

FORUM

Can UNESCO do More to Counter Terrorists' Destruction of World Heritage?

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Palmyra lies in ruins. Before the Temple of Bel was destroyed, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants murdered an 82-year-old archaeologist, Professor Khaled al-Assaad. He was an academic who dedicated more than 50 years of his life to the preservation of Syrian archaeology and Palmyra in particular. The media says he refused to tell militants the location of archaeological treasures. The US and other nations view ISIS as a terrorist group. The systematic destruction of Iraqi and Syrian tangible heritage continues to remain an essential component of ISIS's campaign, and one with which cultural heritage professionals continue to grapple.

Palmyra is a United National Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site featuring monumental ruins of a once great crossroads between east and west in the ancient world. As a symbol of cooperative multiculturalism, it represents the antithesis of ISIS ideology. In the weeks leading up to the destruction at Palmyra, UNESCO issued several statements condemning the actions of ISIS. This did nothing to deter ISIS. They destroyed the Temple of Bel on August 23, 2015. The next day, the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, condemned the actions of ISIS as war crimes, saying:

The systematic destruction of cultural symbols embodying Syrian cultural diversity reveals the true intent of such attacks, which is to deprive the Syrian people of its knowledge, its identity and history. One week after the killing of Professor Khaled al-Assaad, the archaeologist who had looked after Palmyra's ruins for four decades, this destruction is a new war crime and an immense loss for the Syrian people and for humanity (UNESCO 2015).

Unfortunately, the story of Palmyra is one that continues to illustrate the challenges facing UNESCO in safeguarding World Heritage threatened by war and acts of terrorism. Yes, UNESCO openly condemns these terrible acts. Yes, UNESCO has reaffirmed its determination to protect what can be saved by fighting illicit trafficking of cultural

objects, by continuing documentation of sites and by networking with experts throughout Syria and beyond (UNESCO 2015)—but what else can be done? What else should be done? Should the leading cultural heritage preservation organization in the world consider different approaches and philosophies to countering acts of war that destroy cultural heritage? I believe they could and should, but it would require substantive changes with philosophical implications. These changes begin at the foundation of the organization, with a reexamination of how UNESCO defines heritage.

I align my definition of heritage with that of Laurajane Smith (2006), who views heritage as a process. To me, the word heritage represents both tangible and intangible connections to the past that remain dynamic and are manipulated by power structures when advantageous. This differs from UNESCO's stance on heritage, which was, until recently, purely focused on tangible heritage, specifically monumental architecture. However, even with the recent introduction of intangible heritage into UNESCO's mission, the organization maintains a static, check-the-box view of what heritage can be. This in turn informs what, how and if heritage can be preserved.

If heritage is viewed as static, then the options for how or what is preserved are limited. However, if heritage is viewed as a process, it allows for more flexibility in dealing with the varying forms or new forms heritage may take. For example, Cornelius Holtorf proposed a somewhat controversial view of heritage in his 2006 article 'Can less be more? Heritage in the age of terrorism'. Holtorf is a professor of Archaeology at Linnaeus University in Kalmar, Sweden. According to him, it is possible to conceptualize destruction as part of the lifecycle of heritage:

Destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage but part of its very substance. It is not the acts of vandals and iconoclasts that are challenging sustainable notions of heritage, but the inability of both academic and political observers to understand and theorize what heritage does, and what it done to it, within the different realities that together make up our one world (Holtorf 2006: 101).

This reconceptualization of destruction requires a non-static interpretation of heritage. Acknowledging heritage

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as a process does not condone destruction, but it allows us to accept the possibility of it in the face of war or acts of war. Rather than becoming paralyzed by inaction in the wake of destruction, it opens up the possibility of new solutions.

I propose that UNESCO, in addition to its current response protocols, consider creating a new category for World Heritage destroyed by terrorism or as a result of human conflict. This new category would be built on the foundational understanding that heritage is not static. Destruction can be a part of the life cycle of heritage. But most importantly, 'less (preservation) can be more (memory)' (Holtorf 2006: 103). While heritage contributes to a people's identity, the loss of it could contribute just as much. Consider for a moment places that gained more significance after their destruction, like the World Trade Center in New York City. What significance might sites like Palmyra hold for the future identity of Syrians?

Some scholars, such as Smith (2006), posit that UNESCO creates and perpetuates an Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). According to Smith, 'there is a hegemonic authorized heritage discourse which is reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalized in state cultural agencies and amenity societies' (Smith 2006: 11). UNESCO's AHD is being challenged more than ever as a broader range of populations participate in the production of heritage and heritage discourse, like ISIS. As a source of AHD, UNESCO could lead the way in changing how heritage is viewed globally, helping to account for and counter the actions of groups like ISIS. However, viewing heritage as a fixed and static entity is no longer sufficient in an increasingly dynamic heritage sector. For this reason, I think scholars like Holtorf offer ideas of merit in light of the current crisis that UNESCO and other heritage management organizations around the world are facing in the wake of terrorism.

There is a pressing need for more than condemnation and press releases. I believe that UNESCO should acknowledge the destruction as part of the heritage sites' life cycle, without condoning it. By redefining heritage and creating a new category for sites destroyed by war crimes, UNESCO could bolster its claim that history cannot and will not be silenced. Without renewed flexibility in this way, I fear ISIS will have succeeded in erasing, both physically and symbolically, important parts of Syria's, and the world's, heritage. How can preservation continue beyond the physical ruins of a site? How can education continue beyond the tangibility of monuments? The future of these sites should not be curtailed by the vicious actions of groups like ISIS. ISIS has demonstrated flexibility in their many approaches to spreading not only their heritage discourse marked by destruction, but also the general ideology of the Islamic State. UNESCO, as a powerful, global institution, could embrace flexibility and change as a counter to terrorism, but it has to start from the bottom up, with significant

changes to foundational philosophies that ground the institution.

UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova was correct when she said, 'The destruction of Palmyra constitutes an intolerable crime against civilization but 4,500 years of history will never be erased' (UNESCO). However, in order to strengthen her claim, I propose that UNESCO modify its philosophy on what heritage is, what it does, and what it means to preserve it. As of October 20th, the UNESCO website has not changed its information page on the Palmyra World Heritage Site, or any of its other sites in Syria. For someone unaware of the destruction, it would seem that the sites are still pristine and intact. This further demonstrates the static focus of UNESCO's current philosophy.

Changes to the organization's foundational philosophy will take a great deal of dedication and time. As an immediate step, I propose UNESCO modify the information it publishes on its website about sites, like Palmyra, that have been impacted by acts of terrorism. Their website should be current, demonstrating how the present state of the site does not negate its World Heritage status, but simply changes it. Destruction is not the end, but simply a part of the story and the history of the site itself. Regardless of the current state of the site, it remains a significant testament to human history, connecting the past with the present through tangible remains and intangible cultural resources, processes and discourse.

Competing Interests

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