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## ***Transnational Organisation or Policy Tool? UNESCO and its World Heritage Programme as a Global Arena for the Exertion of State Power***

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# Transnational Organisation or Policy Tool?

## UNESCO and its World Heritage Programme as a Global Arena for the Exertion of State Power

*Federica Falchetti*

### Abstract

UNESCO's intergovernmental structure and the two main Conventions composing its World Heritage Programme – the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* and the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* – make states prominent players both in the general UNESCO arena and, more specifically, in the UNESCO-sanctioned processes of heritage-making. Building upon previous research conducted by scholars such as Valdimar Hafstein, Michael Dylan Foster, Regina Bendix and Tim Winter, this paper undertakes a triple-oriented analysis aimed at investigating how and why states use the dominant role they have in such contexts in order to exert power both over the UNESCO bodies and on each other through cultural heritage means, transforming UNESCO in an arena for the display and exertion of state power and the UNESCO instruments in tools for the pursuit of their political interests. In the conclusion, the paper proposes a solution to rebalance the prominent role of states both in the general UNESCO system and in the specific context of cultural heritage.

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## Introduction

Nowadays UNESCO is the main intergovernmental organisation in the heritage field (Hafstein, 2018), and it works to protect cultural heritage through its “World Heritage Programme”, characterised by two main legally binding instruments: the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (UNESCO General Conference, 1972) and the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO General Conference, 2003). UNESCO’s intergovernmental composition is replicated in the World Heritage Programme (Jokilehto, 2017), thus making state actors protagonists not only in the wider UNESCO arena, but also in the specific context of the two aforementioned Conventions. Therefore, states exert a prominent power both in the general UNESCO system and in the specific field of cultural heritage.

Building upon previous research conducted by scholars such as Valdimar Hafstein, Michael Dylan Foster, Regina Bendix and Tim Winter, this paper aims at investigating how and why states use such prominent role in the aforementioned contexts in order to exert power both over the UNESCO bodies and on each other through cultural heritage means.

The analysis is conducted along three different tracks. After an overview of UNESCO’s role and main instruments in the heritage field, the paper demonstrates how state actors exert their power over UNESCO through unbalanced financial contributions to its programmes. The second track of analysis shows how states exert their influence over UNESCO by mirroring, within the UNESCO framework, the same (im)balances of power existing in the global arena, but moving them to the cultural field. Lastly, the third track investigates how states influence the UNESCO policies in order to modify their position in the international scenario, by making an instrumental use of its Conventions and Lists as tools of diplomacy and political weapons of either international legitimisation or de-legitimisation.

The conclusion intends to propose a solution to rebalance the prominent role of states both in the general UNESCO arena and in the specific context of cultural heritage, where the state’s behaviour often overshadows another fundamental subject in the heritage field: the “local community” of heritage bearers, introduced in the 2003 Convention as a relevant actor in the heritage-making processes (UNESCO General Conference, 2003).

## UNESCO in the heritage field

UNESCO was established as a UN specialised agency on the 4th of November 1946, when twenty states<sup>1</sup> ratified its Constitutional act. Its purpose was to foster the diffusion of culture as an instrument to bring “peace in the minds of men”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, UNESCO worked to promote education, facilitate intercultural dialogue and support the respect for all cultures. To do so, UNESCO made use of standard-setting instruments, such as Conventions or Declarations, addressed to its members and the international community at large. Soon after its creation, it also undertook a series of initiatives for the safeguarding of cultural heritage, to

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<sup>1</sup> Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Greece, India, Lebanon, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Preamble of the UNESCO Constitutional Act, signed on 16th November 1945.

the point that nowadays it is the main global actor in the heritage field (Hafstein, 2018). UNESCO protects cultural heritage through the *World Heritage Programme*, characterised by a large number of initiatives. The Programme is the product of a long evolution in which each step led to an increasingly layered and all-encompassing concept of heritage (Di Giovine, 2015; Hafstein, 2018). The two main UNESCO instruments for the safeguarding of cultural heritage are the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (UNESCO General Conference, 1972) and the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO General Conference, 2003).

The World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972 as a legally binding instrument for all member states. It acknowledged as cultural heritage only tangible and material remains of the past, monuments, groups of buildings and sites. This typically western-like definition of heritage, however, was proposed as a global standard<sup>3</sup>. The Convention also established a homonymous List, and the ‘State Parties’ soon started asking for the inclusion in this list of the sites of “outstanding universal value” present in their territory (UNESCO General Conference, 1972). To date, 1,154 elements situated in 167 nation states are present in this List, making it one of UNESCO’s most successful instruments. Sites’ inscription in the List is administered by the *Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, or *World Heritage Committee*, composed of the representatives of 21 member states appointed during the UNESCO General Conference and advisers from specific organisations, such as ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN<sup>4</sup>.

The World Heritage Convention and its List, however, received criticism from non-western countries for their Eurocentrism, materialism and elitism (Bortolotto, 2007; Hafstein, 2018). As stated above, in fact, the kind of elements acknowledged as heritage were typically western-like and, above all, European (Smith, 2010). Many cultures of other areas of the world have historically given value to different types of goods. Some of these cultures heavily rely on immaterial traditions, while others are not used to build permanent and monumental edifices, but temporary and more fragile structures made of mud or wood<sup>5</sup>. However, since the criteria for the inscription in the List (World Heritage Committee, 1977) were strictly adherent to the definition of heritage present in the Convention, such kinds of artifacts would have never been accepted for the inscription. UNESCO made amends undertaking a process of horizontal enlargement from a strictly Eurocentric to a multicultural perspective, a vertical enlargement from an elitist perspective to the inclusion of popular and vernacular culture, and a conceptual enlargement to give to intangible heritage the same value of tangible heritage (De Cesari, 2010, 2014; Bortolotto, 2007; Silverman, 2015).

The Intangible Heritage Convention was adopted in 2003 as a legally binding instrument after a series of other, weaker documents (Bouchenaki, 2003; Hafstein, 2018). Its aim was to sanction UNESCO’s new and full recognition of the value of intangible heritage and its desire to eschew every form of Eurocentrism or elitism (Di Giovine, 2015). In this respect, it recognised that heritage is rooted in fluid realities: the communities of heritage bearers (Hafstein, 2018). Their agency in preserving and constantly recreating culture is stressed, and

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<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon constitutes what Laurajane Smith calls “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (Smith, 2010, p. 29).

<sup>4</sup> For composition and functions of this Committee, see UNESCO General Conference (1972), Articles 8–10.

<sup>5</sup> See the Japanese case of the Horyu-ji temple and the Ise shrine in Hafstein (2018).

it is underlined the need to consider them as relevant actors in the safeguarding processes<sup>6</sup> (Jokilehto, 2017). This Convention also established the *Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, which today is composed of 529 elements belonging to 135 countries. The inscription in the List is administered by the Intergovernmental Committee, composed of 24 member states' representatives elected by the General Assembly of the States Parties, the sovereign body of the Convention<sup>7</sup>.

In both the aforementioned Conventions, however, the main interlocutors for UNESCO are the nation states. UNESCO, after all, is an intergovernmental organisation, and its intergovernmental structure is replicated in the configuration of the World Heritage Convention and the Intangible Heritage Convention, notwithstanding the latter's focus on local communities (Jokilehto, 2017). In both the Conventions, in fact, the states are the only legitimate subjects able to propose official nominations for elements to be inscribed in one of the Lists<sup>8</sup>. Even when, in some cases, the idea to candidate a certain element comes from the local communities of heritage bearers, in a bottom-up process, the consent and guidance of the state is always necessary<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, the protagonists of the processes of heritage-making, from the selection of heritage elements to their inscription in the UNESCO Lists, including their management, remain the states, with their local administrative bodies and their officially recognised personnel of experts<sup>10</sup>. This is demonstrated, as Chiara De Cesari noted, also by the fact that countries which are underrepresented in the Lists often are administrated by weak state structures incapable to draw national inventories of their heritage, propose exhaustive candidatures and invest in their management (De Cesari, 2014). Therefore, states exert a prominent power, both in the general UNESCO arena and in the specific field of cultural heritage, through the strong decision-making role granted to them by the aforementioned Conventions and their Lists.

Various studies demonstrated how states take advantage of their power in the UNESCO context by politicising their UNESCO membership and the inscription of heritage in the UNESCO Lists in order to pursue their foreign and domestic policy objectives. Every state, in fact, when choosing what elements to candidate for the UNESCO Lists, operates a selection (Bendix *et al.*, 2013). This elevates the elements chosen by the state to the role of symbols, able to represent the state itself, the nation that they pretend to embody as well as its culture (Palumbo, 2006). The UNESCO recognition legitimises the states' authority in managing what has internationally become acknowledged as *their* heritage (De Cesari, 2010). This mechanism gives the possibility to the UNESCO members to charge the elements inscribed in the UNESCO Lists with political significance and instrumentally use them to serve their interests (Adell *et al.*, 2015). In this sense, as both Valdimar Hafstein (Hafstein, 2014) and Tim Winter (Winter, 2015) acknowledged, heritage becomes a form of governance. As numerous case-studies proved, in fact, heritage, when included in the UNESCO framework,

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<sup>6</sup> UNESCO General Conference (2003). See article 15.

<sup>7</sup> For composition and functioning of the Intergovernmental Committee, see UNESCO General Conference (2003), Articles 4–10.

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO General Conference (1972) Article 11 and UNESCO General Conference (2003) Article 16.

<sup>9</sup> See the case of “Compagnonnage”, an intangible element inscribed in the Representative List in 2010, as illustrated by one of the protagonists of the inscription process, the anthropologist Nicolas Adell, in Bendix *et al.* (2013) pp.177–193.

<sup>10</sup> For an insight on the various heritage policies then implemented by states on the ground, see Petrova *et al.* (2013).

becomes a tool in the hands of the states, through which they can pursue specific policy goals, such as shaping their image in the international scenario, as for the Irish case of Skellig Michael or the one of Barbados, respectively illustrated by Máiréad Nic Craith and Philip W. Scher in a seminal volume (Bendix *et al.*, 2013). UNESCO heritage can also help states build a specific narrative of their national identity (Silverman, 2010) – as for the Turkish intangible element of Alevi Semah (Aykan, 2013) – gaining a legitimate territorial jurisdiction in administering elements that otherwise would have escaped their control – as for the Moroccan square of Jemaa El Fna (Beardslee, 2016; Hafstein, 2018). Therefore, heritage can become an instrument through which the states can exert a control and action functional to the pursuit of their political aims, both on the domestic and international stage.

This paper aims to analyse the states' prominent power in the general UNESCO arena and in the more specific context of the World Heritage Programme's instruments, in order to investigate how and why states use their aforementioned dominant role in such contexts to exert power both over the UNESCO bodies and on each other through cultural heritage means. The analysis has been conducted along three different tracks. The first track demonstrates how the State Parties exert their power over UNESCO through unbalanced financial contributions to the World Heritage Programme's initiatives. The findings presented in this section of the paper have been derived from an analysis of data extracted from the official UNESCO approved programme and budget 2020-2021 (UNESCO, 2020b) and the Budget & Strategy page of the UNESCO website (UNESCO, 2020a). The second track shows how states exert their influence over UNESCO by mirroring, within the UNESCO framework, the same (im)balances of power existing outside, in the global arena, but moving them to the cultural field. This study has been conducted by taking into account the history of UNESCO itself and showing how external geopolitical dynamics causing shifts of power in the international scenario were reflected in the UNESCO framework, such as in the context of the Cold War and the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (Best *et al.*, 2008; Winter, 2015; Hafstein, 2018). Lastly, the third track of analysis investigates how states influence the UNESCO policies in order to modify their position in the international scenario, by making an instrumental use of its Conventions and Lists as tools of diplomacy and political weapons of either international legitimisation or de-legitimisation. This issue is highlighted by referring mainly to the work by Tim Winter (Winter, 2015) and Christoph Brumann (Brumann, 2015) and through the presentation of a series of emblematic case studies from various areas of the world, such as Portugal and its African ex-colonies (Cardeira da Silva, 2013), Russia and Syria (Allison, 2013; Meskell, 2014), Israel and Palestine (Dumper and Larkin, 2012; De Cesari, 2014) and China and Tibet (Shepherd, 2006; Mukherjee, 2021).

## **Dynamics of power among UNESCO State Parties**

UNESCO is composed of actors and structures that work at different levels. Nowadays, its headquarters are in Paris, but many field offices are dislocated in the member states. The UNESCO general policies and budget are decided by the centralised body of the General Conference, which meets every two years. In it, every member state is represented by its delegates and has an equal vote<sup>11</sup> (UNESCO, n.d.).

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<sup>11</sup> For an insight on UNESCO's structure and functioning, see Seeger (2015).

The General Conference also elects an Executive Board, composed by the representatives of 58 member states that serve for a four-year term. It supervises the implementation of UNESCO's programmes and meets every two years, short before the General Conference, since it also examines the budget and draws up the Conference's agenda. Additionally, the Executive Board nominates the UNESCO Director-General, who is then elected by the General Conference and presides over the Secretariat. The Secretariat implements the wide number of UNESCO programmes through its various branches (Seeger, 2015; UNESCO, n.d.).

Therefore, the relations between UNESCO and its State Parties appear balanced, since every member state has an equal vote in the General Conference and equally participates in the election of the Executive Board, which then nominates the UNESCO director-general. What emerges is an apparent equality among all the member states, also because the components of all the main executive bodies are elected, or at least ratified, by the General Conference, where every state enjoys an equal vote (Seeger, 2015; UNESCO n.d.).

Regarding the Conventions, both the 1972 and the 2003 Conventions seem to grant to all the State Parties equal possibilities to nominate and inscribe their heritage for the respective Lists. As already mentioned, however, the 1972 Convention's shortcomings actually hindered this possibility for some subjects, such as non-western states (Hafstein, 2018; Smith, 2010). The Intangible Heritage Convention seemed to correct these biases (Hafstein, 2018). It did not only institutionalise the new category of intangible heritage by creating the Representative List, but also aimed to amend the shortcomings which had 'broken the balance' in the World Heritage List, where the formally equal member states had actually experienced inequalities when trying to inscribe their own elements. Therefore, the Intangible Heritage Convention seemed to restore the balance among member states on the matter of heritage (Hafstein, 2018). This apparent balance both in the general UNESCO arena and in the heritage field, however, is often unachieved in practice.

### *State funding as a source of influence within UNESCO*

When addressing the issue of member states' equality within UNESCO, it is necessary to take into consideration a factor whose consequences will be analysed in this section: different member states contribute to the UNESCO budget with very different amounts of funding.

The UNESCO general budget is adopted every two years by the General Conference. As the official UNESCO figures for the 2020/2021 approved budget show (UNESCO, 2020a), approximatively 39% of this budget is composed of "Assessed Contributions by Member States"<sup>12</sup> (Figure 1). Of this general budget, approximately 84% is spent on the main UNESCO programmes, including the World Heritage Programme, part of the Cultural Sector, which accounts for 16% of the Programmes' related budget<sup>13</sup> (UNESCO, 2020b). Apart from the general budget, the State Parties to the UNESCO World Heritage and Intangible Heritage

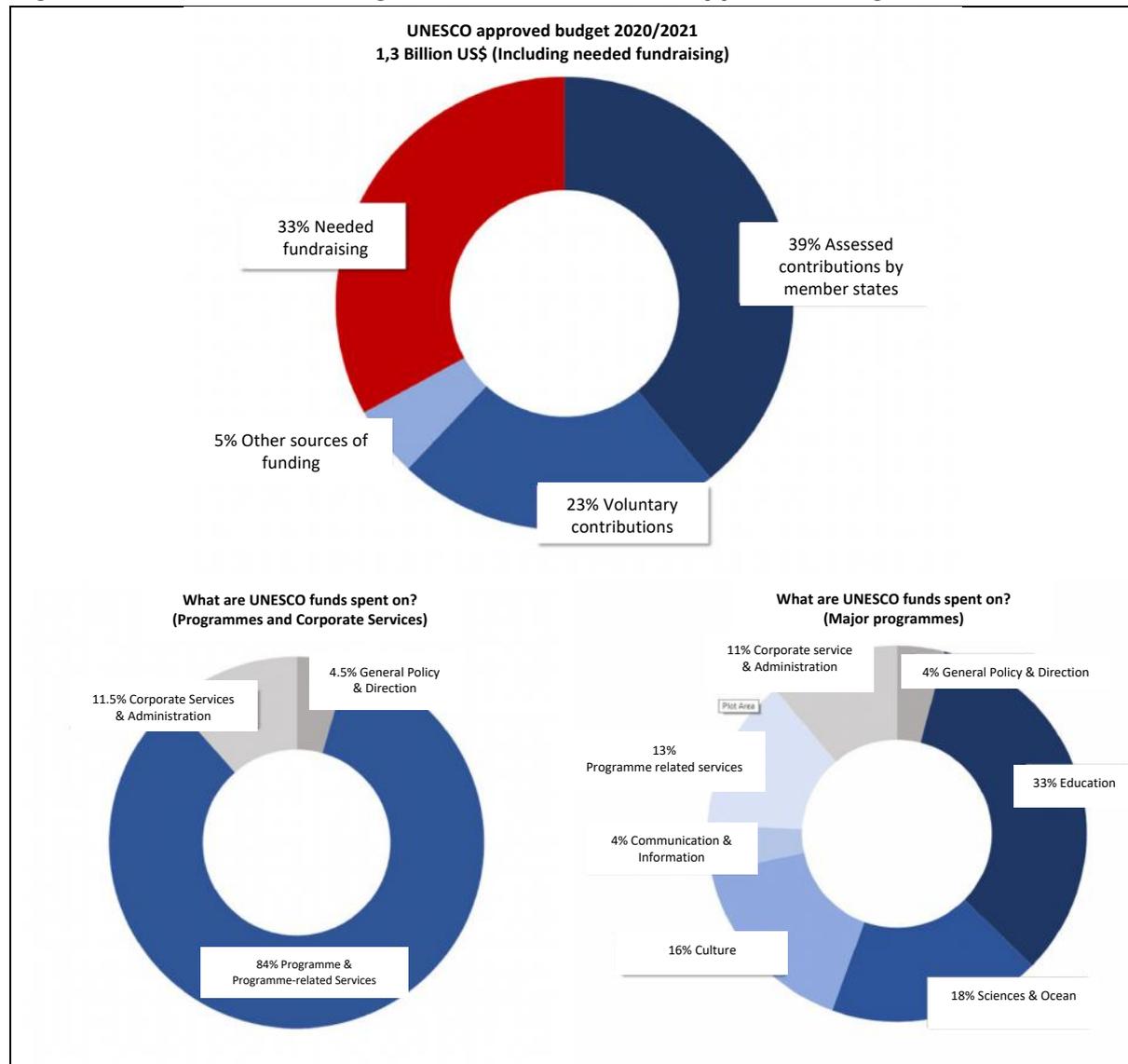
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<sup>12</sup> In the UNESCO 2022/2023 approved budget the value of Assessed Contributions decreased to 35%. However, the money spent on the main UNESCO Programmes increased (86%). Among these programmes, the Cultural Sector, which also includes heritage protection, still constitutes 16% of the total budget (UNESCO, 2020a).

<sup>13</sup> For an insight on the areas of expenditure included in the budget for the Cultural sector, see UNESCO (2020b).

Conventions also contribute to two related funds, the World Heritage Fund and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund, respectively.

**Figure 1. Official UNESCO figures for the 2020/2021 approved budget**



Source: UNESCO (2020a)

The Fund for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, or World Heritage Fund, was instituted by the 1972 Convention. Apart from voluntary contributions and money raised through specific initiatives, article 15.3 of the Convention establishes that the State Parties are obliged to pay a compulsory contribution (UNESCO General Conference, 1972). The money collected is then used to finance projects or programmes defined by the World Heritage Committee. It is worth noticing how article 15.4 specifies that “No political conditions may be attached to contributions made to the fund” (UNESCO General Conference, 1972). The Fund for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, or Intangible Heritage Fund, was established for similar purposes by the 2003 Convention (UNESCO General Conference, 2003). This fund too is composed of voluntary states’ donations, funds

raised through various initiatives and compulsory states' contributions<sup>14</sup>. In this case, the states' contributions are not explicitly compulsory, but a delay in the payment makes it impossible for the interested state to be elected in the Intergovernmental Committee<sup>15</sup>. The 2003 Convention as well specifies that "No political, economic or other conditions which are incompatible with the objectives of this Convention may be attached to contributions made to the Fund"<sup>16</sup>.

However, theory is quite distant from reality. Firstly, the obligation to pay a contribution already creates a hierarchy among the member states, penalising the poorer countries that cannot keep up with the payments and consequently cannot be elected to the Committees. This replicates within UNESCO the relations of power existing in the international scenario between richer and poorer countries, since "wealthier countries nominate more sites"<sup>17</sup>, and have a better chance of serving on the World Heritage Committee (who ultimately decides on the nominations), than poorer or politically unstable ones" (Di Giovine, 2015: pp. 89–90). Moreover, poorer countries in arrear with the payment of the compulsory contributions cannot access to the assistance provided by the World Heritage Fund to safeguard their heritage from possible risks (De Cesari, 2010).

Additionally, even if the percentage of compulsory contributions for the general budget – determined by the General Conference – and the Conventions' funds – determined by the two General Assemblies of the State Parties to the Conventions – is uniform for all the states<sup>18</sup>, their different economic conditions lead them to pay very different amounts of money. For example, over 50% of the UNESCO general budget was composed of the financings of Japan, Germany, France and the US, before the latter left UNESCO in 2017 (Seeger, 2015)<sup>19</sup>.

However, what really makes the difference are the voluntary contributions, above all for tangible heritage, as shown in Figure 2 (UNESCO, 2020b). The figure displays the relevance of the Assessed Contributions for the achievement of the two Expected Results (ER) connected to the Conventions: ER 1 ('Tangible heritage identified, protected, monitored and sustainably managed by Member States, in particular through the effective implementation of the 1972 Convention') and ER 6 ('Intangible cultural heritage identified and safeguarded by Member States and communities, in particular through the effective implementation of the 2003 Convention'). The data, however, also shows the impact of Voluntary Contributions. While this impact still appears to be minimum in ER 6 (Intangible Heritage)<sup>20</sup>, it is impressively high in ER 1 (Tangible Heritage).

Richer states with more economic resources to invest tend to pay higher voluntary contributions (Hafstein, 2018). This increases their international prestige, making them appear as devoted to philanthropic cultural initiatives, but it also makes them acquire an influent position within UNESCO (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Their voluntary contributions, in fact,

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<sup>14</sup> UNESCO General Conference (2003), Article 25.3.

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO General Conference (2003), Article 26.5.

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO General Conference (2003), Article 25.6.

<sup>17</sup> One of the causes is that poorer countries lack the economic resources to foster the capacity-building of state personnel able to draw and update a national inventory and produce exhaustive nominations for the Lists; see De Cesari (2010) pp.308–309.

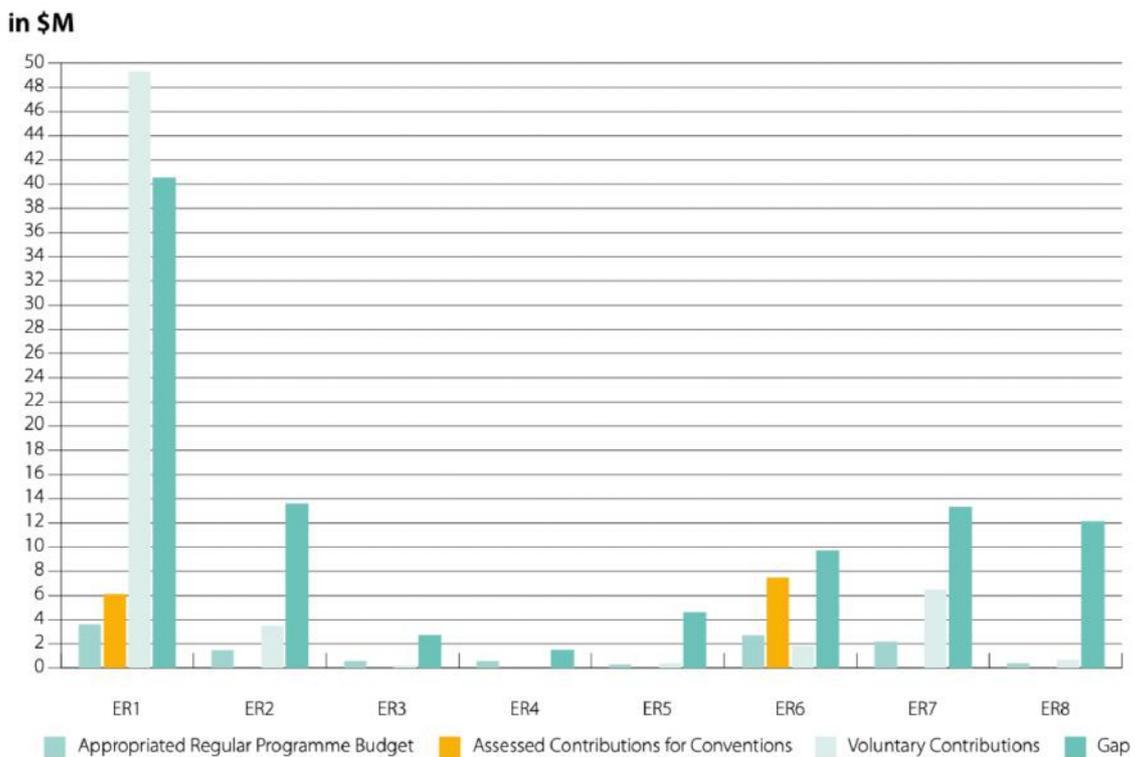
<sup>18</sup> UNESCO General Conference (1972), Article 16.1; UNESCO General Conference (2003), Article 26.1.

<sup>19</sup> This decision entered into force on 31st December 2018; see United Nations (2017).

<sup>20</sup> In the 2022/2023 UNESCO approved budget, however, the value of Voluntary Contributions in this sector increased, surpassing the value of Assessed Contributions. See UNESCO (2020a).

are often used to finance initiatives which reflect their interests, and many UNESCO projects are financed by the same small group of ‘super-donors’. This causes an orientation of the UNESCO programmes towards the interests of its main financiers. In front of these tendencies, other countries may find convenient to support the interests of the super-donors. This is valid above all for poorer countries in need of assistance, which will tend to support their initiatives hoping to win the super-donors’ favour and help (Hafstein, 2018).

**Figure 2. Total operational budget by expected result. Appropriated regular programme budget, Voluntary contributions and Gap (Appropriated regular programme budget of \$534.6M)**



Source: UNESCO (2020b)

This last example recalls what happened with Japan, as reported by Valdimar Hafstein. After the Second World War, Japan adopted an ambitious foreign policy, aimed at rebuilding its image on the international arena (Hafstein, 2018). It became part of UNESCO in 1951 and soon began to exert an increasing influence over it<sup>21</sup>, since the focus on culture was considered a fundamental component of the country’s foreign policy. Since the 1980s Japan became one of the main funders for UNESCO, acquiring a leading position. This prestige favoured the choice of Noriko Aikawa as the head of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Section from 1993 to 1999 and the election of Kōichirō Matsuura as UNESCO director-

<sup>21</sup> Already in 1957 UNESCO launched the ‘East-West Major Project’ as a response to the increasing requests by non-Western countries – among which Japan – for greater involvement in the UNESCO initiatives, above all after the Bandung Conference. For more information, see Winter (2015).

general from 1999 to 2006. On the other hand, after the issuing of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Japan also represented one of its most vocal critics, since this state supported a vision of heritage less focused on materiality, also due to the prevalently intangible and perishable nature of its heritage<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, Japan often used its voluntary contributions to foster initiatives supporting a change in the perception of heritage, which then led to the drafting of the Intangible Heritage Convention<sup>23</sup>. Among the greatest supporters of the Japanese approach there was a number of Sub-Saharan African countries (Bortolotto, 2007). One of the main reasons for this support was the similar idea of heritage held by these countries, whose heritage was mainly immaterial, non-monumental or built in perishable materials that would not have been considered acceptable for the standards of the World Heritage List. In other words, through its economic weight on the UNESCO budget, Japan was able to foster a change in the UNESCO policies, while other countries, weaker on the international stage and underrepresented in the UNESCO Lists, rallied around Japan, hoping to benefit from its achievements. On the other hand, countries that do not have enough financial resources to pay the UNESCO compulsory contributions cannot even be elected to the Conventions' Intergovernmental Committees.

### *External relations of power as a source of states' influence within UNESCO*

Even overlooking the monetary matters, UNESCO, although refusing to represent an arena of political confrontation and aiming at fostering mutual solidarity among nations and cultures, remains an intergovernmental body. Its own nature, then, exposes it to the risk of becoming another setting where states extend tensions and relations of power present outside, in the international scenario. As well posed by Winter (2015), UNESCO is often instrumentally used by its member states as another stage of confrontation. Consequently, culture and heritage often become subjects of litigations actually underpinned by political motivations. Quoting Winter:

*“With the paradigm of the international built upon a benign nomenclature of cooperation, partnerships and collaboration, ideas of equanimity and equivalence have become the norm; a process that masks over the subtle levels of exploitation and subversive power that habituate relations of the inter-national”*  
(Winter, 2015, p. 999).

In other words, UNESCO is a mirror which reflects and replicates within its own structure the same imbalances of power and relations between leaders and followers existing in the global arena, but moves them to the cultural field, making culture and cultural heritage fields of political confrontation.

From an historical point of view<sup>24</sup>, UNESCO reflected the world's imbalances of power since its foundation. In 1947, the first Secretariat was dominated by a restricted number of

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<sup>22</sup> See the Horyu-ji temple and the Ise shrine in Hafstein (2018).

<sup>23</sup> See the Nara Conference, organised by Japan in Nara in 1994 (Hafstein, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> The historical facts illustrated in this section are analysed in Best *et al.* (2008) and Banti (2009).

western countries<sup>25</sup>. After all, UNESCO was born as a profoundly Eurocentric organisation and, for a long time, a few countries played a nearly exclusive role in shaping its policies, so that the idea of heritage that the western world spread through UNESCO was unchallenged (Smith, 2010). The western leadership within the organisation only began to be challenged nearly ten years after its creation. The processes of decolonisation, boosted by the end of the Second World War, saw the emergence of an increasing number of newly independent states, which claimed their role in the UN and its agencies. These countries became increasingly relevant after their initiative to join forces and constitute a third and non-aligned pole in the bipolar scenario of the Cold War (Best *et al.*, 2008). After the 1955 Bandung Conference, which signed the emergence of this pole, the demands of the ex-colonies acquired more solid foundations and UNESCO, as other international bodies, was compelled to take into account their claims (Winter, 2015). This led to the strengthening of the influence of a number of non-western countries within UNESCO by virtue of the more relevant role they had just acquired outside, in the international scenario<sup>26</sup>. The ex-colonies, entering UNESCO, started to support changes in the perception of heritage, pushing UNESCO to move away from Eurocentric criteria and to embrace also non-western ideas of heritage, as shown by the Japanese example mentioned above<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, UNESCO reflects the shifts of power that happen outside of its framework. Countries which dominate in the international setting or acquire a relevant position following events of various kind often obtain a strong influence within UNESCO, imposing their will and vision to the other states and shaping the approach of UNESCO itself to its fields of competence, among which cultural heritage (Di Giovine, 2015).

Therefore, far from representing a neutral body, UNESCO ends up following the interests of its most powerful members. Moreover, certain countries have used – and still use – UNESCO as a tool to send political messages, by adhering to it or boycotting it. An historical boycott of UNESCO took place during the Cold War. Since its foundation, UNESCO had been dominated by countries belonging to the western world and, when the ‘iron curtain’ descended, it strongly remained under the influence of the western bloc. The USSR boycotted the organisation for years, since adhering to it meant to endorse the western cultural paradigms (Winter, 2015). Boycotting UNESCO was equivalent to refusing the idea of culture supported by the western bloc. In the end, however, the Soviet Union signed the UNESCO constitution in 1954. This led the Chairman of the US National Commission for UNESCO to state that “The presence of the Soviet Union in UNESCO makes it more important than ever that the US provide effective leadership. This is no time to reduce our interest or weaken our participation in the Organisation.”<sup>28</sup>

From this statement is possible to deduce that, notwithstanding the words of equality present in the UNESCO documents, it was clear that its member states were not actually equal. In the polarised context of the Cold War, it was practically inevitable that within UNESCO, as within other international organisations, there would have been leaders and

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<sup>25</sup> At that time, the secretariat was composed of 557 posts. 514 of them were held by English or French representatives.

<sup>26</sup> See Japan and the ‘East-West Major Project’ mentioned above. To learn more about this project and the role of countries like India, see Winter (2015).

<sup>27</sup> Other examples, as the initiatives brought forward by South Korea, are in Hafstein (2018).

<sup>28</sup> See Winter (2015) p. 1004, US National Commission for UNESCO Statement by Dr George N Shuster, NC (54)7. UNESCO archives, Paris, File no X 07.21 (470) Relations with USSR – Official Part I up to 31/XII/63.

followers. In that case, the US had represented the main leader within UNESCO, until USSR decided to enter it. The entrance of the Soviet Union would have challenged the US leadership, along with the vision of culture and, of course, heritage that UNESCO had sponsored until that moment under the western influence. After all, the Cold War was very much played on the cultural competition between the two blocs (Banti, 2009), and UNESCO could represent a huge amplifier able to tip the balance in favour of one of the two competitors. In this case, therefore, UNESCO was instrumentally used by the states to send political messages and spread certain cultural perspectives. More recently, however, it was the US that sent a strong political message by leaving UNESCO in 2017 (United Nations, 2017) and accusing it of having assumed an anti-Israel position, as will be analysed more in depth in the following section<sup>29</sup>.

### *UNESCO membership and UNESCO lists as diplomatic tools*

Another mechanism through which states influence the UNESCO policies is by using the Lists derived from its World Heritage and Intangible Heritage Conventions as tools of diplomacy. For many states, being part of UNESCO, signing its Conventions and inscribing elements on its Lists can be compared to joining an exclusive ‘club’. The UNESCO recognition, in fact, not only attracts tourists and economic resources, but can also be considered as a sign of power, ‘modernity’ and legitimisation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). A state that agrees to cooperate at the international level for the safeguarding of heritage and cares for the heritage present in its territory appears as a country that has reached a certain level of external influence and internal cultural development (Skrydstrup and Hafstein, 2017; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Since UNESCO is focused on culture, its member states will interact within this ‘club’ focusing their exchanges on cultural matters. On the other hand, as illustrated above, states also transpose their geopolitical interests in the apparently neutral framework of UNESCO, its Conventions and Lists. As a consequence, the UNESCO instruments are often used by State Parties as platforms to pursue specific diplomatic and political interests through cultural means.

Both the World Heritage<sup>30</sup> and Intangible Heritage Conventions<sup>31</sup> assign their Committees the task to decide which elements nominated by the states to inscribe in the respective Lists. Both Committees are composed of representatives of the State Parties to the Conventions not in arrears with the payment of the compulsory contributions, as mentioned above, and by experts which participate as representatives of specific consulting bodies<sup>32</sup>. Apart from these experts, both Committees and, more in general, the countries’ delegations to UNESCO are increasingly composed by state-appointed personnel and ambassadors (Meskell, 2014). While working to pursue the UNESCO aims, these inevitably represent their respective countries and act to pursue the interests of their states through the UNESCO

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<sup>29</sup> Tensions between the US and UNESCO were already in act since 2011, when UNESCO admitted Palestine as a Member State. In that case, supporting Israel, the US halted their UNESCO contributions. For an insight, see De Cesari (2014).

<sup>30</sup> See UNESCO General Conference (1972), Article 11.2.

<sup>31</sup> See UNESCO General Conference (2003), Article 16.1.

<sup>32</sup> For composition of these committees and other information, see UNESCO General Conference (1972), Article 8–9, and UNESCO General Conference (2003), Article 5–8.

framework<sup>33</sup>. This often causes intense lobbying and trading of favours between state representatives (Meskell, 2014). In this sense, UNESCO becomes another platform for diplomatic relations, and the aforementioned trading of favours becomes a tool to weave or sever diplomatic ties. Quoting Christoph Brumann:

*“Since the late 1990s when (...) World Heritage became a household name (...) it is increasingly the ambassadors, that is, the nation states’ permanent delegates to UNESCO, that head the delegations (...) They are experienced negotiators who know that every favour requires a return. (...) This elite circle provides an ideal ground for lobbying one’s own nation-state viewpoint and making deals (...) Rather naturally then, these deals of mutual support privilege nation-state interests to defend which the diplomats are seconded to UNESCO, after all. (...) Friendly intergovernmental relations or global equity may be more important to them than the conservation of a given heritage site”* (Brumann, 2015, pp. 284–285),

In some cases, for example, states offer their support to the candidature of elements proposed by other countries to the UNESCO Lists as ‘bargaining chips’ to oil the wheels of the bilateral relations with those particular countries (Meskell, 2015). As proven by Tim Winter:

*“The World Heritage system is an arena that explicitly encourages states to be internationally disposed, wherein norms of cooperation rely upon internationalised cultural nationalisms and the building of bridges through the identification of shared pasts. The propensity for countries to collaborate over serial and joint nominations, constructing discourses and spaces of heritage that straddle between and across their territories also reflects a trend towards using the world heritage framework as a mechanism for bilateral relations”* (Winter, 2015, p. 1010).

This mechanism is emblematically represented by the Portuguese case (Cardeira da Silva, 2013). Portugal, until recent times, dominated over a vast colonial empire, extended from America to Africa and Asia. After the collapse of its empire, Portugal tried to maintain its grip on its ex-colonies both from an economic point of view and by fostering a wide cultural cooperation (Best *et al.*, 2008). Portugal, in fact, affirmed that all the newly-formed states once part of the Lusitanian empire shared with Portugal a common cultural background. In other words, when the Portuguese colonies became independent, their former dominator seized the opportunity to cancel with a single gesture both its colonial stain and these countries’ past submission (Cardeira da Silva, 2013). Portugal’s new cultural policy depicts its ex-colonies as its peers in a shared cultural identity and supports the concept of ‘Lusotropicalism’<sup>34</sup>, in order to minimise the harshness of the past domination – above all during the dictatorship – and lubricate the country’s diplomatic and economic relations with the ex-

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<sup>33</sup> For an insight about this ‘community’ of ambassadors and representatives, see Brumann (2015).

<sup>34</sup> “An underlying rhetoric of Portuguese colonialism that praises the distinctively Portuguese soft form of colonialism, promoting racial and cultural miscegenation” (Cardeira da Silva, 2013, p. 63).

colonies. As a consequence, Portugal strongly supported and still supports many projects of heritage restoration and valorisation in its ex-colonies and lobbied to obtain the UNESCO World Heritage recognition for sites situated in some of these countries, such as in Morocco<sup>35</sup> or Mauritania<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, this mutual cooperation on heritage and culture between Portugal and its former empire uses UNESCO as a tool of diplomacy. On one side, Portugal lobbies UNESCO in favour of its ex-colonies to maintain good relations with them and reinforce the ‘Lusotropical’ image of Portugal as a ‘soft’ and ‘respectful’ coloniser on the international stage, lightening its colonial stain. The ex-colonies, for their part, exploit the stronger Portuguese influence on UNESCO to obtain the inscription of their elements on the Lists and use them as economic resources to foster economic development (Cardeira da Silva, 2013). As a consequence, the original purpose of the UNESCO Lists to safeguard heritage for the sake of its own existence takes second place compared to political manoeuvrings that transform the Lists in bargaining chips in the hands of the states.

Such bilateral alliances are sometimes pursued even in spite of the real purpose of the UNESCO Conventions and Lists, which should be the protection of Heritage from damage and destruction. The Russian/Syrian case, brought forward by Lynn Meskell, who personally witnessed the dynamics in act during the 2013 World Heritage Committee session, demonstrates how bilateral relations and geopolitical and economic interests often replace even the basic *raison d'être* of such UNESCO instruments (Meskell, 2014). During the 37th WHC session, held in Cambodia in 2013, was discussed the proposal to inscribe all the Syrian World Heritage Sites present in the List (i.e., Ancient City of Damascus, Ancient City of Bosra, Site of Palmyra, Ancient City of Aleppo, Crac des Chevaliers and Qal’at Saalah El-in, and Ancient Villages of Northern Syria) in the List of World Heritage in Danger. The Committee also proposed to favour Syria’s adhesion to the UNESCO *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* (UNESCO, 1954), or Hague Convention, in order to guarantee stronger protection to Syrian heritage in the face of the civil war in act. In such context, Russia strongly opposed all these initiatives. Since the intensification of the civil conflict in Syria in 2011, in fact, Russia became the international power which most prominently supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad, providing it with a diplomatic shield also in the UN Security Council (Allison, 2013). The Russian interest in protecting the Syrian regime, fuelled by long-lasting military and economic relations among the two countries<sup>37</sup>, soon enlarged to the heritage sphere, offering support within UNESCO to avoid Syrian heritage to be included among the World Heritage in Danger, with the risk of being de-listed (Meskell, 2014). During the same WHC Session, however, all the Syrian World Heritage Sites were nonetheless included in the List of World Heritage in Danger<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, despite the risk of destruction in which incurred the Syrian heritage, Russia refused to acknowledge it in

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<sup>35</sup> See the “Portuguese City of Mazagan (AlJadida)” in Morocco in Cardeira da Silva (2013).

<sup>36</sup> See the “Ancient Ksour of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt and Oualata” in Mauritania in Cardeira da Silva (2013).

<sup>37</sup> The Syrian Ba’hat regime emerged in the 1970s and soon developed a strong alliance with the USSR, depending on Russian arms supplies and military training, and constituting a relevant outpost of Russian influence in the Middle East even after the Cold War, also through the (still active) Soviet-era naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus (Meskell, 2014). Russia was also the largest arms supplier for Syria (72% of Syrian arms imports in the years 2007–2011 came from Russia). For an insight on Syria-Russia relations and the economic and geopolitical reasons behind the Russian ‘diplomatic shield’ on Bashar al-Assad’s regime, see Allison (2013).

<sup>38</sup> WHC Decision 37 COM 7B.57.

order to support the Syrian regime, mainly for economic, military and geopolitical interests (Allison, 2013).

UNESCO membership and the inscription of heritage elements in the organisation's Lists, however, can also be used as international political weapons, to the point of becoming able to foster either the legitimisation or de-legitimisation of specific countries in the international scenario (Dumper and Larkin, 2012). An emblematic case, in this sense, is the Palestinian one<sup>39</sup>. Palestine was admitted as a UNESCO member in 2011<sup>40</sup> and, soon after the admission, Israel, together with the United States, halted their UNESCO contributions as a sort of 'retaliation' for this admission, which they had both strongly opposed (De Cesari, 2014). In such a context, why did Palestine pursue the UNESCO inscription, and why did Israel and the US protest so strongly against it? While the obtainment of the UNESCO membership did not bring visible and immediate changes on the ground, by becoming a UNESCO member, Palestine achieved a double objective. From a wider and symbolic point of view, the UNESCO admission was part of a wider Palestinian strategy to obtain international legitimisation as a full-fledged state by looking for inclusion in the UN system (De Cesari, 2014). In this sense, Palestine did not manage to achieve full recognition, since in 2012 the UN General Assembly accorded the non-member observer state status to Palestine, considered within its 1967 borders<sup>41</sup>. On the other hand, obtaining the UNESCO recognition contributed to the Palestinian diplomatic strategy of "anticipatory representation", as defined by Chiara De Cesari, which consists of "seeking formal, international recognition of sovereignty before effective control of the territories (...) The calling into being, through national representation, of national institutions that do not yet fully exist" (De Cesari, 2014, p. 249).

The UNESCO recognition legitimised Palestine as an existing and full-fledged state – at least in the UNESCO context – and facilitated its potential future accession to other UN bodies (De Cesari, 2014). From a more heritage-specific and pragmatic side, the recognition of Palestine as a UNESCO member allowed it to candidate elements to the organisation's Lists. Such elements, once inscribed, fall under the legitimate management of Palestinian authorities, thus potentially allowing them to acquire a wider territorial control over areas often disputed with Israel, as in the complex case of Jerusalem's Old City, analysed in depth by Dumper and Larkin (2012)<sup>42</sup>. In this sense, then, the UNESCO admission and the inscription of heritage in its Lists have been used by the Palestinian authorities as political tools in order to obtain legitimisation and recognition in the wider UN system (De Cesari, 2010; 2014), as well as instruments of territorial control and governance on the ground (Dumper and Larkin, 2012; Hafstein, 2018).

UNESCO and its Lists, however, can also become weapons of political de-legitimisation, as shown by the Tibetan case (Shepherd, 2006). Tibet's relations with China have been strained for decades due to conflicts for political legitimisation. Soon after the imposition of the communist rule in 1949, the People's Republic of China invaded Tibet in 1950<sup>43</sup>. After the invasion, the Tibetan authorities undertook negotiations with the Chinese forces, leading to the 'Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet', signed by the two parts

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<sup>39</sup> For an insight on UNESCO in Palestine, see De Cesari (2010) and Dumper and Larkin (2012).

<sup>40</sup> 170 countries voted in favour of the admission, 14 against (including the US, Israel, Germany, Canada, and Australia) and 52 abstained – see De Cesari (2014).

<sup>41</sup> Resolution A/RES/67/19 of 29 November 2012.

<sup>42</sup> See also the case of Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem - Battir in De Cesari (2014).

<sup>43</sup> For the history of relations between China and Tibet before the 1950 invasion, see Mukherjee (2021).

in 1951. The agreement testified that Tibet accepted to be considered as a part of China, on the condition that China respected the authority of the Dalai Lama, allowed religious freedom in Tibet and undertook policies only in consultation with the Tibetan authorities (Best *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, still nowadays, Tibet figures as a Chinese autonomous region, apparently endowed with a wide degree of autonomy. In reality, however, soon after the invasion, the Chinese state undertook a series of reforms – then strengthened during Mao’s Cultural Revolution – which, according to the Tibetans, aimed at weakening their traditional identity and the authority of the Dalai Lama, thus depoliticising the Tibetan stances (Mukherjee, 2021). Notwithstanding the liberalisation processes that started after Mao’s death in 1976, the aforementioned repressive policies still continued, and Tibetans responded with protests and riots, which peaked in the 1980s (Mukherjee, 2021). As a consequence, in 1989 the Chinese authorities imposed the martial law in Lhasa, which lasted until 1990 (Best *et al.*, 2008). Since that moment, even more than before, “the Chinese state rejected political liberalisation and followed a policy of enforcing stability, rapid economic development in Tibet and marginalising the Dalai Lama. (...) The state tried to de-emphasise Tibet’s distinct identity and brought Tibetan Buddhist monasteries under Beijing’s regulation. By and large, the state followed a policy of forceful integration of Tibet into China” (Mukherjee, 2021, p. 294).

Therefore, since the early 1990s the Chinese government appeared to strengthen the pre-existing repressive and assimilationist policies towards Tibet by pursuing a wider territorial control over the region, the weakening of local traditional identity and culture, and the depoliticisation of the Tibetan political authorities. In such a context, it is interesting to note that China inscribed the first Tibetan site, Potala Palace, in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1994, soon followed by the Jokhang temple complex in 2000 and the Norbulingka Summer Palace in 2001 (Shepherd, 2006). Nowadays, these three sites, located in Lhasa, are grouped together in the List, under the name of ‘Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace’. According to Robert Shepherd, the Chinese state used Tibetan heritage inscribed in the World Heritage List as a political tool to foster a firmer incorporation of Tibet into China (Shepherd, 2006). The inscription of Tibetan sites in the UNESCO World Heritage List, in fact, indirectly supported this process of forced integration in different ways.

Firstly, the inscription of these sites in the World Heritage List on behalf of China confers to the Chinese government the legitimate authority to interpret and manage them (Aykan, 2013), while also strengthening the narrative of Tibet as a Chinese region (and not a potentially independent state). For its part, UNESCO, “beyond verbalising its concerns, has little or no influence over how Chinese authorities manage Tibetan heritage sites” (Shepherd, 2006, p. 251). In other words, the inscription gives China a practically absolute territorial control over some of the main Tibetan heritage sites, weakening and delegitimising any potential Tibetan independentist stance<sup>44</sup>. Secondly, the UNESCO inscription contributed to the weakening of local cultural identity, complementing a series of assimilationist policies that Tibetans have been denouncing for decades (Mukherjee, 2021). The increased touristic flows derived from the UNESCO recognition, in fact, added to the Chinese plans to open Tibet to tourism as a means of economic development for the region (Mukherjee, 2021; Shepherd, 2006). On the other hand, while being depicted by the Chinese state as a source to foster economic development in the region, such state-directed tourism actually contributed to transform

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<sup>44</sup> For an insight on UNESCO’s heritage role as a means of territorial control and depoliticisation, see the Turkish case in Aykan (2013).

Tibet<sup>45</sup>, its image and the narrative surrounding it, into a space of ancestral culture and tradition, a mythical land of folklore<sup>46</sup> deprived and delegitimised of any political stance. In Shepherd's words, "tourism will do what the Chinese military has been unable to do: turn Tibet into a less authentically Tibetan place" (Shepherd, 2006, p. 244). In this sense, then, UNESCO and its World Heritage List have been used as political weapons to support the Chinese government's domestic effort in gaining wider territorial and political control over Tibet while, at the same time, depoliticising its stances and delegitimising it as a potential independent political actor in the international scenario.

## Conclusion

UNESCO presents itself as an organisation of equals, where member states work together for the promotion of culture and the preservation of cultural heritage. This noble facade, however, crumbles as soon as one digs beneath the surface. As much as UNESCO's intentions aim to ensure a balance among its members, as a matter of fact the reality sees states dominate UNESCO's decision-making processes and listing mechanisms.

This happens because of UNESCO's intergovernmental nature and the functioning of its own Conventions. In Dumper and Larkin's words "UNESCO exists as a form of international oversight, an agency which can provide assistance, but one that is limited by the fact that 'world heritage' remains subject to the power of the State and subservient to nationalist discourses and cultural agendas" (Dumper and Larkin, 2012, p. 42). Therefore, a paradox seems to be created: UNESCO proposes itself as an organisation aimed at considering all peoples as equal and exalting every culture, but at the same time it is administered and oriented by subjects, the states, which legitimise themselves by asserting their own distinction from all others and pursuing their own interests at the expense of others.

What could be the way out of this paradox? UNESCO has long been undertaking a reflection on the role of the state in the heritage field. The most recent instruments, such as the Intangible Heritage Convention, introduce the figure of the heritage bearer and of the 'local community' as relevant actors in the processes of heritage making (UNESCO General Conference, 2003). Such reforms seem to leave behind the logic of state domination and partition of heritage, in order to give back to heritage a humanity it seemed to have lost.

The local communities could constitute a third subject in the UNESCO-states relationship, able to lobby for a real protection of heritage, bringing its preservation back at the centre of the UNESCO listing processes, rather than the political dynamics that now seem to dominate. On the other hand, the agency of local communities seems to go lost, since in the transition from the national to international level only the states remain as legitimate UNESCO interlocutors (Palumbo, 2006). Therefore, how to give voice to the local communities?

The possible solution could be to open a channel of direct dialogue between the heritage bearers and the UNESCO bodies responsible for its Conventions, such as the World Heritage Committee and the Intergovernmental Committee. Although nowadays the

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<sup>45</sup> On 'touristification' and its consequences, see Bendix *et al.* (2013), Di Giovine (2015), Foster (2015) and Hafstein (2018).

<sup>46</sup> One of the risks associated to 'touristification' is 'folklorisation', defined by Valdimar Hafstein as "the reification and commoditization of traditional practices for outside audiences". For an insight, see Hafstein (2018, p. 84).

Conventions do not allow communities to open a direct dialogue with such UNESCO bodies (Aykan, 2013), a source of inspiration could come from the Council of Europe (CoE). In 2005, it adopted a relevant document related to cultural heritage and communities of heritage bearers: the *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, or *Faro Convention* (Council of Europe, 2005). This Convention conceived heritage from the perspective of its bearers and implemented two direct channels of communication between the CoE and the local communities: the Faro Convention Network (FCN) (Council of Europe, n.d.a) and the European Heritage Network (HereIn) (Council of Europe, n.d.b). The FCN is a network to which interested communities can affiliate to share good practices, open inter-practitioner dialogues but also appeal to the CoE secretariat in case of necessity, while HereIn is a digital platform where State Parties share their initiatives in the heritage field, proving their actions in front of the CoE Institutions and of a wider public which holds them accountable. Also experts and heritage communities, in fact, can access the platform, insert data and assess the declarations of the states.

The establishment of similar bodies within the UNESCO framework seems far, but a series of updates to the criteria for the implementation of the UNESCO Conventions since 2005, year of adoption of the Faro Convention, shows a progressive rapprochement to the criteria set out in Faro (World Heritage Committee, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2019; Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018). As for intangible heritage, for example, all the Operational Directives issued since 2008 encourage the State Parties to the Convention to create a consultative body and a coordination mechanism aimed at facilitating the participation of communities<sup>47</sup>, thus recalls the FCN platform instituted in Faro, although such UNESCO body would not be a direct emanation of UNESCO – as the FCN is for the CoE – but would be instituted by the member states and supervised by them<sup>48</sup>.

This paper supports the idea that UNESCO has always worked to correct its shortcomings (Hafstein, 2018). The aforementioned updates to the Operational Guidelines and Directives implemented over the past years might signal a change on part of UNESCO regarding the prominent role of the state and the willingness to increase the space and authority given to local communities. As to whether this path will be undertaken or not, only the future will tell.

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<sup>47</sup> See Articles III.I.79/80 (Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> See *Ibidem*.

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