world to conserve its cultural and natural places in the face of escalating industrialization and destruction can surely only be a positive step, yet how nations mobilize that call and at whose expense reveals a more complex dilemma. For example, the campaign to save the Cambodian site of Angkor is upheld by UNESCO as one of its greatest conservation achievements. Yet in conserving the temples the organization also legitimated the brutal Khmer Rouge, and in the decades to follow, harsh

restrictions were placed on local communities by state authorities. These are the complicated stories of conservation, the underneath of things, that UNESCO cannot officially recount, since the nation-state is the ultimate arbiter of World Heritage. That tension between international aspiration and national machination on the ground constitutes a central strand that runs throughout this book, and while such statist self-interest has been there since UNESCO's beginnings, the politico-economic intercalations have multiplied over the decades. Given UNESCO's founding and purpose, the organization is required to tell the story of successful salvage; it cannot afford to dwell in the messiness of history.

UNESCO's major contribution may be its pioneering of international legal instruments such as the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Perhaps more subtle is its development of a body of general principles and customary norms of international law in the field of cultural heritage protection.¹⁵ Its legal framing, resting upon an assembly of States Parties, provides its structure but also its limitation, premised on the goodwill and civility of states, both to each other and to their citizens. In a world where nonstate actors are now some of its most destructive combatants, the agencies of the United Nations have struggled to make adequate provision. UNESCO's inability to mediate during the destruction of religious sites in Mali and ongoing assaults in Syria, to name just two settings, remains a conundrum. Prosecuting one individual for war crimes against cultural property seems to lose sight of the larger impetus for attacks in the first place. UNESCO's failure to censure the illegal occupation in Crimea or the bombardment of Yemen, both perpetrated by its Member States in breach of various international treaties, reveals further fatal shortcomings.

Much valuable research on the World Heritage Convention has appeared since its establishment in 1972, from a range of different disciplines and perspectives.¹⁶ Academics, activists, local communities, and indigenous peoples have, however, expressed dissatisfaction with UNESCO's philosophies, procedures, regulations, impacts, and exclusions. It is not only issues of nationalism and sovereignty that rankle, but the inability of today's World Heritage regime to incorporate the living aspects of heritage that necessitate rights of inclusion, access, use, and benefits. This view further bolsters the point that the organization cannot continue to privilege the technical, but must revisit its early commitments to creating a better world. In some cases that may entail not inscribing sites on a list but rather allowing groups to determine their own path for heritage. For UNESCO's part it may mean intervening more strongly when its Member

States attempt to forcibly relocate people, refuse to collaborate with them or include them in World Heritage processes, or fail to consider their needs for site use and management. For conservation to fulfill its midcentury promise for the future, it must strive to include the people who matter most, whose heritage it is, and to consider those who have most to win or lose in the fate of World Heritage sites. And finally, we have to be more attendant to history, to the actions of empires and nations that still influence the future of sites and regions, and specifically those conflicts that continue to haunt and recur. We forget that heritage at our peril.

A Future in Ruins was conceived and completed at New College, Oxford. During a sabbatical in 2010 I confessed to fellow archaeologist Chris Gosden that UNESCO would make a fascinating project for study, particularly its World Heritage program. He responded by laying out a paradox that I found compelling. While it was true that UNESCO status bestows a level of international prestige upon ancient sites, for archaeology as a discipline the organization means almost nothing. World Heritage might offer the only truly global platform to showcase the world's most famous archaeological sites to a global public, and yet Gosden was right that it had little impact upon the history of our discipline. I wanted to understand why.

He convinced me to undertake the project. I soon discovered that archaeologists, like many other scholars, had no great admiration for the organization and are more likely to summarily dismiss, misrepresent, or criticize UNESCO and its World Heritage List than to acknowledge its achievements. Educating ourselves about UNESCO then seemed to me the first step, and this project began as an exercise to understand the workings of World Heritage. It was nothing short of a discovery to find that the discipline of archaeology was originally part of UNESCO's early intellectual momentum and had even extended back to its illustrious predecessor, the League of Nations. And while there was an archaeological component to UNESCO's famous Nubian Monuments Campaign to save and study the sites and temples in Egypt and Sudan scheduled for submergence with the completion of the Aswan Dam, this was short-lived. In 1970 when the Tabqa Dam threatened the same fate for archaeological sites in Syria's Upper Euphrates Valley, UNESCO proposed an international appeal rather than a full-scale campaign, advising nations interested in excavation to enter into their own bilateral agreements with Syria.

The implications for archaeology in UNESCO's utopian, one-world mission for the future all but stalled after the 1960s. Some years ago, a

senior UNESCO bureaucrat invited me to provide an official definition of an archaeological site, simply because it had never been adequately formulated by the organization. But the shift away from archaeology as a discipline marked a loss for UNESCO and its later development of a heritage program. That program would often be cast as conserving static sites and monuments, lacking active research agendas, and not infrequently overlooking living people and their practices. Quite the reverse was true for archaeology. Its historical development has increasingly incorporated and relied upon the perspectives and participation of local communities, indigenous groups, and other stakeholders that bring the past alive in the present.

As a modern discipline, archaeology effectively straddles the humanities and sciences, thus representing an administrative predicament for UNESCO's sectoral structure. Yet archaeology has the capacity to bridge disciplines, as Julian Huxley, UNESCO's first Director-General, immediately recognized, and to build international cooperation and partnerships in active and long-term ways. These are horizontal rather than vertical relationships, not simply captured in a single moment such as site inscription or at the level of the nation-state, but conducted over the long term and with many institutions and groups. In Africa, Asia, and the Middle East with their long histories of colonization, archaeological heritage projects can play vital roles in configuring new relationships and challenging negative legacies. Not simply a monumental exercise, archaeology today embraces and contributes to different heritage perspectives: it extends beyond a simple site-based focus and involves neighboring communities, training programs, academic and institutional linkages, scholarly exchanges, and so on. These struck me as some of the disciplinary dimensions that UNESCO's World Heritage program had failed to capitalize upon. How and why this unfolded as it did was tied to tensions over UNESCO's central mission—would it be promoting world peace or providing technical assistance?

A Future in Ruins focuses exclusively upon archaeology and cultural heritage, moving from the early salvage campaigns to the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, commonly referred to as the World Heritage Convention or the 1972 Convention.¹⁷ Other UNESCO conventions pertaining to intangible heritage, cultural property, and cultural diversity, while relevant and related, lie beyond the scope of this work. These conventions have their own structures, staff, statutory meetings, signatories, and legal formulations that do not precisely map onto World Heritage. UNESCO officials often see the

treaties as having entirely different domains and philosophies: one high-ranking official described the development of the different conventions as like moving from solid to liquid to gas! Anthropologists, legal scholars, and heritage specialists have studied UNESCO's intangible heritage and diversity programs extensively, largely because of their implications for definitions of culture and their intercalations with indigeneity, rights and legal property. Alternatively, we have only recently begun to analyze the globalizing strategies of World Heritage, specifically concerning issues of governance, diplomacy, and bureaucracy, and the political economy of culture and rights.¹⁸

Given my own background and training in archaeology, the case studies presented are primarily cultural, often archaeological sites and excavations, rather than natural properties; the latter are a small fraction of the World Heritage List and their inscription, though perhaps not their conservation, is considered less contentious.¹⁹ Cultural sites have always dominated the World Heritage List, and their tacit links to sovereignty, nationalism, territoriality, and identity are well documented. Yet I would argue that the processes, politics, logics, and consequences of World Heritage apply equally to both the cultural and the natural. My concern here is about the potentials of the past and the transition from an early focus on archaeological fieldwork to the broader remit of cultural heritage understood within a global frame. This requires paying attention to the shift from archaeology to monumentality and managerialism by asking what is at stake when the emphasis is placed upon monuments rather than multilayered places. Archaeologists too need to see their objects as embedded in these wider historical and sociopolitical contexts.

The book draws on archival analysis and long-term ethnographic research. I have been fortunate in gaining access as an official observer to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee meetings and events over the past seven years and have conducted countless interviews with ambassadors and members of national delegations, the UNESCO Secretariat, Advisory Bodies, and staff in UNESCO field offices from Brazil to Bangkok.²⁰ Hundreds of individuals from various countries and contexts took the time to share with me their views and experiences. My work has also benefitted from discussions with archaeologists and conservators, as well as site evaluators, consultants, and academics involved in all aspects of World Heritage. It has further drawn upon my archaeological fieldwork over many years in countries including Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa. Researching World Heritage has also taken me to India, Thailand, France,

Italy, China, Myanmar, Peru, and Brazil to follow UNESCO's mission in-country, asking how and why specific nations seek and later utilize World Heritage inscription. In the effort to protect global patrimony there is an ever-expanding number of actors with differing expertise, perceptions, politics, and agendas.

Alongside in-depth interviews and long-term participation, I studied documents in UNESCO's archives in Paris as well as UNESCO's extensive Web-based materials. Personal papers, such as those from the British archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler (now housed in the National Archives, London), are also included. In other collaborative work with colleagues from cultural economics, we use statistical and network analyses to trace the international political pacting, economic interests, and voting blocs that shape today's World Heritage agenda.²¹ Having been trained as an archaeologist, I am drawn to discerning long-term patterns and evidence of change that can be observed by calibrating documentary materials, historical accounts, statistical records, interviews with a wide cross section of players, and observation and participation. From the archives to my interviews to the international gatherings, all roads led back to politics, particularly to the motivations of the States Parties to the 1972 Convention.

During my first World Heritage Committee meeting in Paris in 2011 I remember being moved to see both poor nations and small ones raise their nameplates and take the floor on issues that were important to them. Naively I imagined a kind of equality was possible in heritage matters. My optimism was swiftly dashed as the interventions of powerful states, the pressure they exerted, and the extent of lobbying became evident as the days progressed. If we are to understand World Heritage, we have to acknowledge the array of institutional and international actors that ostensibly "make" heritage.²² Anthropologists have written extensively about the difficulty of studying diplomats and the bureaucratic elite in agencies such as UNESCO. Official credentials are required for access and one's movements are circumscribed by elaborate security measures.²³ Ambassadors and members of national delegations, as well as officials in the UNESCO Secretariat, require letters, emails, and calls before an appointment is granted. Many never respond. Others are happy to discuss issues, even sensitive ones like those described in the book, but do not want to be identified. Ethically I have respected those wishes. However, new appeals for transparency at UNESCO and extensive documentation, including Web streaming and posted transcripts from World Heritage Committee meetings, render most individuals increasingly identifiable.

Because I am an archaeologist researching World Heritage politics, this affords me an understanding of particular heritage sites and their issues, as well as the overall UNESCO system. But I am also distanced from the institutional politics that individuals routinely encounter and typically find burdensome, whether from their governments or from UNESCO itself. Researchers like myself are connected to the issues in such a way that navigating both closeness and distance entails a certain degree of loyalty and discretion. Some members of UNESCO's Secretariat, however, have expected a level of allegiance from me that is not possible to maintain if multiple viewpoints are to be represented, sometimes leading to antipathy and even threats. The stakes for heritage are indeed high. My intention throughout is to understand how and why the past comes to matter in the present, who shapes the political agendas, and who wins or loses as a consequence. It remains critical that we educate ourselves about the politics at work in cultural productions such as World Heritage and understand that we can never escape the past and are, in fact, too often doomed to repeat it. As that great utopian H. G. Wells wrote, the past "rules us absolutely."