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[Comment on: L. Meskell: World Heritage and WikiLeaks: Territory, Trade, and Temples on the Thai-Cambodian Border]

De Cesari, C.

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show how inscribing sites on the World Heritage List turns them into highly valuable assets that can be mobilized in all sorts of transactions, a kind of global currency that can earn all of the states involved in the process a wide range of gains, including international recognition but also gas concessions, capital investments, commercial contracts, political leverage, and territorial gains, among others. This is a very relevant argument, particularly in light of the burgeoning number of nominations and the growing visibility and “politicization” of World Heritage; as such, it is a matter of deep concern for critical heritage scholars and ethnographers but also for other anthropologists who analyze the politics of international organizations and globalized cultural politics. In my own fieldwork, I had plenty of opportunities to observe that what matters in the World Heritage process—at least for State Parties, the key players in the field—is getting sites on the list: this piece goes a long way toward explaining why this is so.

(World) heritagization accelerates the connectivity of sites along manifold vectors. This “hyperconnectivity,” as Meskell calls it, is both vertical, since heritagization turns a site of local and national significance into a global one, and horizontal, by making a historical place into a matter of “international struggles for territorial, economic and military leverage.” Heritagization certainly constitutes a point of entry of global forces—as the WikiLeaks cables show, “governments privilege the economic interests of large corporations, not simply national interests, abroad”—but the type of connectivity it enables and the ways in which it networks a site cross both domains and scales.

My first conclusion, then, is that the recognition of such hyperconnectivity urges us to rethink the multiscalarity of heritage processes. Much research in heritage studies is imbued with a kind of methodological nationalism and works on the assumption of an imagined cartography articulated in a set of nested, hierarchical containers—clearly differentiating a local, national, and global heritage. Working with such categories becomes deeply problematic once we grasp that heritagization, the very labeling of a site as heritage, immediately activates connections across scales and is, in itself, an act of scale-making. Such taken-for-granted, static imaginary does not help us understand the complex dynamics of scales that are not only interconnected but also mutually constituted. Such hyperconnectivity and multiscalarity pose challenges in terms of our research practices and units of analysis. How to explore world heritagization? How to look at it from multiple points of entry? Is it enough to explore it from the “top down” (focusing on World Heritage Committee meetings and expert circles) and/or from the “bottom up” (focusing on conflicts at the site itself)? An important challenge for critical heritage studies today is precisely how to think through matters of intersecting scales and grasp networked constellations of locations and positionalities; or, for example, how state actors mobilize the exchange values of World Heritage inscriptions at different scales.

What is also made transparent in the WikiLeaks cables is that world heritagization spurs conflicts. As Meskell highlights, this process often produces unintended effects that are

Chiara De Cesari

Amsterdam School for Regional, Transnational, and European Studies, Amsterdam School for Heritage and Memory Studies, University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands (c.decesari@uva.nl). 11 IX 15

WikiLeaks makes transparent what Lynn Meskell has spent a good deal of her recent work explaining, namely that World Heritage is much less about preserving heritage than about politics and the economy. (It’s the economy, stupid!) What is particularly interesting is the ways in which this happens, the whole inscription process functioning as a value- and connectivity-enhancing device. The leaked cables about Preah Vihear, the contested temple at the Thai-Cambodian border,

quite the opposite of the goals of the program, such as to preserve heritage and stimulate cross-cultural dialogue or to “build peace in the minds of men and women,” as the famous motto says. In some cases, like Preah Vihear and other contested sites, this even includes armed conflicts and military interventions, often triggered by the ways in which World Heritage recognition invests states with the mantle of sovereignty and reaffirms it: this is indeed an important side effect of the process. Conflicts are themselves the consequence of the heightened cross-scale connectivity discussed above. But they also have to do with the fact that turning sites into “heritage,” into cultural properties with exchange values, means nationalizing, commodifying, and enclosing them by entrusting the nation-state with their care and management and by propelling the economic exploitation of sites through tourism. Often, it is not only states but also, and especially, tour operators and tourism corporations that are able to reap the benefits of heritagization, in spite of the widespread rhetoric of local development and community participation.

We know by now that heritage is about politics and the economy. Perhaps it is time to move on and, following Meskell’s final call, ask about the kind of politics and economies that World Heritage promotes. Of course, there is no single answer to this question, for globalization itself produces variegated effects, but there are reasons to worry. The point, I believe, is not simply that World Heritage has moved so much beyond its original goal, the recognition and protection of the much-criticized “outstanding universal value,” even to the point of its obliteration. It is not only a matter of violence against heritage as things, such as against monuments (e.g., the recent cases of destruction of World Heritage sites by ISIS, as in Palmyra or the earlier destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas). It is also about violence against people; about heritagization spurring privatizations, gentrification, and evictions; and about extreme commodification and people’s life worlds being turned into Disneylands. Once Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) noted that World Heritage essentially gives new values to old sites chiefly by listing them, the assumption being that this type of valorization will itself guarantee preservation and revitalization; in this context, she asks an interesting question: why a list? Why does the dual recognition of human commonalities and shared values and of human creative diversity, and the conservation of the monuments that materialize both, have to take the shape of an inventory? Do we really need such a list, as opposed to a set of projects and initiatives?
