Heritage as a ”common”, a conventional idea or a new conceptual framework for sustainability?

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Sustainable development enhances the emblematic articulation between global and local, as a conceptual frame structured by international conventions and policies, and by tangible actions implemented at a local level. There is currently a shift in this framework, however, with a growing emphasis set on the local level as a way to develop new theoretical as well as practical patterns for sustainability. Several reasons can explain this turn, and chiefly the inability of international bodies to take collective decisions concerning urgent environmental, economic and social issues (“failure” of the Copenhagen, Cancun and RIO +20 Summits). Against this context, an increasing number of movements raising from civil society are carrying out place-based, people-centered approaches, enhancing the values of localness and setting the citizens as key actors of the changes. Putting into practice bottom up approaches, local actors are inventing new governance methods based on values of sharing, exchanging, co-deciding, co-constructing. Among the alternative pathways, the spreading concept of "commons" appears as a means for preserving fundamental resources, promoting human values and enhancing human dignity, emancipation, collective responsibility and social wellbeing. Works examining how landscape, heritage, arts and culture can be considered as commons have been recently undertaken. This paper will analyze how heritage, widely acknowledged as a fundamental resource and a tool for sustainability, can be considered as a "common", and examine the advantages but also the limits of this theoretical framework applied to heritage. Considering heritage as a commons leads to a theoretical and practical shift, because it supposes community based governance, collective decisions and inhabitant’s participation. This means reconsidering definitions of heritage (not only famous UNESCO WHS but also everyday, ordinary heritage), and inventing new management tools where inhabitants – and not only "experts" – decide what elements are considered as heritage and must be preserved, and by what means.

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