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MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Introduction

One of the aims of this first session was to question the relationships between museums and cultural diversity, thus I would like to point out three aspects in order to open up the debate:

- 1)** the distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference
- 2)** the value of diversity and diversity as a value
- 3)** the dialogue between cultures and/or the dialogue between people

1) As institutions primarily dedicated to the display of cultures, ethnographic museums are confronted with the issue of cultural diversity and of cultural difference. But are the notions of cultural difference and cultural diversity cultures equivalent, or do they presuppose distinct conceptions of Otherness? My argument is that far from being equivalent, cultural diversity and cultural difference are quite distinct and have specific contents according to different national traditions (Dias 2008). This is not a minor semantic quarrel; cultural diversity and cultural difference refer, according to the national contexts, to distinct ways of conceiving alterity and its place within the nation.

As Daniel J. Sherman (2008) noted, 'as public institutions assigned both to safeguard and to define culture, museums have always been sites for the negotiation of difference'. According to this author, museums are constituted by, and themselves constitute, difference. In other words, social, cultural and gender difference are at the core of the museums in general and of ethnographic museums in particular. As Sharon MacDonald (2016) has pointed out, cultural difference can be produced, 'unintentionally, for example through the effects of relative location, as well as

intentionally, as in the explicit depictions of “other cultures” in ethnographic museums’. The place accorded to ‘Asian’ societies in museums, mostly in art museums, reveals the ways in which these societies are perceived as different from those of Africa or Oceania exhibited mostly in ethnographic museums. Thus, one of the most important tasks resides in understanding the mutual constitution of museums and of categories of difference as a complex historical process (Dias 2008; Sherman 2008).

The French case may help to illustrate the distinction between cultural difference and cultural diversity. Dedicated to the study of humankind as a whole, the Musée de l’Homme (founded in 1937) aimed at combining physical anthropology, ethnology, and prehistoric archaeology. Moral and intellectual differences between peoples were not regarded as indicators of inherited cultural capacity, but rather as the result of diverse cultural experiences. French ethnologists during the 1930s argued for the diversity of non-Western societies; the latter were not simpler, just different. Thus, the notion of difference connoted not inferiority but rather complexity. By refusing to use terms such as ‘inferior’ and ‘uncivilized’, French ethnologists aimed at stressing the dignity of all human societies and peoples. Their insistence on fundamental respect for cultural difference among human societies was based on what we might call cultural relativism. Although French ethnologists provided an essentialising vision of culture, it was with the intention of defending a diversity of human value orientations. Far from advocating the equivalence of cultures, French ethnologists in the 1930s were instead concerned with the dignity of human beings and societies, which is quite a distinct concern.

With the creation in 2006 of the Musée du quai Branly (Paris), there is a shift from cultural difference to cultural diversity. This museum is primarily dedicated to the display of cultural diversity; it explicitly aimed to be distinctive from an ethnographic museum - thus its name, reflecting its own geographical location and not any specific ethnographical focus - as well as from the embracing view of the study of man - incorporating physical anthropology, ethnology, and prehistoric archaeology - pioneered by the Musée de l’Homme.

Far from being a neutral term, cultural diversity is embedded in theoretical and political presuppositions. Two points are worth making; first, the distinction between cultures and civilizations, a distinction institutionalized with the creation in France both of an ‘exotic’ museum dedicated to cultural diversity and of a non-exotic museum, the MuCEM, at Marseille in 2013 devoted to European and Mediterranean civilizations. Why is diversity essentially linked to cultures and not to civilizations? Second, the concern for human diversity and diversity of cultures echoes a wider concern about ‘ecological’ issues - climatic diversity, bio-geographical diversity, and biodiversity. The presupposition that cultural and biological diversity are not merely similar, but are actually manifestations of the same phenomenon, can be seen in the emergence of a new term - ‘biocultural diversity’.

As for cultural diversity, it has acquired global prominence and has become an issue of concern to social movements, international organisations and states. In other words, cultural diversity seems to be a recent notion based upon quite a modern value, the value of diversity. But what kind of value is diversity, and what kind of duty is its protection? And for whom is diversity a value?

2) The Value of Diversity and Diversity as a Value

In contrast to its synonym *variety*, *diversity* has ceased to be a descriptive term; it has become the name of a supreme late-modern value. The concept's extension grew to encompass both nature and culture; the very term biodiversity encompasses both biological and cultural diversity and it has contributed to a larger discourse about the value of diversity. Biodiversity, in other words, helped make diversity a normative value. As Vidal and Dias noted (2016), it is only in a more recent context that concerns about the consequences of the loss of biological and cultural diversity came to prominence, and that biodiversity became established as a central cultural value. Western societies fundamentally value diversity – as an inherent normative good – in a way that previous Western societies did not. Thus, diversity is seen as valuable through the lens of its being at risk. In this perspective, difference is downplayed to the advantage of diversity, and diversity is given intrinsic value. The notions of loss, risk and danger shape museums' practices in terms of protection and preservation of cultural diversity. The development of the sense that diversity itself is a value to be protected and celebrated in Western societies is a recent form of sensibility, an 'endangered sensibility' (Vidal and Dias 2016). Within this new form of sensibility, diversity acquired the status of an inherently endangered attribute, a threatened value that needs to be protected and preserved. Consequently, extinction either of species or of cultural heritage is envisioned as an anti-value per excellence.

We need to question the notion of preservation itself. Preservation of what, by whom, and for whom? As the French anthropologist, Philippe Descola wrote (2008) 'there are no absolute, scientifically founded criteria on which to justify universally recognized values concerning the preservation of natural and cultural assets'. UNESCO's conventions, namely the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* have come to imply that all natural and cultural entities deserve in principle to be preserved and their defense is somehow a moral imperative. According to Wiktor Stoczkowski (2009), 'UNESCO's doctrine of diversity' functions as a cosmopolitan and secular soteriology, as a vision of redemption and salvation that receives meaning and legitimacy from crisis narratives and a 'doomsday' perspective.

3) Dialogue between cultures and /or dialogue between people?

In my previous research dealing with the Musée du quai Branly, I pointed out the ways in which French debates on cultural diversity were shaped by concerns about the 'equivalence of cultures'. What is at stake in this notion is the assumption that all cultures can be put on an equal footing through the choice, made by Western connoisseurs, of their masterpieces and of their most representative objects. In other words, equivalence of cultures presumes that art is the best way of approaching cultural diversity. At the Musée du quai Branly, there is close relationship between cultural diversity and the stress put on art, as a common denominator across cultures. Far from accepting the possibility of alternative cultural expressions, the Musée du quai Branly tends somehow to limit the field of cultural diversity to one supposed universal form, the artistic one. The Musée du quai Branly was founded on the assumption of the equal worth of the world's cultures and on the equal dignity of the world's cultures. This institution maintains that it is the equality of creations, and especially of artistic creations, that paves the way for the equality of peoples and societies. In other words, through art all societies have equal status because art, being as a common denominator, can transcend cultural barriers and establish a 'dialogue between cultures'.

Can equality, particularly equality of cultures, be made compatible with the acknowledgment of cultural differences? But as we know, equity in the artistic sphere can be paralleled with inequity on the social ground. Thus the role ascribed to museums: to exonerate society for its failure to deal with peoples and cultures whose objects are in museums devoted to the diversity of cultures.

Though ethnographic museums in Europe have increasingly sought to address contemporary culturally diverse societies, there is therefore an underlying difficulty – to display cultural diversity as a national possession. As Tony Bennett (2006) pointed out, we 'need to go beyond diversity as a possession to its conception as an ongoing process of intercultural dialogue'.

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