

A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace
By Lynn Meskell

2018. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hbk. 400 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-19-0648343

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A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace transports the reader through UNESCO's life history: its developmental phase, its achievements, its glories, and the political chaos behind the curtains. UNESCO is not a new research topic for Lynn Meskell, as she has published on the matter over the last decade (Isakhan and Meskell 2019; Meskell 2013, 2015a, 2015b). With this book however, she excavates by 'decapage' the many different strata comprising the 70 years of history of this institution. Her thorough approach allows a better understanding of the agents involved in the consolidation of ideas, the different layers that compose the periodisation of the organization, and the main palimpsests that affected the normal functioning of UNESCO, such as armed conflicts and harmful political issues.

This book is divided into eight chapters that follow a well-organized chronological and thematic narrative. The first chapter "Utopia" describes the pre-foundational stage of UNESCO and the later official creation. This chapter is divided into the three subchapters: "One-World Archaeology", "One Worldism" and "Monumental potential". These

concepts introduce the type of analysis Meskell has chosen for this book, using the aforementioned key concepts to introduce complex phenomena in a narrative storytelling fashion. The Utopia chapter is conceptually dissimilar to the other seven, as it involves details of deceased institutions. Nonetheless, it is crucial for comprehending the previous attempt of the League of Nations to create an organization that could bring together peace and cultural understanding amongst Nations by using the help of key scientific and academic personalities, and in parallel, to understand how archaeology played a key role in defining such a convoluted concept as heritage. In the end, the common ground shared by UNESCO and the former League of Nations is the view on heritage in the sense that the restoration and protection of key archaeological sites might help to bring the much-needed post war peace through the help of its partners, one worldism, social progress, and international cooperation.

From the second to the fifth chapter Meskell shows how UNESCO started operating and setting its criterion with the large-scale and internationally triumphant Nubian campaign. The Nubian project, without doubt, settled a milestone in the organization's horizon, and this same campaign brought together engineers, archaeologists, architects, and so on under the banner of humanity's patrimony. The Nubian project also established the baseline for archaeological *praxis* regarding 'development' projects which are now labelled as contract archaeology, cultural resource management, rescue archaeology and professional consultancy. Behind the prosperity that the Nubian campaign brought for UNESCO, Meskell identifies 3 key critical elements that certainly hold back the development of a universalistic and progressist institution. Among the issues is the long-term colonialism inflicted by powerful European nations like the United Kingdom and France who impose from the west to the rest what heritage is, and, what sort of heritage is representative for universalism and consequently which sites are deemed valuable enough to protect. A second conundrum highlighted by the author is UNESCO's blurred view when deciding that tangible heritage is more important than living communities surrounding archaeological sites, since the Nubian campaign also marked a clear policy of prioritising the remains of past peoples above the living ones. A third element is the questionable criterion of how sites are selected in

the World Heritage List, which is clearly Eurocentric by its conception because it seeks to identify outstanding universal values, by using a narrow conceptualisation on what is universal and what is not. This means that preservation efforts are focussed only on monumental architecture, which not by coincidence was mostly erected by ‘complex’ societies that resemble the current human creative genius. A last element that allows us/one to see how this well-oiled cultural machine works is UNESCO’s technocratic status, which is reviewed in depth in Chapter Three. In this chapter Meskell analyses the institution’s main task; being the main consultancy company regarding Heritage and its multiple dimensions.

The last three chapters focus on the recent history of UNESCO. Along these chapters Meskell describes the path that the institution followed when the World Heritage List was already operational, after 1974. Thirst for power coming from leading member states parties, unequal selection of sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, war atrocities, and an unbelievable neutral position regarding terrorism and slaughters is what summarizes UNESCO’s trajectory in the recent years. Nonetheless, despite the everlasting pressure that countries like the Russian Federation, United States, United Kingdom, France and Italy apply to the institution to follow the path that these countries proclaim to be ‘better’, there is hope at the end of this road. Despite the dystopian context, good examples of what UNESCO was created for like the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage reflects

‘[...] a confluence of international cultural heritage law with human rights law, the protection of minorities, and the emerging law on the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.’ (page 220).

All in all, UNESCO was created with the genuine spirit of bringing peace by acknowledging everyone’s cultural practices and accepting difference, and from a more positive point of view, Meskell invites the reader to ask oneself: What if UNESCO was not created? How would the international scenery for archaeology be if UNESCO never raised the concern of protecting sites? Would we have the same voice as archaeologists to protect world heritage if UNESCO was not created? And to round up these questions Meskell raises the fact that if UNESCO was not established,

most probably an institution resembling UNESCO's utopian views most certainly would be created.

After performing this thorough sectioning of UNESCO and uncovering what it is constituted from, by extracting information from layer to layer Meskell raises the issue that from academia we picture international organizations to be more powerful than they really are, and at the same time we idealise the capacity of these organizations with respect to their ability to "deliver on impossible promises" (page 227). Consequently, this book allows dimensioning the impact that archaeology –beyond science– has in politics and people. It constitutes a wake-up call for archaeologists as the general tendency in the discipline is to conduct scientific research, leaving aside the implications that our narratives and interpretations could have beyond science (i.e. indigenous communities, national identities, cultural identities, racism and ethnogenesis).

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