The ethics and politics of world heritage: local application at the site of Laponia

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the ethics of world heritage (WH) through a cosmopolitan lens. It proposes that cosmopolitanism provides fertile ground for the study of WH, in particular if combined with sensitivity to distinct indigenous ethical and political claims. Underpinning my article is the question of whether the politics of WH, despite its peaceful and universalist intensions, obscures local disputes and subaltern voices. The empirical emphasis is placed on the WH site of Laponia in the North of Sweden – a location of Sami indigenous communities and commercial mining interests. I provide a narrative analysis of the inconsistencies between the Swedish ‘good state’ narrative defined by support for human and indigenous rights globally and the protection ambition of WH and its generally favourable attitude towards mining, despite its potentially damaging effects on the WH site of Laponia and the cultural heritage and land rights of Sami people living there. My study also provides an analysis of Sami narratives on Laponia – storylines that are rarely included in the Swedish ‘good state’ narrative. The study seeks to contribute to scholarly understandings of indigenous peoples’ ability to lay claims to the cosmopolitan protection logic that prevails in WH.

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Introduction
The establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1945 mirrors the post-World War II quest for peaceful co-existence and respect for human rights. The constitution of UNESCO rests on the idea that ‘wars begin in the minds of men’ and ‘it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed’ (UNESCO 1945). The broad ambition was to create sustainable peace and cosmopolitan unity by globally dispersing the universal values of ‘dignity, equality and mutual respect of men’ to end ‘the doctrine of the inequality of men and races’ (UNESCO 1945). This required ‘a diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice, and liberty and peace’ (UNESCO 1945). It is notable that the language employed by UNESCO at the time centred on the rights of men, which discursively...
excluded women from its founding ambitions. Nonetheless, since its establishment UNESCO’s self-image has been steeped within cosmopolitan notions of human rights and peaceful co-existence. Thus, a ‘moral solidarity of mankind’ cannot be achieved through ‘the political and economic arrangements of governments’ (1945) alone. It involves fostering ‘educational and scientific and cultural relations of the peoples of the world’ (1945) with such knowledge enabling mutual respect and understanding among the world’s peoples. The emphasis on cultural togetherness and knowledge exchange was reproduced in the language of the World Heritage (WH) Convention, signed in 1972 (UNESCO 1972).

The signatories of the convention committed themselves to the protection of the world’s cultural and natural heritage, viewing it as a global responsibility that should involve ‘all the peoples of the world’ (1972). The extent to which the peoples of the world are able to fulfil that ‘global protection ambition’ varies though (Green 2009). In some cases, poverty and conflict prevent local communities from protecting cultural property and heritage (Dumper and Larkin 2012; Meskell 2015). Moreover, there are disagreements within the UNESCO WH Committee regarding the selection of sites and objects that should be included in the WH list, and how to protect cultural property and heritage from armed conflict (Meskell 2015). This article rests on the idea that the ethics and politics of WH could be considered institutional expressions of cosmopolitanism. However, the cosmopolitan ambitions of UNESCO and WH are not easily translated into policy or practice in local contexts, with some sites being characterized by armed conflict (Meskell 2018) and others disputes over land rights and development projects.

Despite the ‘recent proliferation of internationally recognized WH Sites’ (Dumper and Larkin 2012), there is limited scholarship on the ethical challenges arising from that development (Colwell and Joy 2015, 122). Such enquiries tend to be conducted by anthropologists (Di Giovine 2009), archaeologists or conservationists (Agnew and Bridgland 2006; Meskell 2018) and heritage studies scholars (Labadi and Long 2010; Labadi 2013; Winter 2015, 2017). In this paper, I bring such interventions into conversation with scholarship on ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ as well as feminist sensitivity to dialogical human relations and the uncovering of embodied experiences and marginalized voices (Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell 2020).

The inscription of a particular site on the WH list is an effort to appreciate its universal values and to protect it from destruction. WH sites are often co-managed by a variety of actors including local and regional councils, national environmental agencies and indigenous communities. In this paper, the focus is on Laponia, a WH site located in the North of Sweden across the municipalities of Gällivare, Arjeplog and Jokkmokk. In particular, Laponia is designed to recognize the cultural value, heritage and ancestry of Sámi people living and working at or near the site. However, Laponia is also defined by disputes between Sámi communities and other stakeholders, in particular in regards to the damaging effects of the potential establishment of a mine at Gállok which is located in the near vicinity of the WH site.

Laponia provides a case in point for analysing the ethical tensions between the cosmopolitan undertones of WH and the interests of Indigenous Sámi communities, local non-Sámi communities, the state itself, and commercial mining interests. More specifically, the case demonstrates the triangular tension between the cosmopolitan logic of WH,
competing commercial interests and Indigenous quest for the land rights. It is also illustrative of the power relations that prevail within that triangular logic.

The research question of this article, inspired by, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty (1998), asks whether the politics of WH, despite its peaceful and universalist ambitions, obscures local disputes, subaltern pasts, histories, stories and experiences. I address this question through a narrative analysis which identifies tensions between Swedish statist and commercial interests at the Laponia site and Sámi contestations of those interests. In this way, I hope to bring more nuance to Sweden’s self-narrative as a ‘good state’ committed to human rights at home and abroad (Lawler 2013; Bergman Rosamond 2020).

I commence by outlining the key tenets of cosmopolitan theory to assess its applicability to the study of WH as an institutional expression of cosmopolitanism. While cosmopolitanism can capture the universalist and peaceful ambitions of WH, there are instances when it is less applicable to the study of local applications of those norms. This requires a cosmopolitan framework that is both ‘embedded’ (Erskine 2007) and ‘dialogical’ (Mendieta 2009), enabling the uncovering of unheard voices. I also outline the distinctiveness of the WH site of Laponia to illustrate the difficulty of translating the cosmopolitan norms of WH into local practice. I then introduce the narrative approach of the paper which enables me to identify the tensions between the broad ethics of WH, the commercial interests of the Swedish state and the mining industry, local quests for economic prosperity, and Indigenous counter-claims for justice and recognition in and around Laponia. The analysis centres on state-based and extractive narratives as well as Sámi contestations of such storylines. To conclude, I posit that while the ethics of WH commits the world to cosmopolitan values and policies, those are not easily translated into local practice – particularly in settings defined by longstanding disputes over land rights and self-determination. Yet, as I argue below, Sámi appeals to the cosmopolitan ambitions of UNESCO and WH have strengthened their quest for the protection of Laponia from extraction.

**Cosmopolitanism and its applicability to WH**

WH can be understood as an institutional expression of cosmopolitan solidarity and protection norms. However, stakeholders vary in their interpretation of how to translate the cosmopolitan ‘global protection ambition’ of WH into practice (Meskell and Van Damme 2008). While WH is designed as a global peace project, its management is the duty of national and subnational communities. Thus, the politics of WH gives rise to ‘tensions around universal values of cosmopolitanism, discourses of citizenship, patterns of exclusion and the symbolic meanings attached to these sites’ (Bianchi and Boniface 2002, 80). The position developed here is that cosmopolitanism, if coupled with sensitivity to local difference, inclusive dialogue and embodied experiences and narratives, especially in the case of Indigenous peoples, can help to capture the complexity of WH.

A central theme within global ethics is the question of how far states and other actors have an ethical obligation to ensure the rights, security and wellbeing of all human beings, rather than members of bounded communities alone (Bergman Rosamond and Phythian 2012). Cosmopolitan theory rests on the assumption that all human beings are part of a shared moral order, in which we have ethical obligations that stretch beyond our political communities. Thus, national borders have little moral significance as we are obliged to care for people of all nations. This includes showing hospitality to
newcomers seeking refuge in our land (Kant 1795) and working towards the achievement of perpetual peace globally (Molloy 2017). While a number of states, governments and international institutions subscribe to at least a minimum cosmopolitan notion of ethical obligation, they do not advocate the abolition of the state (Blake 2013). As David Held noted, ‘cosmopolitanism is concerned to disclose the ethical, cultural and legal basis of political order in a world where political communities and states matter, but not only and exclusively’ (2009, 535). Rather, most actors are ‘moderate cosmopolitans’ recognizing that ‘there are special obligations to fellow citizens in addition to general duties to the community of all human beings’ (Kleingeld 2019). However, as Held (2009) argued, the rise of global institutions and international law suggests that there is cosmopolitan awareness among the peoples of the world. A key question then is whether such awareness ‘is compatible with the maintenance of distinct cultures’ (Blake 2013, 3) and ‘a plurality of values and a diversity of moral conceptions of the good’ (Held 2009, 539). Next, I address this question by exploring cosmopolitan scholarship that assumes that such plurality is not only possible but desirable.

Toni Erskine makes a case for ‘embedded cosmopolitanism’ which is premised on ‘an account of moral agency’ that is ‘radically situated in particularistic associations’ and which ‘would … remain inclusive and self-critical enough to take seriously the moral standing of those beyond … home’ (2007, 44). Her account of cosmopolitanism, moreover, recognizes that ‘the communities that define us are best understood as multiple’ and ‘territorially dispersed’ enabling multiple responsibilities and loyalties (Erskine 2007, 44).

The recognition that universal notions of justice and rights can co-exist with respect for particular cultural values also informs feminist scholarship on cosmopolitanism (Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell 2018, 2020). Here, Martha Nussbaum (2000, 7) notes that ‘it is possible to describe a framework … that is strongly universalist, committed to cross-cultural norms of justice, equality and rights, and at the same time sensitive to local particularity’, an ethical position that she reiterates in her later work (Nussbaum 2019). In what follows I suggest that such ‘embedded cosmopolitanism’ requires inclusive dialogue and empathetic care.

**Cosmopolitan-informed dialogue**

Seeking to mitigate the tensions between cosmopolitan notions of justice and sensitivity to particular cultures and spheres of belonging requires ethically informed dialogue across intersectional boundaries. However, such cosmopolitan dialogue should not privilege powerful voices over those unheard. Insightful here is Eduardo Mendieta’s call for a cosmopolitanism that is ‘enlightened, reflective and rooted’ and ‘dialogical’, expressed ‘through local cosmopolitan iterations’ (Mendieta 2009, 255). This requires making ‘audible and visible the voices of those local histories … that have been rendered subaltern and silent’ and challenging the ‘reason of imperial and global designs that have resulted in so much inequality and suffering’ (2009, 251). Mendieta’s version of cosmopolitanism, then, is both decolonial and self-reflective enough to take account for people’s varied lived experiences.

Being sensitive to such lived experiences sits at the centre of feminist scholarship on ethical obligation and care, in particular the assumption that ethical obligation arises
within actual human encounters that include inclusive dialogue (Sylvester 1994; Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell 2020) and the act of listening to marginalized voices (Robinson 2011), rather than abstract moral reasoning. This requires ‘empathetic cooperation’ which refers to the ‘process of positional slippage that occurs when one listens seriously to the concerns, fears and agendas of those one is unaccustomed to hearing’ (Sylvester 1994, 317), not least Indigenous communities. Below I illustrate the relevance of these ideas in the context of WH.

**The ethics of WH – towards an embodied cosmopolitanism?**

The ethics and politics of WH are couched within cosmopolitan language (Colwell and Joy 2015; Gillman 2010). In particular, they rest on the idea that some forms of heritage are ‘of outstanding universal value to humanity’ and should ‘be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy’ (UNESCO n.d.-a). That ‘global protection ambition’ embraces both intangible and tangible heritage and cultural property (Meskell and Van Damme 2008). The international community is obliged to ‘participate in the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value’ and to ‘co-operate’ to this end (UNESCO 1972). Thus, heritage is a value that should be preserved for the benefit of humanity at large. However, the WH convention does not provide much guidance on how to translate this cosmopolitan ambition into embodied local practices of WH. A key contention here is that the cosmopolitan value of a particular WH site is subject to the ethical and political interpretations and specificities of the communities that live and work within or around it or those charged with its management.

Indeed, a range of specific voices, values and interests surround the ethics and politics of WH (Gillman 2010; Colwell and Joy 2015; Winter 2015), affecting its practical application locally. While some actors might treat a particular site as a local articulation of cosmopolitan values, others might view it as their ancestral home, carrying historical value and symbolism across generations, as the case of Laponia illustrates. In this context, Colwell and Joy (2015, 113) argue that, though the ethics of WH is ‘most closely identified with a cosmopolitan project of universal human rights … this universalism is immediately brought into conversation with different forms of relativism’. Hence, the cosmopolitan logic underlying WH is not pure but located within competing values and interests, with western norms and knowledge often being privileged over those of other parts of the world (Colwell and Joy 2015). This is visible in the composition of the WH list, with 47.19% of the heritage sites and objects on the list being located in Europe (UNESCO n.d.-d). This, however, does not mean that a cosmopolitan analysis of WH is redundant – as proposed above it demands sensitivity to the prevalence of embodied experiences, local narratives and competing interpretations of what constitutes universal values and how to best protect them. This also requires engaging in the act of listening to the voices of Indigenous and local people living in close proximity to a WH site and employing care and empathy in such dialogical relations (Robinson 2011).

Meanwhile, numerous WH sites are defined by tension and longstanding disputes over land rights and ownership and in some cases warfare, militarization and securitization (Head 2012). Despite this, WH is often upheld as a productive mode of conflict resolution, fostering peace and a cosmopolitan sense of community across nations. Below I briefly
illustrate this complexity through a set of reflections on the distinctiveness of the Laponia WH site.

The WH site of Laponia

Laponia became a WH site in 1996, stretching across 94,000 km², embracing forests, mountains and bogland and hosting several natural parks and nine Sámi villages (Sameby). It is located in Sápmi – a geographical area populated by Indigenous Sámi people that stretches across the Kola Peninsula in Russia and the northern parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway. The authenticity of the Laponia site is ensured by ‘the continuing Saami practice of reindeer herding and the seasonal movement of the herd’ (UNESCO n.d.-c). Here, UNESCO notes that it is ‘the largest area in the world (and one of the last) with an ancestral way of life based on the seasonal movement of livestock. Every summer, the Saami lead their huge herds of reindeer towards the mountains through a natural landscape hitherto preserved’ (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2020). Thus, the WH designation of Laponia is based on practices, cultural heritage and traditions that are tied to the land and Sámi people’s attachment to the site (Baer 2005). However, it does not follow that Sámi voices on the status of Laponia are privileged over those of other voices. For example, Sámi communities continuously object to the possible establishment of a mine at Gállok near Laponia, noting that it is likely to harm the practice of reindeer herding, and, as such, the authenticity of the WH site. However, the ruling Social Democratic party has not been particularly attentive to the distinct concerns of Sámi communities, leaving them waiting for a final decision on whether the mine at Gállok will go ahead or not.

Thus, the case of Laponia illustrates prevalent tension between statist and mining interests and Indigenous claims for land rights as well as the cosmopolitan underpinnings of WH (Reimerson 2016; Laponia 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). While cosmopolitan theory can capture the ethical foundations of WH, it is less applicable to the study of the tensions, embodied lived experiences and the silences that prevail at specific WH sites. Cosmopolitanism then needs to be paired with feminist insights into the importance of listening to the voices of the unheard and staying attentive to marginalized knowledge (Sylvester 1994; Benhabib 1997; Robinson 2011; Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell 2018, 2020). In line with this position, my narrative analysis below seeks to uncover some of the voices and ethical positions of Sámi people living and working at the Laponia WH site. Such an approach offers opportunities to think ‘differently about global or transnational justice’ (Ivison 2006, 120–121) and ensuring that cosmopolitan theory stays attentive to local narratives and embodied experiences.

A narrative approach to the study of the WH site of Laponia

Here, I outline my narrative approach, mainly drawing upon feminist techniques (Wibben 2011). This enables me to address the research question of whether the ethics of WH obscure local disputes and stories that sometimes collide with cosmopolitan understandings of protection and peaceful co-existence. Narratives are key to national and subnational story telling since ‘they are a primary way by which we make sense of the world around us, produce meanings, articulate intentions, and legitimize actions’ (Wibben
They are also ‘constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by casual emplotment’ (Somers 1994, 616). Moreover, narratives are political in that they enable and disable certain representations and restrict what meanings can be attached to specific stories (Wibben 2011, 43). Some narratives become normalized and accepted, while others are marginalized (Wibben 2011, 64). Moreover, narratives co-exist with other stories, some of which contest the prevalent ‘master-narrative’ (Wibben 2011, 65). By staying attentive to counter-narratives, we can get closer to the stories ‘associated with Indigenous voices in settler-colonial contexts’ and seek ‘to denaturalize this dehumanization intrinsic to colonial and settler-colonial logics and all the violences arising from them’ (Runyan 2018, 3). Sometimes narratives leave out events, sentiments and injustices. Counter-narratives that contest the master-narrative bring to light what has been left out (Wibben 2011, 1).

Employing a narrative approach allows me to identify multiple storylines about Laponia and the extraction industry located in its vicinity. The analysis below commences by uncovering the discursive themes that prevail in the Swedish official self-narrative as a ‘good state’ and a mining nation. However, that official story has until recently skipped over Sweden’s historical oppression of Indigenous communities. Informed by the dialogical ethical position developed above the analysis seeks to bring attention to Sámi narratives on Gállok and the WH heritage site of Laponia – interventions that help to challenge Sweden’s self-narrative as a ‘good state’.

The analysis unpacks the contents of a range of materials including discursive interventions by the Swedish state, the extraction industry and Sámi authors and activists as well as scholarly accounts of engagements with the history and contemporary situation of Sámi communities in Sweden. I reference Swedish official documentation and statements, interventions by the mining industry, material published and written by Sámi organizations and Sámi activists. However, before proceeding I wish to acknowledge my position within the study. I am not of Indigenous origin and lack personal insight into the injustices that Sámi communities have experienced throughout history. Nonetheless, I hope that my contribution can shed light on silences in the Swedish self-narrative as well as the tensions that surround local applications of WH at Laponia.

**Challenging Sweden’s good state self-narrative – a history of colonization and mining**

Sweden’s self-narrative is that of a ‘good state’ (Lawler 2013) committed to the rights and security of the members of Swedish political community and those of other nations. Traditionally, that sense of obligation rests on a cosmopolitan-informed commitment to social democratic internationalism, support for human rights, peace building, international law and institutions as well as high levels of overseas development assistance. Relevant here is Sweden’s longstanding support for international law and UN activism (Bergman Rosamond 2020), having recently held a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and, increased its financial support for UNESCO (Regeringskansliet 2018).

However, constructions of Sweden’s ‘good state’ self-narrative rarely have problematized its colonization of Sápmi (Salminen 2018; Lawrence and Mortiz 2019, 1; Bergman Rosamond 2020) or its implicit involvement in European colonialism (Keskinen et al. 2009). Rather the story about Sweden has been told through the lens of the non-
Indigenous majority population (Salminen 2018), focusing on its dual ethical commitment to the rights and security of citizens and non-citizens alike (Bergman 2007), including support for Indigenous justice globally (Ojala 2020). Indeed, the ‘contested issue’ (Ojala 2020, 160) of Swedish colonization of Sápmi is not something that most Swedes have thoroughgoing knowledge of (164). And if they do, there is a tendency to assume that Swedish colonial practices were somehow ‘kinder’ (165) than those employed by other nations. Here, Össbo and Lantto note that ‘Sweden can be said to have adopted “the blue water thesis”, according to which “colonialism happens across oceans and is not something that occurs within the perceived borders of the state”’ (2011, 327). The counter-narrative to Sweden’s good state self-narrative is that which emerges from the historical context of the Swedish colonization of Sámi people. However, as I will show below, being a mining nation, is not easily reconcilable with the obligations that emerge from hosting a UNESCO-endorsed WH site. While UNESCO views Laponia as significant to ‘all the peoples of the world’ (UNESCO 1972; Laponia 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), Sweden, in its capacity as the hosting state, has a special responsibility to protect and preserve its uniqueness. Next, I turn to Sweden as a mining nation with particular emphasis on the Gállok extraction project.

**Mining**

Sweden produces 90% of the European Union’s (EU) total production of iron ore (Lawrence and Mortiz 2019). Mining has often been upheld as a generator of economic development in northern Sweden (Lawrence and Åhrén 2016), creating jobs, raising tax revenues and bringing economic activity to densely populated regions (Persson, Harnesk, and Islar 2017). Being a mining nation is a central feature of Sweden’s narration of its industrial self-identity. For example, former Conservative Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt stated in 2012 that: ‘our mining industry and our iron ore is for us what oil is for Norwegians. An amazing wealth, an opportunity to build future investments, future development and we think that it is important for us to help and reinforce this in different ways’ (cited in Persson, Harnesk, and Islar 2017, 23). This message was reiterated by the Red-Green coalition government in 2019 which noted that ‘Swedish mining and mineral extraction is of great importance for Sweden as a nation, both from a regional and local perspective, and beyond Sweden’s borders. It relates to supply of natural resources, jobs, welfare and green adaptation’ (Regeringskansliet 2019, own translation). Being a mining nation is hard wired into Swedish political culture and nation branding. It is hardly surprising then that the Swedish state has tended to contribute to the establishment of a solid business culture for mining firms, through ‘pro-mining policies, low mineral taxation, and investments in mining-related infrastructure’ (Spangen et al. 2015, 7). Part of this business logic has been to privilege the extraction of minerals over Sámi people’s land rights. That logic is undergirded by commercial interests that emphasize the economic prosperity and wellbeing of national political community, rather than the distinct land rights and justice claims of Sámi people. This tendency is especially visible in the dispute over the Gállok Iron Deposit near Laponia.

Extraction has taken place in the vicinity of Laponia since the late seventeenth century (Spangen et al. 2015). The Gállok Iron Deposit is located near Laponia, 40 km from Jokkmokk municipality and Sámi villages Jåhkågasska and Sirges, in northern Sweden. It is one
of the biggest iron ore deposits in Sweden and, therefore, in Europe. It is viewed by the state and local non-Sámi communities as a future source of employment and of national, social and economic development. Sámi reindeer herding communities, however, highlight the negative impact that the expansion of the extraction industry near Laponia and several Sámi villages will have on their livelihood (Persson, Harnesk, and Islar 2017; Lawrence and Mortiz 2019). For Sámi reindeer herders, access to land is a condition for the continuity of their traditions and cultural identity. However, a future establishment of a mine at Gállok endangers reindeer herding by preventing the animals from grazing in the area (Mustonen and Syrjämäki 2013).

Nonetheless, British mineral extraction company Beowulf Mining was awarded exploration concessions to evaluate the significance of the iron ore deposit (through drilling) in 2006, though it is still awaiting a final decision by the Swedish government whether it will be allowed to start the mining process. Nonetheless, in March 2022, the Swedish government signalled its hitherto strongest intention to grant Beowulf Mining the right to extract iron ore, providing that the company is able to finance such extraction and that there will be no environmental impact on the area bordering on the mine.

The former British CEO of the company has described the Gállok Iron Deposit as a location of ‘superb drilling results’ (Sinclair-Poulton 2012), disregarding its location near the WH site of Laponia and Sámi territories. Rather, Beowulf Mining views the site as ‘a quality magnetite iron ore deposit’ and ‘a real opportunity to transform Jokkmokk’, creating employment and generating tax revenues that will help to ‘develop and sustain public services and infrastructure’ (Beowulf Mining 2017). Beowulf views itself as a corporate stakeholder able to ensure Sweden’s ‘leading position as the single largest iron ore producer in Europe’ (Beowulf Mining 2017). That corporate vision is in line with Sweden’s self-narration as the EU’s leading mining and mineral nation, committed to green energy and sustainability (Regeringskansliet 2013, 2019). It is also a vision that sits comfortably with the Social Democrat led town council of Jokkmokk, a body that has welcomed the establishment of a future mine at Gállok, emphasizing the jobs and prosperity that it would bring to local people (Sameradion 2018). Meanwhile, Sámi communities and environmental protest movements object to the establishment of Gállok near Laponia, holding frequent protests and strikes at the site (Persson, Harnesk, and Islar 2017, 20).

While the Gállok Iron Deposit is not located within the WH site itself, extraction in its vicinity is likely to have destructive effects on its universal outstanding value as designated by WH, in particular by jeopardizing the opportunities for Sámi reindeer herders to use the land (Davidson and Djurberg 2017). Without the presence of Sámi culture and reindeer herding the character of the Laponia would significantly change (Mustonen and Syrjämäki 2013). Here, the Chair and General Secretary of the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO notes that it is not ‘UNESCO that has promised to protect Laponia, it is Sweden’ (Davidson and Djurberg 2017). The failure to do so raises questions about Sweden’s commitment to the future of the site. The Swedish Environmental Protection Board and the Swedish National Heritage Board (2013) have noted that the establishment of a mine would challenge the WH status of Laponia. The two agencies also take issue with the position of Beowulf Mining that the geographical distance between the WH site and Gállok is so vast that future extraction would not impact on the WH site. Rather, they contend that the establishment of a mine will damage the future of reindeer herding at the site of Laponia. This is also the position of the Laponia management centre,
composed of Sámi and other local representatives, which notes that ‘without the Sámi community’s areas lying outside Laponia there would be no functioning reindeer industry in the World Heritage Site’ (Laponia 2020c). The likely impact of mining on Laponia led the Swedish government to consult UNESCO in 2020, with the latter subsequently undertaking an enquiry on the matter. In 2021, the preliminary results of that enquiry were communicated. UNESCO’s position is that mining is likely to have adverse effects on the uniqueness of Laponia and reindeer herding (Sveriges Radio 2020). This assessment has been welcomed by Sámi communities in Jokkmokk who view it as a victory and a way of preventing the Swedish state from granting Beowulf mining rights. Next, I reflect on Sweden’s oppression of Sámi communities historically, an aspect of Swedish history that rarely figures in its self-imagination. I then unpack Sámi narratives on Laponia and Gállok to illustrate the tensions and multiple voices that surround local applications of the ethics and politics of WH.

Background and the Sámi narratives on Laponia

The Sámi people are descendants of people who lived in Sweden during the Stone Age, long before the boundaries of the Swedish state were settled (Sámediggi and Ministry of Agriculture 2005). Thus, the presence of Sámi people in the North of Sweden predates the formation of the Swedish state. The Sámi Parliament notes that ‘the Sámi are not immigrants, having lived in their settled areas long before the borders were drawn for today’s nations’ (Samediggi 2020c). From the sixteenth century onwards, the Swedish crown sought to exercise its sovereign power over the Sámi in more forceful ways. After 1553, the Sámi people were obliged to pay tax to the Swedish crown and, in 1606, an elaborate taxation system was imposed on the Sámi (Samediggi 2020b). In the early seventeenth century, the Swedish state embarked on a Christianization of Sámi people to assimilate them into Swedish society. Before the seventeenth century, there was little interest among non-Sámi people to relocate to the North of Sweden. However, the discovery of silver in Nasafjäll in 1634 required labour and more people moved north or were forced to do so (Sámediggi and Ministry of Agriculture 2005).

In 1673, the Lappmark Proclamation was introduced, promising tax exemption to settlers who were prepared to move to the North for 15 years (2005). However, they were not allowed to interfere with Sámi trade or colonize their land, although those promises were not kept, with many Sámi people being forced off their land. However, in 1749, a new piece of legislation was introduced – the Lappmark Regulation, which stipulated that the settler population should focus on farming and refrain from encroaching on Sámi hunting and herding (Samer 2020a, 2020b). That period also saw dispossession of Sámi people’s land as a result of settlers being granted land ownership for the purpose of farming.

The nineteenth century was defined by Sweden’s colonization of Sápmi as part of the country’s industrial expansion in the North (Samer 2020b), leading to further discrimination and forceful displacement. In 1886, the Reindeer Grazing Act was introduced which differentiated between nomadic reindeer herding Sámi people, deemed to be more authentic, and those who lacked such credentials. The Sámi herders were kept separate from the majority population to retain their ethnicity and cultural heritage, an approach of segregation that went under the label ‘Lapp shall remain Lapp’ policy.
That construction still creates tensions in Sámi politics with non-reindeer herders enjoying fewer rights than their reindeer herding counterparts. Meanwhile, a number of Sámi people abandoned reindeer herding in the 1930s due to forceful displacement and famine (Labba 2020). The children of reindeer herders were displaced and sent to nomad schools, a practice of segregation that was further reinforced by the Nomad School Act of 1913. In those schools, the pupils were forced to speak Swedish rather than Sámi. However, the curriculum aimed to keep them apart from the majority population upon leaving school (Lawrence and Mörkenstam 2016; Mörkenstam, Josefsen, and Nilsson 2016).

Sweden engaged in racist practices of eugenics until the 1940s. During the 1930s, scientists at the Swedish State Institute of Racial Biology at Uppsala University documented racial variations between Sámi people and the majority population. Such practices have been portrayed in popular culture with the film Sameblood showing how Sámi people’s facial features and the shape of their heads were measured to scientifically prove their inferiority (Sameblood 2016). However, after World War II, new pieces of legislation were introduced and international treaties were signed by Sweden. In 1977, the Sámi were granted Indigenous status in Swedish law and, in 1993, the Sámi parliament was established.

Being an advocate of human rights globally, Sweden also signed the UN Convenant on Civil and Politic Rights adopted in 1966 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007. Despite being ‘praised for its Indigenous’ politics internationally (Mörkenstam 2019, 1720), Sweden has not ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (169) adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1989. The inconsistency between Sweden’s support for international law and Indigenous justice beyond borders and its failure to sign and implement the convention at home is plain to see. Nonetheless, in 2019, the Swedish government announced its commitment to setting up a truth and reconciliation process to shed light on the injustices Sámi people have experienced historically and in and through settler-colonial processes.

The truth and reconciliation process can be said to be an attempt to promote dialogue between the Swedish state and Sámi people through the uncovering of Indigenous stories of suffering. However, it is unclear whether this dialogue will involve a self-assessment of Sweden’s colonization of Sápmi. Sweden has not as yet offered a formal apology for its oppression of Sámi communities, though the Swedish Church offered such an apology in 2021. The absence of an apology prevents a reconciliatory, truthful and ethical dialogue between the Swedish state and Sámi communities. For that to happen Sweden needs to acknowledge its racialized wrongdoings, past and present, to ‘create real space for new beginnings’, in line with transitional forms of justice (Palmer and Watene 2018, 133–134). Moreover, the majority population ‘needs to be reeducated’ about the oppression of Indigenous people (Koggel 2018, 242). Hence, Sweden’s good state self-narrative has to recognize and incorporate the lived historical experiences of Sámi people. While more room is dedicated to Sámi counter-narratives in mainstream popular culture and media, not least the tensions surrounding Gállok (Bergman Rosamond 2020), this has not as yet led to an official ‘reeducation’ of the Swedish majority population (Koggel
Next, I turn to Sámi narratives on Laponia in an effort to illustrate the tensions that prevail at the WH site.

**Sámi narratives on Laponia**

While multiple themes prevail in Sámi narratives on Laponia, two have been selected here, first, its significance for Sámi culture, land rights and co-determination, and, second, as a site of national and international contestation. For Sámi people living in the northern Swedish municipalities of Jokkmokk and Gällivare, ‘Laponia is the country where they live and where their ancestors existed and where the reindeer graze’, it is also the territory they ‘inhabited and administered for thousands of years’ (Mijá ednam 2017).

Sámi heritage and traditions are linked to reindeer herding, which is both a source of income and a historical shaper of Sámi identity. The importance of reindeer herding is highlighted in a letter to UNESCO, written by representatives of Sámi villages, in which they note that ‘once mining and exploitations commence, the Sámi, the Indigenous people that live and work in the Laponian Area, face the prospect of losing forever the means to carry out traditional reindeer herding’ (Lundberg et al. 2013). Beowulf Mining is seen as a hostile other that will jeopardize Sámi traditions, livelihood and land rights and by extension the WH site itself (Sveriges Radio 2020). The spiritual relevance of Laponia is also highlighted in Sámi contestations of mining (Samediggi 2020b). In the words of the Sámi Parliament (2009, 31), ‘Sámi cultural heritage is also a landscape of the mind, full of memories, myths and oral traditions, sometimes with religious overtone. The Sámi names for terrains, places, mountains and lakes are also part of the Sámi cultural environment’. That discourse is often represented in Sámi popular culture – with Sámi singer Sofia Jannok’s lyrics being instructive here; ‘this is my home, this is my heaven, this is the earth where I belong and if you want to ruin it all with big wounds in the mountains then you’re not worthy of listening to this song’ (Jannok 2016). While there are provisions in Swedish law that protect reindeer herding, Sámi people do not own the land they inhabit, which complicates their relations with the Swedish state, local councils and the extraction industry (Koivurova et al. 2015). That relationship is further complicated by the majority population’s tendency to privilege their economic interests over Sámi land rights.

Nonetheless, Sámi villages have been granted co-determination in the running of Laponia and have a majority of the seats on the Laponiatjuottjudus – a non-profit organisation that co-manages the site. Laponiatjuottjudus is composed of nine Sámi villages, the County Administrative Board of Norrbotten, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the municipalities of Gällivare and Jokkmokk (Regeringskansliet 2011, 840). The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has delegated the responsibility to manage the national parks and nature reserves of Laponia to the Laponiatjottjudus. The latter is also charged with the task of spreading knowledge about the universal values that undergird the site’s inscription on the WH list. Henrik Blind (2017), the Sámi head of the Green Party in the North of Sweden, notes that Sámi people’s participation in the running of Laponia enables self-determination and local influence, and, a deeper decolonized ‘understanding of the responsibility that Sweden as a nation has for the global values that require protection from exploitation to benefit coming generations'
… it provides clarity and ensures that the state can not run away from such responsibility’. Thus, the management of Laponia could be viewed as an example of ‘world heritage policy beyond the finished product of charters and conventions’ with co-determination ensuring that embodied knowledge and the experiences of Indigenous people are fully considered (James and Winter 2017, 49). Mikael Teilus (2020, 1), a member of the Sámi Council Mija Edas, notes that ‘the world heritage site cannot be run without the presence of Sámi people, but we also feel that the authorities show more respect for us and our knowledge. It is a rectification to be an equal stakeholder’. The co-running of the WH site, however, is not uncontroversial with the Jokkmokk municipality, dominated by the local Social Democratic Party, calling for less Sámi influence in the running of Laponia, and objecting to what they perceive as Sámi communities’ tendency to privilege land rights over tourism at the WH site (Norrbottenskuriren 2018, own translation). This is illustrative of the tensions that surround the site, with the Jokkmokk municipality seemingly dismissing the special attachment that Sámi communities have to the land. It is also indicative of the difficulties involved in local applications of the cosmopolitan values of WH, with a number of actors viewing Laponia as a source of income primarily (Norrbottenskuriren 2018, own translation).

Nonetheless, the management of Laponia reflects Sámi quests for recognition of their culture, heritage, knowledge and self-determination (Mijá ednam 2017; Mikael Teilus 2020). Here, Green (2009, 19) notes that though ‘the involvement of national and international agencies in Indigenous affairs … might have detrimental effects on local/Indigenous peoples’ ability to influence local processes’ this does not have to be the case. Her study of Laponia shows that the co-management of the site has enhanced Sámi people’s sense of empowerment and strengthened ‘their ethno-political aspirations’ (Green 2009, 19; e.g. Grey and Kuokkanen 2019). Thus, ‘the World Heritage Convention can … serve, in certain circumstances, as a tool for Indigenous peoples to reclaim … right to self determination over their cultural heritage’ (Grey and Kuokkanen 2019).

However, Sámi self-determination has been increasingly challenged by the extraction industry. The current British CEO of Beowulf Mining Kurt Budge has noted that extraction at Gallok will not damage the Laponia WH site since the establishment of a mine, in his view, would increase the number of visitors to Laponia and ensure easy access to the site through infrastructural investments (Norrbottenskuriren 2017). As noted previously, this view is disputed by UNESCO and Indigenous communities. Budge’s predecessor Clive Sinclair-Poulton defined Gállok as an empty space, void of people, and, as such, disregarding Indigenous communities working and living in the area. At an event, he described Gállok as a tundra landscape and site of emptiness, without people and therefore available for extraction (YouTube 2014). In Sinclair-Poulton’s words: ‘one of the major questions I get is what are local people gonna go ahead and say about this project, and I show them this picture and say, what local people?’ (YouTube 2014). This mirrors traditional colonial settler practices and the conquering of wilderness without considering the land rights of Indigenous people.

To ensure the protection of their heritage and reindeer herding traditions, Sámi people contest the establishment of mining near Laponia, bringing their case to domestic and international audiences. The possible destruction of Laponia by the Gállok extraction project prevails in Sámi discourses (Samid Rikkasearvi 2020). Sámi representatives have questioned the exploration of ore at Gállok viewing it as a threat to the WH status of
Laponia. Here, the chair of the Sámi village Jåhkågasska tjellde notes that ‘for us it is unthinkable that the government would come to a decision that entails allowing extraction, both in terms of its impact on our rights to engage in reindeer herding and its significant impact on the world heritage site of Laponia’ (Länta cited in Samid Rikkasearvi 2020). Similarly, the Chair of the Sirges Sámi village notes that ‘the Sámi culture is alive and well within Laponia’ and that reindeer herding has created a ‘landscape full of life’ at the site (Kuhmunen cited in Samid Rikkasearvi 2020). The same message was communicated by Sámi reindeer herders at a global conference in 2017: ‘the Swedish government has a responsibility to protect reindeer herding and a living Sámi culture as one of the main values of the World Heritage. Reindeer herding in the Laponia area cannot function when grazing lands straight outside of Laponia are destroyed’ (World Reindeer Herders’ Congress 2017). By teaming up with reindeer herders from around the world, Sámi representatives seek transnational Indigenous support for their efforts to protect Laponia from commercial mining interests (Bergman Rosamond 2020).

Another example of Sámi contestation of the mining industry near Laponia is the ‘What Local People’ (Persson, Harnesk, and Islar 2017) initiative – a protest movement that contests Beowulf Mining’s mining rights at the Gállok site. While the movement does not specifically focus on the protection of Laponia, it is an example of Sámi contestation of corporate interests near the site. The What Local People movement notes that ‘all over the world, the mining industry threatens to destroy nature and culture with shortsighted industrial projects aimed only at maximizing company profits’ (What Local People 2019).

By appealing to international law and aligning themselves broadly with the cosmopolitan ambitions of UNESCO, Sámi people have contested the ambition of Beowulf and the Swedish government’s tardiness in deciding whether to grant the company extraction rights (Samid Rikkasearvi 2021). For example, in 2011, the Sámi Council presented a letter to Beowulf underlining the company’s duty to fulfil its obligations under international law, in relation to Indigenous people’s rights (London Mining Network 2012). Sámi activist Henrik Blind and Swedish parliamentarian Amanda Palmastierna (2021) emphasize in a jointly authored article that Sweden is obliged to honour international law and protect Laponia from destruction in accordance with the logics of WH, and in so doing ensure the protection of Indigenous rights at the site. They also highlight the significance of involving UNESCO in future discussions on Laponia. Thus, Sámi people’s appeals to international institutions and law help to legitimize their justice claims in relation to the Swedish state and the mining industry.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have explored whether the politics of WH, despite its peaceful and cosmopolitan ambitions, obscures local disputes and competing narratives. I have shown that though the ethics of WH is located within cosmopolitan notions of protection, the practical application of that logic is not straightforward. Indeed, stakeholders vary in their interpretation of the ethics of WH and how to translate cosmopolitan values into local practice.

I first outlined the key principles of cosmopolitanism and their relevance for studying WH, particularly by arguing that the theory needs to engage with people’s embodied experiences, and, as such, be more sensitive to previously unheard voices, in particular
Indigenous calls for justice and rights. This requires pairing cosmopolitan insights with feminist and dialogical ethical scholarship which emphasize the importance of inclusive and empathetic dialogue that takes account of marginalized voices.

In the second part of the article, I introduced my narrative approach, which enabled the identification of silences in Sweden’s good state narrative, not least its colonization of Sápmi, but also its tendency to privilege national mining interests over Indigenous justice claims. Thus, Sweden’s self-narrative is complex, embracing cosmopolitan global commitments, while failing to implement ILO 169 and considering the implications of its colonization of Sápmi. To bring nuance to the story about Sweden, I provided an analysis of Sámi narratives on Laponia, focusing on the latter’s significance for Indigenous culture, traditions, land rights and co-determination. The article also shed light on Sámi efforts to contest the Beowulf mining project by appealing to national and international actors and audiences. Indeed, Sámi peoples have appealed to UNESCO to add backing to the universal value of Laponia to protect the outstanding value of the site and as a way of protecting their land rights and cultural heritage.

The analysis demonstrated that the politics of WH, despite its justice-driven protection ambition, obscures storylines and ethical positions on the ground, some of which are inconsistent with the cosmopolitan ethics of WH. Laponia shows the significance of unpacking the conditions and ethical preferences of those living within and near a site as well as the power relations that undergird the location. Yet, the cosmopolitan logic of the politics of WH rests on the assumption that all WH sites have universal value regardless of where they are located. Through its inscription on the WH list Laponia is informed by that logic, but as the analysis showed, it is also defined by broader patterns of suppression of Indigenous rights. Thus, the translation of the cosmopolitan ambitions of WH into local practice is difficult and involves navigating the economic interests of the hosting state and local populations, the commercial interests of extraction firms, and the cultural and economic interests of Indigenous communities.

However, Sámi participation in the management of Laponia and its use of UNESCO’s expertise in relation to the Gállok project have provided new opportunities for Sámi people to assert their political voice and their rights vis-a-vis the Swedish government and the extraction industry (Green 2009; Grey and Kuokkanen 2019). This, in turn, has begun to shift the power relations that prevail in disputes over Laponia in favour of local Sámi activists. Thus, the study of Laponia provides fertile ground for investigations of the ability of Indigenous groups to articulate their experiences and lay claims to the universality that prevails in WH. By making cosmopolitanism more sensitive to marginalized voices such ethical tensions can be captured and the power logics of WH contested.

Notes

1. To be considered of outstanding universal value, a particular heritage needs to fulfil certain criteria including ‘being representative of “human creative genius”‘ and exhibiting ‘an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world’ (UNESCO n.d.-b).
2. UNESCO and its members are starting to show willingness to address the dominance of western ideas in determining what heritage and cultural property should be recognized (Colwell and Joy 2015, 113; e.g. Meskell and Van Damme 2008).

3. A Sameby is an administrative and financial geographically specific area that is responsible for organizing and managing reindeer herding.

4. While only 4600 people in Sweden out of a population of 10 million are engaged in reindeer herding (Samediggi 2020a), the legacy of that tradition is a feature of Sámi heritage and culture (Bergman Rosamond 2020).

5. In 2020, the Swedish Supreme Court (2020, 1) ruled in favour of the Sámi village Girjas, giving it the sole right to grant fishing and hunting licenses within its territory, a right that the Swedish state case now lacks. The Court ruling was informed by ILO 169, despite Sweden’s failure to ratify the convention.

6. There has been less attempt to involve the Sámi Council composed of Finland, Russia, Norway and Sweden in this advocacy work, despite that body’s commitment to Sámi rights and solidarity across Sápmi.

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