The Right to Heritage: UNESCO Cachet and Its Limits in non-Western Contexts

Ayse Seda Yuksel

University of Vienna

This paper examines the relationship between the commodification of nature and heritage-making in conflict-ridden southeastern Turkey. Based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2007 and 2014 in the region, this paper argues that heritage-making is a socially, politically, and institutionally mediated process that is subject to the commodification of nature and its objectification as an ecological commodity. As argued by several scholars, since the 1970s, nature has emerged as an accumulation strategy and has acquired an exchange value under the new conditions of created scarcity, which brought changes in its production and consumption (Katz, 1998, Smith 2006). Specific natural sites are turned into "new ecological commodities" and put under protection regimes through enclavisation. Heritage industry and its category of "cultural landscape" are located at the center of this new phase of intensified enclavisation via the concept of authenticity. Introduced in 1992, the "cultural landscape" category aimed to alleviate UNESCO funds' uneven distribution between the western and non-western states, which had been previously based on monuments and buildings. Yet, it has served to expand the UNESCO flagship and the hegemonic ideal that heritage would bring economic development through tourism and tourism-related activities.
Through a comparison of two WH applications in the region during the short-lived reconciliation period between the PKK and the Turkish state, this paper argues that heritage-making in the war-ridden Kurdish region in Turkey has become not only an economic resource that would animate local impoverished local economies in the eyes of the local actors but also a powerful political resource and a medium of communication (Graham 2002) that bring together various counter-hegemonic discourses on class, ecology, and ethnic identity. The discursive vortex (Kuymulu, 2013) of *right to nature* and *right to the city* has allowed the local actors to turn heritage sites into *translocal* ecological commodities that helped them to articulate their demands to broader discourses and political agendas. However, the case studies from southeast Turkey also show the limits of the World Heritage cachet and discussions that take heritage as a political resource implying a universal right. The asymmetrical urban warfare that had started months after the WH nomination processes shows that WH cachet is a locally bounded political resource.

- **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

  **Ayse Seda Yuksel** is a post-doctorate researcher at the University of Vienna, in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. She has done extensive fieldwork in the southeastern region in Turkey and has written extensively on state rescaling, urban entrepreneurialism, and contentious urban politics, city branding and media studies. Her recent publication is "Framing the Ethnic Conflict and the Concept of Terror: An Analysis of the Peace Process in Turkey" published in *Media and Politics in the Southern Mediterranean: Communicating Power in Transition After 2011*, edited by Roxane Farmanfarmaian.