

World Heritage in danger and tourism stakes in Europe: global concerns for local planning conflicts

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Abstract

This paper aims to study local conflicts about planning schemes, which could threaten sustainable development in World Heritage sites, by a critical geopolitical analysis. It studies especially the case of the protests against the building of a hydropower dam, close to the Alto Douro Wine Region, a UNESCO listed site in Portugal. Tourism issues are essential in these areas, where the World Heritage ranking, which brings substantial incomes, is threatened by the development project. These planning disputes are firstly conflicts of interests between different stakeholders, acting on different scales and defending their own concerns and perceptions, from local protesters to States representatives in the World Heritage Committee.

Keywords: *UNESCO, World Heritage, Foz Tua dam, Alto Douro Wine Region, Planning conflict, Geopolitics, Tourism*

In Europe, the UNESCO World Heritage ranking of several urban or countryside sites could be threatened by the development of planning projects, which could alter distinctive feature, landscape or sustainability. Thus the feasibility to achieve planning schemes in protected areas is questioned. Does the World Heritage status prevent any evolution or renewal of these sites, leading these areas to become wide frozen museums? Apart from these classic questions on planning constraints in listed sites, we can also analyse how these threats become new issues in planning conflicts. Indeed if a site is thrown out of the World Heritage list, the consequences would be significant for the local economy. The iconic UNESCO label is an astounding opportunity to attract tourists and investments and to promote the area. The loss of this status would inevitably affect the local attractiveness and the local sustainable economic development. Thus this threat is used by activists to protest against planning projects in World Heritage sites, in the name of economic value and touristic activities.

This paper aims to study local conflicts about planning schemes in World Heritage sites, and especially touristic issues and arguments in these disputes. It proposes to use a critical

geopolitical methodology to analyse how touristic attractiveness and economic issues in these areas strengthen conflicts of interests between numerous stakeholders: local protesters, environmentalists, developers, tourism sector, States, the World Heritage Committee, environmental, cultural and heritage experts, etc.

Methodology: the local geopolitics approach and heritage studies

Economic and touristic issues in World Heritage sites have already been described and studied through an analysis of stakeholders' interactions and strategies (Gravari-Barbas, 2004, 2005; Gravari-Barbas & Jacquot, 2012, 2013; Pedersen, 2002; Rautenberg, 2003). This paper proposes to use a local geopolitical approach to analyse these issues. If *classical* geopolitics is "the study of the relationships between geographical features and international politics" (Dahlman, 2009, p. 97), based on a state and interstate scale, *local* geopolitics is a *critical* geopolitics approach, which can be based on a larger scale – a local scale – amongst others.

According to authors like Gearoid Ó Tuathail (1996) or John Agnew (2003), critical geopolitics focuses less on the analysis of stakeholders' strategies and more on their discourses (Ó Tuathail, Agnew, 1992; Müller, 2010). It seeks to "unveil the manner in which politicians discursively construct geopolitical spaces, often by manipulating geographical facts for strategic purposes" (Dahlman, 2009, p. 98). Moreover critical geopolitics analyses rivalries between all political stakeholders at all levels, not only statesmen and military staff, but also local politicians, NGO, environmental activists, lobbying groups, firms, citizen organisations, etc.

Local geopolitics approach was developed in the 1980s-2000s by the French school of geopolitics and the editorial board of *Hérodote* journal founded by Yves Lacoste. These geographers uses a critical geopolitics and discourse analysis approach to study new issues, as electoral process, immigration, local and regional identities, segregations, social and spatial conflicts or planning process, in large-scale territories, such as regions or cities. Their methodology is based on the analysis of perceptions and representations of all stakeholders involved in "a rivalry for power on territory" (Lacoste, 1995).

In this way of a critical and discursive approach, heritage is inherently a geopolitical question, as well as tourism (Giblin, 2007). Indeed the question of heritage preservation is linked to spatial issues and geographers' concerns, such as landscape, sustainability, land planning or economic development. Moreover heritage perceptions, and thus the necessity of its protection, are highly subjective and directly related to identity references of each nation and people. Moreover according to M. Gravari-Barbas and V. Veschambre (2003, p.71), "the reference to heritage appears closely linked to issues of space appropriation".

Thence the arguments to defend heritage constitute geopolitical discourses. Furthermore heritage sites are targets of conflicts and wars. Indeed few World Heritage sites are in the heart of classical geopolitical conflicts (the Old City of Sana'a in Yemen, the ruins of Palmyra in Syria, the Preah Vihear temple in Cambodia or the monuments of Timbuktu in Mali, such as examples). Several authors have already discussed the international geopolitical issues of cultural property, the World Heritage and UNESCO's role in wars or interstate rivalries (Silverman, 2010; Van der Auwera, 2012; Meskell, 2015). This paper aims to broach the geopolitical conflict notion in a larger approach. Indeed the protection of many World Heritage sites is questioned by protesters in local geopolitics disputes about planning issues.

This analysis uses this local geopolitics approach to study discourses and perceptions on touristic issues of stakeholders involved in planning disputes in World Heritages sites. The direct interviews of key-stakeholders, a qualitative monitoring of local newspapers and activists' blogs or websites, and an important fieldwork are the best means to understand the contradictory discourses, and so are the main sources of this study. This paper develops a case study: the Alto Douro Wine Region, a major tourist destination in Portugal and a UNESCO's listed site, where local activists and tourism stakeholders protest against the building of a hydropower dam.

Planning, heritage and local geopolitical conflicts

Changing land uses and planning process are frequently sources of conflicts. Even better, B. Cullingworth and V. Nadin (2006, p.2) explain that "politics, conflicts and dispute are at the centre of land use planning. Conflict arises because of the competing demands for the use of land, because of the externality effects that arise when the use of land changes, and because of the uneven distribution of costs and benefits which results from development. If there were no conflicts, there would be no need for planning. Indeed, planning might usefully be defined as the process by which government resolves disputes about land uses".

Indeed, while the first protests against planning schemes arise from the 1950s, they increase from the 1970's to become systematic and symptomatic of any sizeable project (Dziedzicki, 2003; Bailoni, 2013), such as power plants (nuclear, dam, wind farm, etc.), transport links (road, railway, airport, etc.), any other public service infrastructures, urban sprawl effects, urban renewal schemes, etc. The protest is thus becoming common and widespread (Subra, 2007). These planning conflicts are stakeholders' interactions, which confront divergent ambitions, contradictory perceptions and personal or mutual interests. The opposition arises from local concerns, which can cause NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard") reactions, as well as global views, which can cause NIABY ("Not In Anybody's Back Yard") reactions. The protesters are usually neighbouring residents, environmental activists, citizens, local

politicians, local history, cultural or heritage societies, economic stakeholders, lobbyists or corporations (Wolsink, 1994; Dziedzicki, 2003). Nevertheless their mobilisation and their arguments are often common and shared, whatever their motivations or their profiles.

Thus these planning conflicts (or land-use conflicts, or environmental conflicts) are geopolitical disputes, in which arguments are constructed by using perceptions of singularity and potential development of territories, environment and landscapes. These feelings of uniqueness arise often from heritage elements, and contribute to defining a local identity, an “identity cement” (Gravari-Barbas & Veschambre, 2003, p.73). So, the protesters against a planning scheme aim to preserve the environment, to avoid nuisance and pollution, to protect an iconic heritage or landscape, but also to defend a part of local identity (Bailoni, 2013).

Moreover, this uniqueness of the heritage is sometimes highlighted by labels, such as an inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list. This sort of recognition can heighten the touristic attractiveness of the site, and so, can provide a substantial economic value (Bertacchini & Saccone, 2012; Cassel & Pashkevich, 2014; Frey & Steiner, 2011; Frey *et al.*, 2013). For Lynn Meskell (2015, p.226), World Heritage status is “a political business”. In this case, any evolution of the site and its landscape might question and affect the viability of this value and induced tourism activities. Thus any planning project might cause a conflict of interests between developers and local stakeholders, with contradictory logics “preservation *vs.* exploitation, local appropriation *vs.* tourism development” (Gravari-Barbas & Veschambre, 2003, p.76). The issue of the dispute is not only the feature of the development project, but it might be the recognition or the label itself. Indeed UNESCO might also protest against a planning scheme and threaten to remove the site from its list, as an instance in 2009, when the World Heritage Committee decided to revoke the Dresden Elbe Valley’s from the list, because of the building of a four-lane road bridge.

Many World Heritage sites are affected by planning conflicts involving tourism issues. There are many examples in Europe, which is characterized by a high concentration of UNESCO sites, significant revenues from tourism and strong political disputes on planning issues. For instance, the regeneration of a 1970s commercial area and the project of a new hotel (with an innovative architecture) in the World Heritage perimeter of the historic city of Edinburgh cause a planning conflict, asking the question of the apparent incompatibility between conservation and development in listed areas. Similar debates also arise over development schemes in Florence or Seville, both major tourist cities and World Heritage places. The case of the city of Bath can also be cited: in this major popular tourist destination in England, the development of park-and-ride facilities – to welcome the tourists! – could damage the countryside landscapes, and so is contested. Moreover, the Liverpool’s Maritime Mercantile City is even ranked on the official UNESCO’s list of

World Heritage in danger (such as the ancient cities of Palmyra or Timbuktu), because of schemes for brownfields renewal on the fringes of the protected area, the “Liverpool Waters” project (Jones, 2015). All these local geopolitical conflicts are caused by tourism, development and protection interests. Each time the questions of the UNESCO’s role, position and actions is asked, and the future of the World Heritage ranking is challenged. The iconic Douro Valley in Portugal is at the heart of this type of conflict and debates.

The Douro valley: an highlight touristic attraction in Portugal, a threatened World Heritage ranking

Portugal is often described as one of the most advanced country in Europe towards energy transition and is sometimes described as an example to follow. Indeed more than 50% of domestic power production comes from renewable sources. Since 2007 Portugal has moreover launched what is described as “the most important hydroelectric project in Europe over the last 25 years”. This project is called PNBEPH (*Programa Nacional de Barragens com Elevado Potencial Hidroeléctrico*) and it aims to build eight new dams and create mostly additional storage capacities. Construction of new reservoirs is regarded as the best solution to reduce the interannual and daily fluctuations of wind power and hydro power. Indeed these reservoirs can be filled by pumping from downstream to upstream, using the electricity surplus of wind power generation (Bailoni, Deshaies, 2014).

Nevertheless, even if these dams and reservoirs may be regarded as good things to reduce emissions of greenhouse gas, they are also regarded as a source of nuisances at the local level, especially for landscape and sustainability issues. These schemes are contested, inducing local geopolitical conflicts. The main dispute takes place in the Rio Tua valley, a tributary of the Douro River. This 108 metres high dam is built by EDP (*Energias de Portugal* – the main Portuguese electricity operator) at about one kilometre from the confluence. The reservoir will extend to 27 km upstream. The power station is expected to generate 585 GWh annually. Works began in 2011 and should be completed by end of 2016.

On the one hand, EDP, the Portuguese state which funds a part of the project, the main political parties and many local councillors support this scheme and explain the dam will generate a clean and renewable energy. This €370 million investment will help to reduce emissions of carbon (470 kt CO₂ annually, compared to a coal power station). EDP adds that the dam is essential to increase the wind power efficiency and its reservoir might be regarded as a power tank.

On the other hand, protesters founded the platform *Salvar o Tua*, “Save the Tua”, which is composed by activists from smaller parties (far-left, Greens), environmentalist NGOs, local

economic stakeholders or neighbourhood organisations. They denounce the environmental impacts of the dam and its reservoir on the ecosystems of the valley. Rio Tua is indeed described as “one of the last wild rivers in Europe”, even if this expression is frequently used about a lot of rivers in Europe. The protesters also seek to protect the traditional landscapes and cultural identity of the region, which would be damaged by the dam, the reservoir and the high voltage power lines. Moreover they contest the destruction of a railway, which passes along the bottom of the Tua valley. They describe it as an element of heritage and explain that the operation of this line could be an asset for tourism development. Lastly, local vineyards producers are worried about the impacts of the future reservoir on the local climate, especially higher humidity, and so on the wine quality. So this dam could affect the sustainable development of the valley.

In a first phase of the conflict, the protesters’ arguments are essentially the protection of environment, landscape and small heritage elements. They lead customary actions, such as demonstrations, occupy camp, petitions, etc. They use experiences from other planning conflicts in Portugal and in Europe, including the mobilisations against dam projects in Rio Minho and Rio Côa valleys, which were withdrawn following protests in the name of heritage protection (Bailoni, Deshaies, 2014; Gonçalves, 2001; Wateau, 2010). Nevertheless these first actions against the Foz Tua dam are quite inefficient.

Thus, in a second phase, protesters seek to accentuate their actions, involving new stakeholders and challenging economic and tourism issues. They decide then to alert UNESCO showing that the project will have disastrous effects: the dam site is close to the production area of port wine and especially close to the boundary of the Alto Douro Wine Region, listed as UNESCO World Heritage site since 2001. The Committee recognised then that the “long tradition of viticulture has produced a cultural landscape of outstanding beauty that reflects its technological, social and economic evolution”¹. If the dam is located outside the protected area, its visual impact will be important from the Douro valley, and the power lines will pass through the UNESCO area. By this action, the protesters ask the question of the revocation of the Alto Douro Wine Region from the World Heritage list. The loss of the UNESCO ranking would cause disastrous effects on the prestige, the tourism attractiveness and the sustainable economy in whole Northern Portugal. This threat gathers tourism and wine stakeholders, from across the protected area and beyond, against the dam (Melo, 2011).

¹Webpage of this World Heritage site: <http://whc.unesco.org/fr/list/1046/> (Visited: 19. April 2016)

UNESCO has reacted and has sent ICOMOS² investigators. Their report concluded that the dam would have a “severe” and “irreversible” impact on the landscape (ICOMOS, 2011). The World Heritage Committee then decided to conduct further investigations in 2012. Portuguese government asked to EDP to slow down – but not to stop! – the works until the final decisions.

The company has sought to counter the main criticisms of ICOMOS experts and protesters. Edouardo Souto de Moura, one of the most famous architects in Portugal and winner of the prestigious Pritzker Prize, has been appointed by the company to find solutions to reduce the impact of the dam on the landscape. In his report, his main proposal was to bury the power station and then to reconstitute traditional terraces above, incorporating local elements, such as granite stones and olive trees. If his proposals were limited and not revolutionary, EDP has bought an image, a reputation and an architectural patronage. In its amended draft, the company has also committed to finance a new local history museum and new tourism, leisure and transport facilities around the reservoir, showing that this dam would strengthen local economy and touristic attractiveness. EDP adds that the hydropower facilities are part of the cultural identity and landscapes in the Douro basin, and that eight existing dams allow the flow regulation of the Douro River, on which tourism boats can sail from Porto. Thus the company has clearly launched a marketing campaign.

Following further investigations and new reports (WHC, ICOMOS, IUCN, 2013), the World Heritage Committee decided in June 2013 to keep Alto Douro Wine Region on the list, and only required a few technological amendments on the power lines and water supply. The Portuguese government and EDP welcomed this decision, and obviously protesters denounced it. They regretted that the World Heritage Committee did not follow the recommendations of the ICOMOS’s technical report. Thus, João Branco, deputy chairman of Quercus, an environmentalist NGO involved in *Salvar o Tua*, said that “this is a shameful decision which dishonours UNESCO. (...) It shows that real UNESCO bosses are the governments which fund the organisation. (...) Governments now know that they can do whatever they want with the World Heritage” (quoted in *Público*, June 19, 2013). Joana de Melo, member of GEOTA, another environmentalist NGO, considered this decision as “a true crime against the heritage, environment and local development” (quoted in *Público*, June 20, 2013). Then, protesters aim to continue the struggle and to prepare new actions through the courts and European bodies.

²UNESCO World Heritage Committee mandates the International Council on Monument and Sites (ICOMOS), an expert advisory body, to provide independent evaluations to determine new nominations to the list, or to oversee the management of the listed sites.

A few months from the completion, Salvar o Tua still demands to stop the project and asks to involved citizens to send a pre-filled protesting email to UNESCO from its website. The activists still claim to add the Alto Douro Wine Region to the List of World Heritage in Danger³. According to them, the UNESCO credibility is at stake.

Local geopolitical conflicts... with classical international geopolitical issues

The analysis of these local planning conflicts shows that the response of UNESCO is often denounced and considered too conciliatory toward the developers. Protesters would wish firmer reactions from the World Heritage Committee. Nevertheless if local issues cause these conflicts, UNESCO is an intergovernmental institution, managed by States representatives. The States' positions often remain subject to national or even international scale interests, although these disputes between planning, heritage and tourism stakeholders involve mainly local scale issues. There is a scale contradiction between local protesters who react about local concerns, and States representatives who act in the World Heritage Committee as international stakeholders. Thus, if these planning conflicts are first and foremost local geopolitical questions, a classical geopolitical analysis is required to understand UNESCO's responses.

Several recent papers have already analysed the stranglehold of States on the World Heritage Committee, the site nomination process and their management (Meskell, 2015; Meskell *et al.*, 2015; Bertacchini *et al.*, 2015). They show moreover that the current international context tends to shift the traditional balance of power in UNSECO. Indeed new key States, such as China, India, Brazil or South Africa, have emerged over the last decade, challenging the usual decision-making process within the World Heritage Committee and intending to impose a multilateral management. Lynn Meskell (2015, p.226) explains that “over the past few years the World Heritage Committee has become increasingly politicized and confrontational (...). From this perspective, the politics around designating World Heritage site are not dissimilar from those fraught international deliberations over nuclear disarmament or climate change”.

In this context, ICOMOS and other archaeological or environmental experts are often criticised by ambassadors and politicians from non-European States. The emerging States representatives denounce the Eurocentric approach of heritage and sustainable issues in their studies and intend to counterbalance the historic dominance of “Western” States on the World Heritage Committee (Frey *et al.*, 2013). Thus the analysis of the Committee

³ Salvar o Tua websites: <http://www.salvarotua.org/> and <http://lastdaysoftua.com/> (Visited: 19. April 2016)

decision-making shows that the expert recommendations are increasingly ignored in favour of geopolitical agreements between States representatives (Meskell *et al.*, 2015; Bertacchini *et al.*, 2015). Corridor diplomacy and lobbying have replaced expert recommendations in decision-making processes. The position of each State in Committee can indeed be determined by national prestige and identity affirmation issues, domestic tourism interests, political arrangements, or international economic, strategic and cultural coalitions. If the Committee decides whether a site is inscribed on the World Heritage list or on the World Heritage in danger list, its resolution is often based on geopolitical considerations, rather than strictly environmental, cultural and heritage criteria, despite the experts' recommendations. About the Alto Douro case, Meskell *et al.* (2015) quoted Vinay Sheel Oberoi, then Indian ambassador to UNESCO, who criticised the ICOMOS recommendations in 2012 and said that the "pyramids would never have been built if ICOMOS and the World Heritage Committee had been there". In this way, the 2012 session of World Heritage Committee decided to not include the Alto Douro Wine Region on the list of World Heritage in danger. If Portugal is a European nation with a long history of colonisation and domination in the World, the largest shareholder of EDP, the developer of the Foz Tua dam, is the China Three Gorges Company, a firm from an emerging economy, since 2011, when the government completed its privatisation during the economic crisis.

Three remarks should conclude this paper on tourism issues in planning conflicts in World Heritage sites. Firstly, the question of scales is essential: if the concerns of these conflicts are mainly local, they involve international issues. So a classical international geopolitical approach is necessary to complete a local geopolitical analysis. Secondly, while Lynn Meskell (2015, p.234) asked "might the creation of World Heritage for the purposes of peace and cooperation actually be just a constitutive of conflict and competition?" about the Crimea, Mali and Syria wars, where listed sites are clearly strategic and mediatised targets, this "uncomfortable question" could also be asked about planning and tourism conflicts. Indeed these disputes are certainly more prominent and important because they concern World Heritage listed sites and this label is a major source of tourism income. So the ranking strengthens conflict issues, whatever the type of conflict. Thirdly, these cases show that the credibility and neutrality of UNESCO are challenged, asking the question of necessary reforms in World Heritage management and decision-making processes, and more generally in heritage international sustainable protection.

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