



## Selecting World Heritage sites: A new proposal

Lasse Steiner, Bruno Frey 18 November 2011

*There are nearly 1,000 UNESCO World Heritage sites. These sites benefit hugely from tourism, so suspicions of fixing the judges' verdicts are rife. This column suggests a novel way to get rid of the politicisation: random selection.*

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The UNESCO World Heritage sites have become major attractions for cultural tourism and are icons of national identity. Being put on the UNESCO World Heritage List comes with considerable media coverage – and naturally governments invest substantial time and effort in order to gain an entry. At present, the list comprises 936 sites – 725 of them cultural, 183 natural, and 28 mixed properties in 153 of the 186 State Parties who ratified the *Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage*.

### Defining beauty

There is a precisely structured process to become a World Heritage site. A country must compile an inventory of its significant cultural and natural sites for a 'tentative list'. It must then select a property from this list into a 'nomination file' evaluated by experts from the International Council on Monuments and Sites and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, under the guidance of the World Heritage Centre in Paris. They submit a recommendation to the World Heritage Committee composed of 21 countries. The experts classify the applications into four groups and recommend acceptance, to revise and resubmit the application, to correct significant shortcomings (with the possibility for resubmission after several years) and outright rejection.

Those nominations that are accepted by the committee are included in the World Heritage List. They have to be of "outstanding universal value" and meet at least one of ten criteria such as, for instance that it "represents a masterpiece of human creative genius", or "bears a unique and exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or a civilization which is living or has disappeared". While the first properties on the List were evaluated in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, it has been claimed that "(t)he scrutiny of these systems by the two Advisory Boards is now rigorous" (Cleere 2006: xxii).

### Turning ugly

The World Heritage List is generally considered to be an excellent effort to save the globe's common history in the form of cultural monuments and landscapes worth preserving. The achievements of list have been well recognised and we need not repeat them here (see for example Frey and Steiner 2011). There are, however, serious criticisms, most of them referring to the selection of sites. It has been argued that there are too many properties on the list, reducing their exclusivity. Another striking aspect is the highly unequal distribution of sites according to countries and continents, with almost 50% of the sites located in Europe. It has been claimed that the selection is not based on objective considerations but strongly depends on political influence. Our recent econometric study (Frey *et al* 2011) is consistent with this claim. For the year 2006 and at that time 182 countries, a large number of determinants, such as historical GDP, area in square kilometres of a country, and number of years of high civilization, are significantly correlated with the number of sites. In addition, it turns out that various factors unrelated to the value of heritage, such as rent-seeking by bureaucrats and politicians and membership in the UN Security Council, significantly influence the composition of the list. Other studies have previously shown that there is a direct correlation between participating in the Committee and representation in the list. The 21 member countries of the Committee nominated more than 30% of the listed sites between 1978 and 2004 (Van der Aa 2005). One extreme example occurred in 1997 when ten Italian sites were included in the List at one point in time during which the Committee was chaired by a compatriot. The director of the World Heritage Centre, Francesco Bandarin, concluded, "Inscription has



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become a political issue. It is about prestige, publicity, and economic development" (Henley 2001).

## Random selection

In order to reduce such unwarranted political influence we propose to apply random selection. It is fair in the sense that every item has the same probability of being selected, which ensures a broad representation and reduces unwanted political interventions. In the form of demarchy (or lottocracy) this procedure has been extensively used in classical Greek and Italian city states such as Venice. Today it is still used for instance for jury services. Applied to the selection of World Heritage sites, two random mechanisms are possible.

The sites to be put on the World Heritage List can be chosen by lot from among all sites considered 'acceptable' by the experts – that is, all those that are not rejected. Alternatively, all acceptable sites can be weighted by the classifications of the experts. Weight 3 could be given to those with recommended acceptance, weight 2 to the ones which have to be revised, and weight 1 to the ones with significant shortcomings. While this procedure would ensure representation of all acceptable sites, it makes it less attractive for governments to invest money and effort to propagate a property because the final selection is beyond their influence.

A possible disadvantage may be that a random selection does not provide the same prestige as (what is claimed to be) a serious choice by a World Heritage Committee. To circumvent this problem we suggest a second random mechanism. The selection is applied one step ahead at the composition of the World Heritage Committee which today takes the allegedly politicised decisions. The members of the committee are selected by lot from the 186 member countries of the convention. Random selection of the Committee members makes *ex ante* bargaining, strategic voting, and logrolling more difficult. Undesired political influences can then to a large extent be excluded which should give more weight to an objective selection of sites based on the ten criteria agreed.

Random selection has been used rarely in such a context, partly because the more politically influential countries object to its use. Moreover, many people object to random decisions because they are not used to them. Nevertheless, the World Heritage List seems to be an excellent object to use this social-decision mechanism.

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