



Inverting the Nation at the British Museum

Tiffany Jenkins

Independent sociologist

Abstract

In the last four decades the ideas and practices that the British Museum were historically associated with have come under critical scrutiny, which means the institution requires a new basis for legitimacy. As a consequence, over the last ten years in particular, the discourses about the role of the museum have gradually and subtly altered. In this paper, I suggest that there is a repositioning of the institution away from a surveyor of the world, to a facilitator of world cultures. New discourses position the institution as playing an important role in promoting tolerance amongst peoples in the present. One reason this is necessary, it is suggested, is due to a rise in nationalism. The British Museum was never a museum that presented a nationalist discourse. Instead it surveyed the world. However, the shift which identifies nationalism as a problem and the museum as a solution to it, is a significant departure that requires attention.

Introduction

In this article I argue that the legitimising discourses of the British Museum are in flux, that it is in search of new authority, and that one of emerging legitimising narratives is an implicit and at times explicit critique of nationalism. After an introductory discussion of the establishment of the Museum, I outline that the foundational principles have been subject to critical scrutiny. I look at how, in this critical context, the museum is shifting and adapting its role, and suggest that it is drawing on different rhetoric, discourse and practice in response. A number of initiatives have been launched over the last decade that have, I argue, attempted to repose the role of the organisation, in an attempt to re-legitimise it. The attempt at adaptation and new legitimising strategies, in part, inverts concepts of nationalism, which is an important development - both in relation to its history and the historical association of museums in the nineteenth century and their use in the project of building the nation.

Foundations

The British Museum was founded in 1753. Its origins lie in the collections and will of Hans Sloane, a physician, naturalist and collector who had assembled more than 71,000 objects, which he wanted to remain as a collection after his death. The first interesting point here is that the decision to have it in Britain and in London was not something that Sloane specified as necessary. Instead he suggested the locations of London, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, Paris and Madrid. He did however offer it to London first. After some prevarication it was accepted, paid for, and on 7 June 1753, an Act of Parliament established the British Museum. It was set up as a Trust. It was to be run independently of Parliament, and to have no entrance charges. And it was the first public institution to be called British. The current director, Neil MacGregor, suggests that the aim was to embody the values of the new state created in 1707, which had been challenged by the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 (MacGregor, N. 2004). Significantly it was a period when the country was learning to deal with a new parliament, whilst society was rethinking the place of the monarch, and the relationship between parliament and the citizenry. In this context, national meant belonging to neither church nor king, but to an emerging idea of the citizen

Despite being the 'British' Museum, this was not a museum that expressed a discourse on the nation itself, nor did British material culture or history figure strongly in the collection - if at all - for some time. This was in contrast to a number of national museums that played an explicit role in the promotion of national identity, such as those in Prague and Budapest or the Louvre (MacGregor, A. 1998). There is a debate as to why a British identity was muted in the discourses and collections of the institution, centring on disagreements over questions of political stability and instability). Arthur MacGregor suggests that the insular character and comparative political stability of Britain may have attenuated the demands of nationalism and that as a consequence the institution did not collect artefacts of a British nature (MacGregor, A. 1998). Wingfield, on the other hand, posits that this absence of nationalism cannot account for the significant absence of British material in the collection. Wingfield suggests that whilst the British Museum did not present a national narrative, it presented a discourse of 'civilisation', a discourse that is linked to particular histories. The Museum was a surveyor of other cultures, linked to the relationship of Britain to parts of the world through trade, colonisation and imperialism (Whitehead, 2011).

Thus, in marked contrast to other national museums, the idea of Britishness was implicit rather than explicit. The British Museum was a national museum which implicitly, through its architecture, presentation of objects and position in relation to the British state, helped to make the nation's importance visible. It expressed, in the words of Norbert Elias, 'the sum of the national self-image' a confident, self-assurance about Britain's place in the world (1939: 5).

How things have changed

The British Museum was associated with ideas and practices which have come under critical scrutiny which means that the institution requires a new basis for legitimacy. Broadly, a legitimation deficit arises when older sources of justification for institutions are undermined and eroded (Habermas 1987). In what follows, I briefly describe the shifts that have led rise to a questioning of the foundational ideals of the institution.

In the past 40 years in particular, the cultural authority of the museum has undergone considerable scrutiny and a number of criticisms, which have resulted in the destabilization of its legitimacy. A number of overlapping social and intellectual shifts have resulted in significant and widespread questioning of the purpose of the museum, which has weakened its traditional sources of justification (Jenkins, 2010). The social theorist Zygmunt Bauman explains that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the time of the emergence of the modern museum, was a time when men of knowledge had authority that could be described as legislative (Bauman 1987; 1992). This intellectual climate underpinned the formation of the modern state and official institutions of culture, including education and the early public museums. In the present period, however, Bauman argues that the role for men of knowledge as legislators of meaning has weakened. They no longer - securely - hold legislative authority or the ability to define meaning and outline judgements. As the state's reliance on culture for the reproduction of its power diminished, market forces rose to challenge their autonomy. Bauman describes a clash of interests between philosophers and aestheticians, and emerging market-orientated intellectuals where the production of culture serves the market and their role shifted from being 'legislators' to 'interpreters' with the transition from modernity to post-modernity

The central tenets of the Enlightenment, which informed the remit of the museum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have been called into question (Foster, 1985; Bennett, 1996). While the principles of the Enlightenment were always critiqued, a number of intellectual trends since the late 1960s, in particular: postmodernism, cultural theory, and postcolonial theory, have theoretically deconstructed its premises, thus profoundly challenging claims about truth, and the idea of the museum as a distinct realm removed from social and political forces (Furedi, 2004). These critical ideas have impacted upon museology and, I would suggest, practitioners; if to differing degrees. Until the 1980s, most literature on museums was devoted to reports of exhibitions, discussion about equipment and histories. There was some examination of the social and educational role of museums, but this was limited. This changed in the 1980s, when a body of work emerged that criticized the idea that museums were value-free and argued that they are inherently and unavoidably political (Merriman 1991). The development of museums in Western societies, it has come to be argued by a wide group of museologists and practitioners, occurred in specific historical circumstances and actively supports the dominant classes, maintaining the status quo as natural (See, for instance, Duncan and Wallach, 1980). One response was to

critically engage with the old institution and forge a more socially useful role for it, as illustrated when, towards the end of the 1980s, a group of scholars and museum professionals published *The New Museology* (Vergo 1989), a collection of essays that aimed to develop new critical theory on museums and to reconsider the social role of museums. *The New Museology* recommended that the study of museums and professional work should adopt a greater degree of self-awareness and questioning of the methods employed, as well as the purpose and context of the institutions. Overall, as the historian Daniel Sherman and the art historian Irit Rogoff describe, 'a broad range of critical analyses have converged on the museum, unmasking the structures, rituals, and procedures by which the relations between objectives, bodies of knowledge and processes of ideological persuasion are enacted.' (1994: ix–v).

Other social shifts have also played a role in shaping a new social and cultural context for the British Museum. Since the Second World War the nationalist project has been firmly interrogated. Decolonisation has reduced the British Empire and prompted by its decline questions have been raised about Britishness. The influence of post-colonial thinking has severely impacted on institutions associated with this period of history. As a consequence of these historical events and the development of these intellectual theories, the pursuit of knowledge, culture and science – the work of museums – have come to be viewed not as universal or objective, but as influenced by the prejudices of European cultures. For example, writing in her book *Making Representations: museums in the Post-Colonial Era*, the theorist Moira Simpson argues that museums' origins were implicated in colonialism, continue to be 'inextricably enmeshed' and need to move away from this model. (Simpson 1996: 1)

Furthermore, the political structure of the British Isles, itself made up of four different kingdoms, is increasingly unstable. A referendum, planned for 2014, will consider the Independence for Scotland, and it is possible that the United Kingdom as it is today may cease to exist – additionally exacerbating the need to ask the question of what it means to be 'British'.

The British Museum has also been a target of particular criticism, but it had, up until the late 1990s, been able to withstand it, I would suggest, due to its significant size and history. Under the last government, however, it fell out of favour with the British political elite. Remarkably, and in contrast to traditional practice, the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, did not visit the institution. The New Labour party had symbolically distanced themselves from British history and the past. I would also suggest that these critical questions have begun to have an impact on this institution, not just because of external pressure, but also due to the arrival of a new generation of curators schooled in critical thinking, and the new museology who are involved in the life of the institution, and reshaping it from within. The question that is raised in this context is that given the questioned status of foundational principles associated with the pursuit of knowledge and the notion of Britishness, how can the museum continue to operate with credibility?

How the museum is adapting – from universal to encyclopedic

Over the last ten years, especially since the new director – Neil MacGregor – took over in 2002, the discourse about the role of the museum has gradually and subtly altered. It is possible to identify a repositioning of the institution away from a surveyor of the world, to a facilitator of world cultures, and a role in promoting tolerance amongst peoples in the present; one reason this is necessary, it is implied, is due to a rise in nationalism or battles fought along the lines of ethnic

identity. Amongst the new strategies is a programme of loans; one in particular has been forefronted, that of the *Cyrus Cylinder* to the National Museum of Iran in Tehran. In the press release about this loan the Museum stressed the independence of the institution from the national government, the multiplicity of meanings of the cylinder and, crucially, the essential role the loan and the object could play in contributing to: ‘a better relationship based on dialogue, tolerance and understanding.’(BM, 2010). The discourse I want to highlight here is one of the role the institution can play in complicating concepts of identity and in the promotion of tolerance.

Another example of this is the shift in the discourse that has long characterised the museum as universal to the term *encyclopaedic*. In 2002 a group of museum directors issued the *Declaration on the Importance & Value of Universal Museums*. It defended the role of the museum as a space in which to understand artefacts from different cultures and time, and argued that they should not be judged by their practices in the long distant past, practices that should be appreciated as the product of different sensitivities and values. Significantly, although the British Museum was not among the original signatories, the declaration was circulated through the British Museum press office. It was seen as a call to arms against repatriation and was immediately subjected to critical scrutiny (O’Neill 2004, Curtis 2006).

Since then, the Museum is less frequently formally referred to as a ‘universal museum’, opting, for example in their publicity for touring exhibitions, for ‘A museum of the world for the world’ or an ‘encyclopaedic museum’ as a description. To qualify; the transition from one to the other has been gradual and you can still find examples of a universal discourse. Further, I am not suggesting that encyclopaedic was not used before – it was. As Eva Schultz has shown, one of the earliest treatises, compiled in the 1560s by Samuel Quiccheberg - a Flemish physician, made reference to the encyclopaedic framework within which scholarly collecting should be conducted (1992). Increasingly, however the museum is described as promoting tolerance in a difficult and divided world, and references to any universal discourse are dropped. Writing in the national newspaper *The Guardian*, the director, for instance, argues that the display of objects allows the visitor to address ‘questions of contemporary politics and international relations.’ And that the BM in particular encourages that because it is a ‘collection that embraces the whole world allows you to consider the whole world.’ (MacGregor, N. 2004) With this shift one finds references to the promotion of tolerance and understanding in the present as the purpose of the institution. Take for example, the introduction by the director, to *Enlightenment Discovering the world in the Eighteenth Century*, referring to the changes in outlook and practice, such as the moving of collections to other institutions, of the institution over time: ‘[...] it has surrendered its eighteenth-century definition of universality, it has developed a new identity as a collection of the cultures of the world, ancient and modern.’ He continues to elaborate on the same point but in relation to the public – stating that it has changed; broadened and diversified:

The comparatively small number of people who have lived in London and visited its displays in the late eighteenth century have been replaced by the millions who now come every year. That new audience is truly world-wide, both because they come from all over the world and because they include the increasingly cosmopolitan population of London and Britain as a whole. (MacGregor, N. 2003 : 6)

The British Museum is ‘a museum of the world, for the world.’ Neil MacGregor states. Indeed, a related narrative holds that contemporary geopolitical factors provide the institution with a more vital and relevant role to play in the contemporary period. MacGregor writes: ‘As the

world becomes more interdependent and more tightly linked, it is more and more essential to have a place where the interlocking of stories of humanity can be seen and explored.' (MacGregor, N. 2003: 3)

The term *encyclopedic* is less charged than that of *universal*, which is too associated with a period in which the institution and the arts were not seen as political - in the sense of reinforcing the social order in the service of elites but as part of a separate sphere of society. Although the British Museum was never an explicitly national museum in terms of its frame of reference, and has always distanced itself from any type of nationalist discourse, it is significant to see that today it is further distancing the institution from the discourse of nationalism; that it is positioning the institution as operating in opposition to, and as a critique of, a perceived rising nationalism in broader society. However, paradoxically, this discourse suggests a more explicitly political role for the institution.

Another major museum director – James Cuno, formerly of the Chicago Institute of Art, now CEO of the Getty, is developing a similar narrative more forcefully: the encyclopaedic museum is a space to contest problematic nationalism, suggesting also that nationalism is on the rise (see Cuno, 2008). As James Cuno writes in his latest book, *Museum Matters*:

This I hold to be the promise of the encyclopaedic museums: that as liberal, cosmopolitan institutions, they encourage identification with others in the world, a shared sense of being human, of having in every meaningful way a common history, with a common future not only *at stake* but increasingly, in an age of resurgent nationalism and sectarian violence, *at risk*. (Cuno, 2011: 7)

Here, in this approach, it is possible to identify an inversion, even a critique of nationalism, in an emerging discourse that seeks to legitimise museum institutions, and those named as encyclopaedic. In the contemporary period there is an attempt to re-authorise the Museum by positioning the institution as a vital space to address political issues – in particular essentialised identities and intolerance. It is implicitly and, at times, explicitly, a critique of nationalism.

In closing, there are a number of questions to raise in relation to these observations, for further reflection. Primarily, will it work? Will it contribute to furthering the legitimacy of the institution? The British Museum does seem to be on firmer ground, further stabilised by prominent media projects such as the History of the World in 100 Objects that was broadcast in 2011 on BBC Radio4. The Times Newspaper, in 2008 nominated Neil MacGregor as 'Briton of the year' - in the words of their Art Critic Rachel Campbell-Johnston: 'He is a committed idealist who, in a world in which culture is increasingly presented as the acceptable face of politics, has pioneered a broader, more open, more peaceable way forward.' (Campbell-Johnston, 2008). However, it would appear that within the sector and academy, these shifts; if identified, are seen as cynical and calculating (see, for example, O'Neill 2004, Curtis 2006, Flynn 2010). Further, the claims for the institution as creating tolerance further politicises the institution in an explicit fashion, and may commit it to a purpose that it is unable to fulfil.

Bibliography

- Bennett, O. (1996) *Cultural Policy and the Crisis of Legitimacy: entrepreneurial answers in the United Kingdom*, University of Warwick: Centre for the Study of Cultural Policy.
- BM (2010) The British Museum lends the Cyrus Cylinder to the National Museum of Iran, London: British Museum. Press release, 10 September. Online. Available: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press/press_releases/2010/cyrus_cylinder_loan.aspx> (accessed 3 August 2012).
- Campbell-Johnston, R. (2008) Briton of the Year: Neil MacGregor, *The Times*. December 27.
- Cuno, J. (2008) *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the battle over ancient heritage*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Curtis, N. (2006) 'Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: the tangled stories of things', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21:117–127.
- Cuno, J. (2011) *Museum Matters: in praise of the encyclopaedic museum*, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Elias, N. (1939) *The Civilising process: the history of manners*, New York: Urizen Books.
- Foster, H. (ed.) (1985) *Postmodern Culture*, London/Sydney: Pluto Press.
- Flynn, T. (2010) 'A History of the World in Looted Objects' Blog entry. Online. Available <<http://tom-flynn.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/history-of-world-in-looted-objects.html>> (accessed 2 August 2012)
- Furedi, F. (2004) *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st century philistinism*, London: Continuum Publishing.
- Habermas, J. (1987) *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge/ Oxford: Polity Press.
- Jenkins, T. (2010) *Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections: the crisis of cultural authority*, New York, London: Routledge.
- MacGregor, A. (1998) 'Antiquity inventories: Museums and "national antiquities" in the mid-nineteenth century'. In V. Brand *The Study of the Past in the Victorian Age*, Oxford: Oxbow books: 125–37.
- MacGregor, N. (2004) The whole world in our hands, *The Guardian*, 24 July.
- Merriman, N. (1991) *Beyond the Glass Case: the past, the heritage and the public*, Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- O'Neill M. (2004) 'Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global'. *Museums and Society*. 2 (3): 190–202.
- Schulz, E. (1994) 'Notes on the history of collecting and of museums' in Susan M. Pearce, (Ed.) *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Routledge: 175–187.
- Sherman, D. J. and Rogoff, I. (eds) (1994) *Museum Culture: histories, discourses, spectacles*, London: Routledge.
- Vergo, P. (ed.) (1989) *The New Museology*, London: Reaktion.

- Whitehead, C. (2011) National Art Museums in Britain. In: Knell et al. (eds) *National Museums: new studies from around the world*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 105–122.
- Wingfield, C. (2011) Placing Britain in the British Museum: encompassing the other. In: Knell et al. (eds) *National Museums: new studies from around the world*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 123–137.