



One of the posters spotted at an Occupy Rally in the USA

Generally dissatisfied with the utopian museum

Dr Bernadette Lynch¹

An elderly Chinese woman stood at the far end of a room at a consultation session at a large UK museum and asked *why* the museum wanted to engage communities. She said, ‘What is it for? What is it you want to *do* to me?’ⁱ

The utopian rhetoric of mutuality and shared authority in today’s museums, in reality, places a community member, such as this woman, in the role of ‘supplicant’ or ‘beneficiary’. Museums and galleries continue to subtly maintain inequitable social relations by exercising invisible power, setting parameters that offer what Cornwall calls ‘empowerment-lite’ (Cornwall, 2008).ⁱⁱ Thus the image of the 21st century, democratic, dialogical museum simply does not match the rhetoric. Furthermore, by placing people in the position of beneficiaries, the museum continues to rob people of their active agency and the necessary possibility of *resistance*.ⁱⁱⁱ This would explain the anger of many participants who express frustration with these well-meaning institutions.^{iv}

Carl Schmitt attacked *liberal-neutralist* and *utopian* notions that removes the ‘political’ in social relations in civil society, arguing that conflict is embedded in existence itself (Schmitt, 1927).^v The institution can only break free if it acknowledges conflict and instigates a form of reciprocity that allows the institution to be challenged, and to challenge back! Two types of reciprocity are therefore in play – the utopian in which our well-meaning responsibility for the other leads to their disempowerment as ‘beneficiaries’ and the one in

¹ Dr Bernadette Lynch is a museum writer, researcher and consultant. E-mail: lynchbernadette@hotmail.com

which the museum – and its community partners – may be challenged, thus leading to a more equitable partnership, and the possibility for people to assume new roles as ‘active agents’. Is this utopian? For the social relevance of the museum, it is a reality that has to be achieved.

ⁱ The workshop was part of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation’s UK-wide research project, led by author, Dr Bernadette Lynch. ‘Engagement at the heart of museums and galleries’ examined public participation in 12 leading UK museums and galleries, and found overwhelming evidence that despite best intentions, all is not well. Working with groups comprised of staff and community partners, it reviewed the obstacles to engagement. Through the *Our Museum* programme, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation is now focusing on organisational development to help these institutions change their organisational culture, as models for the sector as a whole. See Lynch, B. (2011) *Whose Cake is it Anyway?: A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in twelve museums and galleries in the UK*, The Paul Hamlyn Foundation: phf.org.uk. For information on the Our Museums programmes, see <http://ourmuseum.ning.com>.

ⁱⁱ Cornwall, A. (2008) *Democratising Engagement: What the UK can Learn from International Experience*. London: Demos. Available at www.demos.co.uk/publications/democratisingengagement.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of this is explored further in Lynch and Alberti (2010) where we break this process down through the example of an attempt at co-creating an exhibition. Lynch, B. T. and Alberti, S.J.M.M. (2010) “Legacies of prejudice: racism, co-production and radical trust in the museum”, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 25:1, 13 - 35. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09647770903529061>.

^{iv} A relatively recent and still painful experience of antagonism, for which they were unprepared, hit UK museums during the 2007 Bicentenary of Britain’s Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. There were high expectations amongst Black and Ethnic Minority communities of full collaboration in developing related museum programmes. Yet, one museum professional summarized the views of many when she said that ‘consultation was not even an accurate description of what in fact took place’. Of the various evaluative reports on the impact of the Bicentenary on UK museums, the most thorough and revealing research produced on the subject is the ‘1807 Commemorated’ project, led by Laurajane Smith and Geoff Cubitt of the University of York, UK. Available: www.history.ac.uk/1807/commemorated (Accessed: 7 January 2013).

^v Schmitt, C. 2007 (1927), *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.