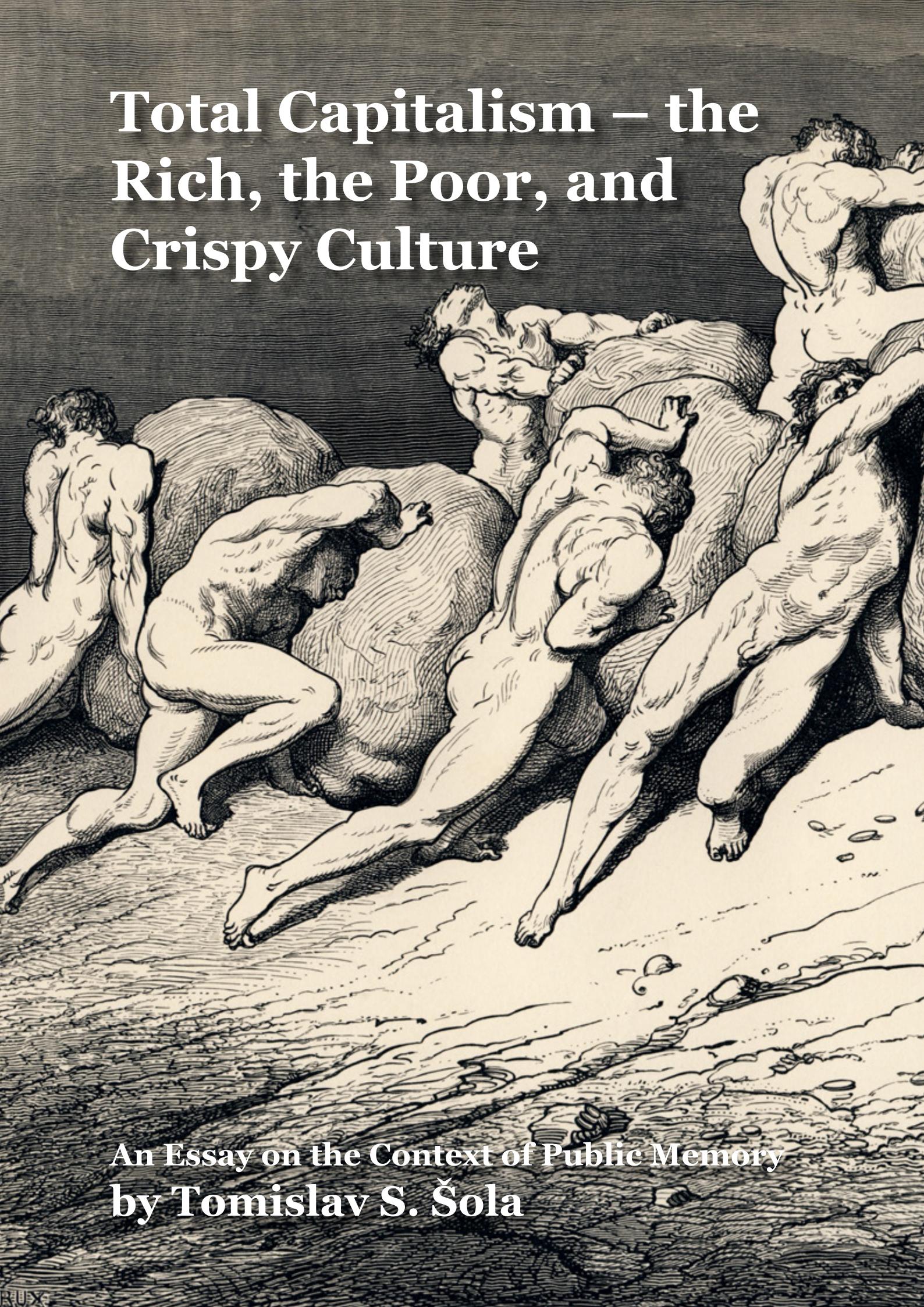


Total Capitalism – the Rich, the Poor, and Crispy Culture



An Essay on the Context of Public Memory
by Tomislav S. Šola

The text is not about the vast subject of culture but a fragile and yet decisive part of it, as I will explain. “Pars pro toto” can easily be applied here too: what is happening in our institutionally relatively protected area of heritage is only a reflection of the drama that is happening to the entire cultural sector. In fact, with this text, I want to point out the causes of the state of general involution, including socio-cultural domain, at least in the Western world. I do not know the East and the South well enough. Long-term work in the context of information sciences has taught me that development is not necessarily progress and that the upward trend does not have to refer to quality. There is also the decadence of systems and, as IT experts would say, their re-definition at a lower level of order. The Western development paradigm is still based on the idea of unlimited growth and, as I was keen to emphasize the economic context, - the legitimacy of obscene profits.

I write about museums and heritage, often taking the risk of being “one of us” who ventures into themes that go beyond our domain, our expertise, and self-congratulatory implications. On the other hand, writing a truly original text in essay form implies that the author renounces serious, scientific ambitions in advance and leaves it up to the reader to continue or give up.

I am now free of any preoccupation with new career achievements, and aware that what I write today cannot be better or clearer than when I was full of drive and ambition. Knowing this, I nonetheless add—consciously and at some risk—occasional details from my long professional experience (aware as well that I conducted that career neither pragmatically nor rationally). Since I am dispensing with the obligation of footnotes, this personal tone may make the text easier for some to read, while

others—forewarned at the outset—may find it off-putting.

To be fully honest, I considered my lectures more useful than the written texts: the slides included images, played with meanings and metaphors, and incorporated body language as well as references to the immediate reality. Any lecturer worth the job is also an actor. Lectures forced me to formulate clear, conclusive lines about any phenomenon that engaged me, compelling me to articulate precisely the points I considered important to share. This is why, upon leaving the Faculty, I “invented” the “one-slide lecture,” with the intention of publishing thousands of them, as they once formed the ever-changing body of my teaching. But only some had a chance, whether on the site <https://www.mnemosophy.com/> (which is a pain to refresh regularly) or in the last book, as mentioned above. There, of course, the publishers could not handle all the photos and the copyright issues, so once again, the text was the only result.

To confirm what I said earlier: this text is too long for a professional journal and too short to be a book — an unpleasant dilemma. To prevent it from ending up in a collection of unpublished works, I am publishing it on my blog while it still feels contemporary, whatever its final destiny may be.

It may sound odd, but as a rather timid and probably vain author, I have only once in my life submitted a text of my own to a journal. That one was rejected. The others that were published were requested by editors themselves — which, I suppose, explains why they weren’t rejected. At the time when I was editor-in-chief of the museum magazine, I accepted all my texts - without the slightest hesitation. But that was back then.

Overwhelmed by practice, I have transformed my own thinking and professional frustrations (guided in it by the best men-

*tors one could have) into modest articles and books lost in the ocean of conventional thinking. *Heritology* (1982) and *mnemosophy* (1987) are neologisms I coined to explain the content of the hypothetical science, to soothe my professional conscience (<https://www.mnemosophy.com/>). Theory of an institution can hardly help in saving the world so the conventional museology should have been transformed into, if possible, a science of public memory. As such it would surely survive desert wind and tropical rain.*

I have always been overworked, and in circumstances that were anything but exceptional, so theory—however seriously I took it—was for me more a way of articulating my frustrations with the state of the profession, and of the world, than a genuine ambition. It so happened that after fifteen years of practice I became a professor, and theory thus also became a job—something more than a sideline or a way of needling conservative colleagues. I was too weak, as an insider, to change museums; and it turned out, unfortunately, that I did not manage to do so even by changing the profession itself, by educating a different kind of curator. First I realized that nothing could be changed within the world museum organization, and then that without it even less could be achieved.

And then I tried preaching: I accepted almost every invitation. For all those invitations and paid lectures—especially during the war in the former Yugoslavia—I am deeply grateful to my hosts. They helped me survive, not only spiritually but also (something I never thought I would need) materially. The “invention” of “heritology” or “mnemosophy” was a creative game, with all the pleasure of painting or sculpting (which I understand), but also with risks that I underestimated. Pro-

jects seemed to me more effective than preaching. Of some, only traces remain (<https://www.mnemosophy.com/>), while one may yet live on longer: <https://www.thebestinheritage.com/>. It was conceived as a formula by which, by highlighting the best among us—the bravest and most creative from all over the world—once a year they would be brought together in one place to demonstrate the knowledge and experience that drives the memory professions forward, and to prove to themselves that one day they could become a powerful, decisive profession for the society of the future.

0. Introduction

- Culture is losing resources and credibility in an age dominated by technological shortcuts and media illusions.
- Western models and traditions cannot serve as universal templates; heritage must withstand all climates—social, political, and cultural.
- Museums and heritage are about the present, not a nostalgic refuge in the past.

To imply or suggest that culture has less and less resources, I dare again to write in international English with the feeble help of AI services and Google translate. As I will reveal below, AI remains only my better Wikipedia and, um, - a big concern: if given the opportunity, it heavily censors any proposed text. Alarming capacity as well as the criteria used! But, if asked indeed, it instantly and diligently helps putting the International English into some version of the correct English. For any other use, however, it only makes me nostalgic for the underused, elegant, Smart Lookup service. The power of AI is an epochal paradigm shift: now villains, lazy people and plagiarists are no longer thieves. They are simply given an advantage over hard-working, honest authors, due to a scenario whose consequences we do not yet fully understand.

Every street urchin, so to speak, can write a PhD or sign a proposal for a new concept for, say, a museum he has just set foot in. Will anyone in the future need originality, authorship and will they want to recognize a creative work? Will the “legitimate” nature of theft be used for possible blackmail? War and the sex industry

are the sniffer dogs of technological innovation; both industries were already well pleased with the invention, while we will be left with its consequences: let's say frankly, a disaster, just like with plastic, without which we equally and obviously "could not do". However, AI is a reality to be embraced, not defeated. This new reality will continue to grow each day — in both its dangers and its potentials. The world has always been a rather gloomy place, yet we have never given up on trying to improve the human condition.

Are the growing divisions on the planet a distortion of the world we know or a painful process in which we will understand its true nature? While we were observing the globalization processes, it became obvious to everyone that up to now we were speaking and thinking only from the point of view of the Western and, to an extent, the Christian tradition. Some, now old curators in Africa, China or India, especially from the beginnings of my professional life, will remember a lecture or conversation I had with them at any given occasion. I must have sounded awkward explaining things that only later developed into clear ideas. They did not make me popular at the time.

Any contact with those civilizations has been a privilege throughout my professional life. Yet most of the people I encountered over the decades—especially while studying abroad and later—were generally more Western-minded, or more firmly preset in their views, than I was; some were, quite simply, thoroughly Western. Coming from between worlds, I was invited as a speaker to two hundred or more conferences. It was always essential to me that the costs be borne by the organizers: the symbolism mattered, as did the reassurance that I was not using domestic public funds for what could have been seen merely as my own pleasure

or self-promotion.

I have always had in mind that true professional philosophy should be applicable anywhere and always but practices are due to differ. The rest of the world has yet to devise its own answers to the universal need for the transfer of collective, societal experiences. It should not necessarily be the expensive, often very inefficient, western conventional museum. Not even in the West as the ecomuseum concept was making clear for the last fifty odd years. Especially not in the AI environment. Colonialism was criminal plunder and genocide, but its covert practices remain as supremacism and acculturation. For such a traumatic past, one needs a long-awaited spiritual, political and economic emancipation and professionally well prepared public memory institutions and their actions.

I left the mainstream organizations like a catholic priest who came to the Vatican and left there as an apostate. In short, I was explaining to my colleagues from, what is nowadays often called, “Global South”, that their museums cannot be modelled after our civilization. They looked at me in benevolent disbelief, without understanding. They were brought to the West by scholarships and grants, for which neither they nor most of us sought deeper intentions. We believed, at least most of us, that it was about help. I argued that any usable “museology” must “endure both desert wind and tropical rain”. Western “science” of an institution (!?) certainly could not handle that.

Culture is our immediate framework, while economy and politics form the general context in which we function. Understanding the context of both is essential for understanding our position, potential, and opportunities in fulfilling our mission in contemporary society. This is always a voluntary, but I believe, necessary

risk for an author who advocates for the success of his profession. Times are changing, as the Latin proverb reminds us, and we are changing with them. So, we must become credible and confident in our understanding of the present world to be able to adjust to its nature and recognize our role in it.

Culture is under siege, flattened by technology and media, yet still pretending to matter. Using the attribute “crispy” to describe banalised and commercialised culture is deliberately ironic and satirical, rather than a strictly analytical scientific approach. I have noticed that heritage, within the context, can itself become an object of such delusions and temptations for easy success and a mass audience. So the title is actually a cynical use of what I despise in so called marketing, by letting the title to attract the attention while not living up to the challenge implied. However, having written a rather critical book on museums and marketing, I dare to engage with the theme again. The claim is that financial hardship and the endeavour to achieve survival within the wildly alluring media landscape render much of heritage too ‘crunchy’ to be reliable.

The subject matter we deal with always influences our view of the world. Thus, the past sometimes becomes a fascination, almost a kind of passéism. This can lead to the temptation to belittle the present or even fail to understand it. Nothing is worse than that, because museums are about the present, and the past is their means of insight and argumentation. Their mission is centred on the present and for the present users. After all, paradoxically, the present is only the future past.

1. Understanding the roots of totality

- Modern capitalism evolved into a predatory, totalizing system, legitimized by ideology, marketing, and neoliberal thought.
- Democracy and welfare ideals have been hollowed out, leaving society manipulated by faceless intermediaries and the cult of individualism.
- Culture and public memory sectors are crucial but undermined; without them, society cannot resist the widening gap between the rich and the poor, appropriate or resist changes, face the challenges or recover meaningful dialogue across civilizations.

Capitalism has always been harsh, while “entrepreneurship”, as its driving motivation, has always degraded into greed. With the progress of democracy and the humanistic vision of a welfare society, capitalism has become somewhat more polite, but then neoliberalism transformed it into a total and predatory one. Admittedly, even if we understand the new situation, perhaps due to conventions, we overlook the fact that the financialisation and monetisation of the world are, in reality, a disguised robbery of both people and the planet they inhabit. Is there still time for the cultural sector to influence its uncertain fate? Of course, but they would hardly make it. Yet we exist only while we are trying. Eventually, we will be able to exercise our full potential if, as professionals, we truly understand what is happening, what risks our sector is exposed to, and how, in the conditions of the chaotic illusion of democracy and wild chaos, to influence decision-makers.

Neither are shipping companies run by experienced ship own-

ers anymore, newspapers are no longer published by public media companies, nor by the educated heirs of founders; wine cellars are likely to be no longer family estates but joint-stock companies... Everything is increasingly managed by faceless intermediaries, “managers” on behalf of bankers and funds. The cheapest, the most obedient, the most sycophantic, i.e. the worst, secure an advantage in getting a job everywhere.

A tanker with a hundred thousand tons of oil changes its route on the open ocean several times, depending on how that cargo is traded on some of the world’s stock exchanges on behalf of brokers. As is the case with perception and understanding, only when I learned first-hand about the case of two newly built tankers, each with over 100,000 grt, being taken to the scrapyard because the stock market situation had changed, did one of the expressions for the economic model we live in become even clearer to me: “casino capitalism”. Moreover, the company contributed to GDP, so I assume that economics professors use such examples to explain how the famous “GDP” is just a mask. Behind it, there is but the nature of the Age of Greed, curiously, the flow of money as a practically manipulative parameter of wealth, proposed curiously by the same great economist who invented the famous “invisible hand”. So the greed is hidden by just recording money transactions. So, the GDP can rise while the standard of living is decreasing. It’s probably been two decades since that phrase about greed imposed itself on me as the shortest description of the nature of the system we live in (<https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/2413975>). I do not doubt that someone else has come up with a similar description.

The roots of this sinister neoliberal drama, which changed the world some 40 years ago, are deep. They date back to the 1920s,

and the protagonists and advocates are numerous. In short, if it weren't for F.A. von Hayek, the Mont Pelerin Society, the discouraging crises of the 1970s, Milton Friedman and his famous Chicago School (actually "robbers" in quasi-scientific guise), and Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, the World Bank and the IMF, - the horror movie we live in would not be our reality at the same time.

The evil wizards, the initiators of this myth of the rich and enterprising as demigods of humanity, were Edward Bernays and Ayn Rand. Bernays was fascinated by the power of two contemporary phenomena: the subconscious (which he adopted from Freud, his uncle) and effectiveness of Hitler's propaganda in influencing the masses. He, as a true progenitor, transformed these insights and practices into what was public relations and then what we call marketing. To cut the long story short, it all later transformed, in front of our eyes, into a culture of lies. You already know the Orwellian expressions that elaborate the description of this incredible apocalyptic reality as post-fact, post-truth, post-human, post-democratic society, etc. And, the "rule of the mob" or at least the prevalence of dangerous kitsch in the widest sense of its meaning: mob as a "democratic" façade to the system. Ayn Rand tried to provide an alibi for this paradoxical myth of individualism denouncing welfare society as the darkest and most repulsive communism. Never before her nor after, - not even now, the rich (as "creative super humans") were, in fact, declared the new aristocracy. Her book "Atlas Shrugged" (1957) gave legitimacy to selfishness. The book is probably still, as some authors have claimed, the bible of neoliberalism and as some connoisseurs claim, "the worst book in history". In a strange way that line of thinking is like a curse turning into reality. In one interview (**Woman's Own** 1987) Margaret Thatcher declared:

“There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.” This statement has caused immense controversy because many interpret it as an expression of her individualistic and neoliberal worldview – the idea that responsibility lies primarily with the individual, not with society or the state. Who, me? You? The hypocrisy of it suggests actually that the power belongs to us, all of us, but as we are not able to exercise it, it belongs to the most creative, daring, entrepreneurial, courageous and versatile among us. The society thus becomes composed of a new aristocracy and serfs.

I have long known about the turmoil caused by the financialization of the world, but it was not just monetization, as we outside the economics profession call it, but a much more radical cut, on a par with Thatcherism gone wild. The Glass–Steagall Act did not “quietly fade away” – it was officially repealed in 1999 with the passage of Clinton’s Gramm–Leach–Bliley Act. This erased the key barrier between commercial and investment banking that had existed since 1933. This business implies speculative investment activities. And again, it is the same with economics as with religion: it is easier to accept than to understand. And what actually happened? Instead of taking out a loan for your business from an old-fashioned bank with some reasonable interest rates, you found a bank at that address that wanted a share of the ownership, and of course the right to trade it. In short, instead of a banker, you borrowed money from a gambler and sat down at a casino table with your obligations in your pocket. That was the end of the world and the beginning of the predatory, casino capitalism in which more or less the whole world lives. Although it was an exclusively American law, its repeal had global consequences because the largest global actors are there, and deregulation in the USA made other countries follow the same direction

if they want their banks to remain competitive. Perhaps some museums could or should have said something about it. Well, not even those most directly responsible said anything. And, the few money museums always show some history and flaunt various trophies of monetary history. I remember the only one among them, the Museum of the National Bank of Belgium, which perfectly explained the nature of inflation and probably educated the audience on such topics. Yes, the specific function of museums is to constantly “educate” us for the world we live in. In everything. To defend us, protect us, prepare us... Although I do not believe in the modern formula of democracy, - being well informed, actually “literate” remains the basic reliable substance of voting.

The neoliberal value system gives legitimacy to these pretensions by completely isolating people with this cult of individualism. But, as it turned out, it was easier to offer them the opportunity to become a mob again. Unlike in ancient or medieval times, the frightened mob is made to believe in its guilt and/ or its fantasies, so it can be governed easily. Lonely individuals without education and money cannot, of course, successfully fake democracy. Good for war plans. Once or if decimated, the new mob that would grow out of this complete collapse would, supposedly, align enthusiastically with the new set of dreams and illusions.

Although “communism” has been rightfully historically disgraced, as long as, though ominous and humiliating, the Berlin wall existed, there was more consideration in international relations: the need for balance was motivating societal force even if alternative functioned more as balance of power. By that time, we knew that the Planet is small and endangered, - that we would be facing the limits of growth and that new peaceful cooperative-

ness would enable solutions. The world was waiting for the prosperous, positive globalisation in the sense of the Charter of the United Nations.

We never bothered should a world be bipolar, unipolar or multipolar, - a question, anyhow seemingly outside of the realm of public memory. But it is not. Two or three decades later the “end of history” looked more like the end of the Western paradigm of development. It seemed that the dominant globalising culture can rightfully be there at least insofar as the rest of the world will not be obliged to it. So whatever we may face from now on, hopefully not a cataclysm, will depend on the new capacity of great powers to engage in the now neglected dialogue of civilizations. In the face of AI and the endless destructive force of technology we have to return to common sense that always understands difference and variety as richness, not the obstacle. We have to return the dialogue. I had Plato and Confucius on my mind to propose them as symbolic representatives of it. But, as I asked AI about it, - it knew better: “This whole stretch is sometimes called the “Axial Age” (term by Karl Jaspers): roughly 800–200 BCE, when multiple civilizations produced foundational thinkers—Confucius, Buddha, Socrates/Plato, the Hebrew prophets, Zoroaster (a bit earlier)—whose ideas shaped the world for millennia”. True and intriguing.

That dialogue needs to be established or restored to continue in the present, thus providing a chance for everyone to make the world’s future shared and feasible. If public memory sector were strong enough so far to form a solid, unified profession instead of being misled into dismembered, neutral occupations, we would have become an indispensable, “soft” part of the project.

Political parties, once based on projections of justice and equal-

ity, the so-called left, have no one to represent anymore. There is no working class either. Society has been ground into manipulated individuals and radical groups. An essence made up of pseudoscience, national mythologies and political fanaticism has been squeezed out of Nazism and fascism, which saturates the entire society, predominantly the right-wing part of politics, but populism goes beyond traditional left and right options. What matters is where corporations and owners of a large part of the Planet can have a better foothold. They created it at the expense of democracy and social justice. In many countries, especially post-socialist ones, the Church has recognised the frustrations of the “masses” and has imposed itself as a partner in the distribution of power; with new technology and the culture of spectacle, it uses the historical experience of manipulating spirituality, especially of the poor masses, and the growing frustrations of the once powerful middle class.

In parallel and seemingly paradoxically, with an aggressive, exclusive campaign for individual freedom, society is daily dehumanised and distanced from simple ideas about glory and reward for effort and creativity, about eradicating poverty as a social vice, as a social disease. The result of all this is velvet totalitarianism as a shameful staging of democracy, as a hidden decline in quality criteria and standards of values, and as a tolerance, and sometimes even encouragement, of the daily growing gap between the rich and the poor. The reality is increasingly poorer citizens, and through the impoverishment of the state, an increasingly poorer culture and its sectors. In short, this is a historical triumph of hypocrisy. The remembered past and culture have been manipulated to serve, contrary to their nature, this project of self-destruction of humanity, instead of being a salvific balancing act of development.

Seventeen years ago I joined a symposium in Zagreb by a written comment which, having been never published can serve some purpose here:

A hundred years ago political prophets were selling the dream of society of equality and prosperity for all. Only their eagerness survived. The grand pose and gesture has been appropriated nowadays by salesmen. The rising global oligarchy of the obscenely rich desperately looks for the ways to secure their quickly increasing wealth. In diversification of investment and ways of compressing it into valuables, - art was always a good choice. That gave a tremendous push to the art trade. The fairs for the rich clientele multiply. For them, art works are the undersigned bills of exchange. In most cases, they do not leave the airports. The freeport storages, outside of the taxation and control of the public institutions, serve not only as fabulous storages but also offer other services: private showrooms (exhibitions!), art advisory, framing, restoration and the banking services. When an appropriate moment in the strategy of prices comes, works will find the way to private galleries, private museums, and, due to the influential boards and permissive curators, to public museums. The strategic combination manipulates the prices the same way shares on the stock market change value overnight. The heritage profession does not exist to be able to react. Heritage occupations like museum curators are pushed into "fach idiotism", servility and opportunism. Does anybody remember having seen a blockbuster "Art as commodity" or "How is Art History Constructed"? Public institutions, at least in Europe, are paid by taxpayer's money to explain the world and represent public interests. Oligarchs of the world unite!

Of course, the focus on arts reveals that I started my career

as art museum curator, hence the frustrations! I would change some of the text now but abstaining from doing it I make obvious my concern with the very idea of heritage. The past is so much interpreted that David Lowenthal (one of greatest minds I have encountered) always regarded it as a creation, a construct, - be it in good or bad faith. According to him, it incorporated all the moral responsibility as well as may have been corrupted by imperfections or particular interests. I would add, remembering one of my articles in ICOM News, that even collecting can be done the “crispy” way.

Total capitalism could be called many names, depending which of its multiple monstrous transformations we have in mind. It depends from which perspective we wish to describe it or what feature of it do we want to highlight or expose to critical insight? It is surely “vulgar” by both Marxist or “Marxist” line of thinking and certainly deceptive and “illusion-based”,

Economics and politics are the only decisive context of culture and public memory, of the memory sector and its institutions, of all the occupations that make up this never-born profession. If the collapse of the Western development paradigm really happens, as I myself have accepted to think and teach, then it will be due to the devaluation of work and the glorification of profit, in fact, to the uncontrolled, mindless greed that only the mythologized, narcissistic individual embodies. It is always the value systems that govern and decide our destiny. All else are methods and means.

2. The Crunch of Culture in the Age of Great Greed

- Culture is being chewed up by total capitalism: museums, art, and memory institutions are turned into snacks for the mob, entertainment, or silent complicity.
- Fear, obedience, and careerism crush free thought; creativity is a luxury that risks dismissal or blackmail.
- In a world where war, chaos, and propaganda are profitable, the public memory sector must insist on showing what human experiences are truly worth keeping—before they’re digested and forgotten.

The grandiose profit project that rules the world must create even a false and shameful legitimacy. Thus the existence of mob was created by the frustrations of the majority, on the weaknesses of human nature and on new and old hatreds, - a force that its creators abuse for the purposes of power and domination over others. Monsters have countless faces. Patriotism is beautiful, nationalism is not, and chauvinism is ugly and dangerous. The genie from the bottle, once released, does not return without a tribute in the blood. They will not be able to restrain him even when the same mob turns on them. So, why even risk? They can do something else: divert the crowd’s attention to others, presenting them as the cause of their suffering. And so, as history (discreetly, almost imperceptibly) interpreted in museums shows, the culprits of “our” troubles are duly listed—those who are “other” and different. If one draws conclusions from this eternally successful trick, then human society, as a species, is incapable of progress.

Driven by insatiable greed, total capitalism has rediscovered

that war is the most lucrative business in the world and the most efficient way for the owners of the project to maintain their power, but the fascination has turned into snobbery. Consequences? Price? Who cares. In war, “de-regulation” is the “normative” state: there are speeches, narratives, revived myths, resurrected ghosts of the past... Chaos is regular, cacophony is what most hear, misunderstanding is implied, and animosity is legitimate. Impoverished and frightened people can be forced into any pen. For hatred, which is the cancer of the soul, there is no cure; it crudely and perfidiously finds ways to feed itself on intrigue, murders, death, destruction...

The possibility of some happy catharsis that would open minds, at least those of the survivors, probably does not exist, otherwise wars would not repeat themselves. Therefore, culture, and memory, at their best, may console, but they do not protect. What is more, through their subtle powers they can be bent to serve some future wars. Many museums serve this purpose indirectly and through discreet ambiguities.

Have we learned this in our museums that “curate” the past? “Curating the past” is not a phrase but a concise description of the job of most museums. We have not.

We mainly produce and sort knowledge, and in this low aspiration we will easily become inferior to artificial intelligence and the meta-verse. The population will fail to stay sane and balanced being daily immersed into parallel reality. Can we also allow ourselves the failure? We must not only cope with it but insist upon our ability to demonstrate which human experiences are worth continuing and why. Even those who, as public intellectuals or social institutions of memory, should oppose it do not dare, and indeed maybe should not if not able to propose the alternative.

Perhaps they simply do not know, while, at the same time technology is unstoppable. What if they, as one may assume, are not even aware of the context that I am trying to present. It determines them. Instead of being a teacher, History has become an inspiration and source of a new “right” to repeat everything that, stained with blood and tears, should have been stored as a reminder of the dark conscience of humanity.

Viewed against any universal system of values, many museums would reveal their complicity in past wrongs—or at least in the conquests of history. Many continue to fall short today, while some have genuinely moved beyond it. But that is a discussion for another time—I address this to the few who have wandered onto these pages.

Lecturing and writing about these issues often leaves one with a sense of guilt, a feeling that awareness alone is not enough. Frustrated by the limits of such efforts, I sought a more tangible approach: over two decades ago, I helped establish The Best in Heritage (<https://www.thebestinheritage.com/>), not as an advertisement, but as a platform to explore efficiency, innovation, social responsibility, and the courageous stances some curators and their institutions take. It has become a way to showcase that these principles can be applied globally, demonstrating that meaningful, wise action is possible.

As the middle class slowly disappears, the precariat (a segment of the population that is increasingly struggling to make ends meet) and the number of those hopelessly poor are growing. The poor are rarely museum goers. I admit that, in my corner of professional reality, I myself feel guilty for the world (worse than the one we inherited), because I thought, wrote and preached that museums and other institutions of public memory as a means of

communication of science can help save the world from self-destruction. And, it seems that they really can't: there are enough testimonies in the profession about the punishments that, in the form of dismissals and closed career doors, have befallen all free-thinking, enterprising curators or museum directors. It is a wonder that in the selection process, some even went through various sieves and conditions whose purpose is to "do" the job in a servile and obedient manner.

As a result, museums often turn into entertainment, idleness, sensationalism, shallow media projects, instruments of political service, or even a silent science. One cannot belittle the latter, because it is indeed enough science to be valued—but it is also just enough to be incomprehensible, impractical, and susceptible to corruption, thereby securing the full support of politics. Both paths consistently avoid conflict with the "owners" of money and power, and in doing so, become socially useless.

If you pay attention, the same pattern appears particularly in contemporary art, which is often socially autistic, forced, or—one might even say—irrelevantly radical, ultimately participating in the same scheme of confusion and deception.

From the outset, both museums and artists are intimidated: museums by a lack of funds, and obedient individuals by "projects," which serve as an open door to a career. Those with experience know that a career built on projects is always, at least in part, tantamount to blackmail or fosters a courtly mentality.

So why should bureaucrats, as distributors of public money, risk their own survival by supporting self-conscious, "arrogant" professionals who call for the improvement of society and of the human condition—"condition humaine"—in ways that, if possible, go even beyond what Sartre modestly advocated?

3. The siege of public memory

- Museums and memory institutions are under siege: government mandates, political pressure, and profit obsession threaten their very mission.
- Short-term profit and control trump long-term cultural survival; the soft power of heritage is ignored at our peril.
- Diversity, critique, and memory matter—but the system wants obedience, not insight.

The owners of the world have it easiest with individuals. After all, there are very few who, through their significance and greatness, have earned the right to exist and act as apostates and heretics, and are also famous enough to be untouched by the establishment. The establishment cunningly takes them and presents them as “evidence” of its tolerance, denounces their truth as extreme and destructive “conspiracy” theories, and completely marginalizes them in the media. The tacit resistance of power holders and their allies diligently sabotages the frequency and reach of these special individuals. Although they are great, they can be sure that they will be bypassed by the Nobel Prize, and probably all others that have public importance. The rest of this necessary pyramid of social truth (of which these special individuals are at the top) is made up of teachers, lecturers, professors, public intellectuals, and institutions of public memory, and, finally, public representatives of all professions, some of which, like journalism, are public a priori. In some countries, this base has been destroyed, discouraged, disavowed, belittled, impoverished, blackmailed with employment contracts, and exposed to the closer attention of legal and judicial public bodies that super-

vise citizens. Violated laws and norms, no matter how small, should be prosecuted, but the selective application of their criteria can turn into repression. It can take the form of such a persistent, meticulous and subtle kind that it is impossible to expose, simply denounce, let alone prove as an evil practice.

In some countries, a politically “aware” ambulance may fail to appear in time to save a person proclaimed as a “notorious” by some media...While this may sound drastic, there are reasonably enough arguments anyhow to claim that we increasingly live in undemocratic societies. The West seems to fail in finding the power of self-regeneration, of spontaneous and continuous change. This is a costly ineffectiveness if we bear in mind that this civilizational paradigm (unlike the East and the South, which are different) has been (also) built over millennia. In the developed systems that still have strong public institutions maintaining their self-consciousness so they are harder to be influenced, say, by politicians. The more they depend on their own income and private support, the easier it becomes to provide their silence in matters where the corporate world has strong interests. They can simply appropriate some scientific, aloof stance and ignore reality around them instead of being quality substance of change. That is what societal memory is for.

The budget is constructed with professional arguments and public support. Arguments for financing can be strong, but they are often decided by administrative bodies that represent the public, civil, and user interests in principle. They are actually politically influenced or serve the interests of the economy’s rulers, despite their democratic attributes. In small countries with the trauma of socialism behind them, decisions are often influenced by a mixture of corruption and politics. In larger countries,

this is less obvious, but most often the patterns and trends allow us to express the worry over the future of the sector. Of course, there are exceptions.

Memory institutions are a public service, non-profit and do not have to be commercially successful. They may be, but should not be obliged to it. It is a frequent practice that a third or a quarter of their annual budget has to be self-created and that seems to be a reasonable solution in developed countries that still have a relatively resilient middle class. Own revenue stimulates curators for more effective engagement. But, again, in any decent, democratic society museums and universities should be free. Instead, the neo-liberal leaders try to prove that neither education nor healthcare are public goods but areas of profit. Using the same arguments, they use perfidious ways to convince the entire cultural sector. But how to explain to the proponents of such policy that virtues, pride, personality, distinctiveness, uniqueness, autochthonousness, difference, are acquired through the efforts that cannot be instantly measured nor appreciated. Being the soft power they demonstrate their usefulness in the long term, - certainly and economically relevant, but are not proven by immediate profit. What is the part of cultural impact in motivation of visiting certain destination or placing ones' business there? Always greater than expected.

Besides, the world has almost forgotten that diversity among people or in nature is wealth. When the heritage industry was conceived, it was intended to tell museums that they are simply part of the tourist offer of attractions and destinations and that that said it all. Periodically and repeatedly, museums come under the same pressure. Let there be cultural tourism, but the point is not to give in. They are more important than they themselves think,

and certainly more than the disinterested majority or the blasé, self-proclaimed one percent financial elite and the “experts” who serve them, think.

The current allocation in developed Western countries for all heritage occupations is less than it was a few years ago. The inconvenience it brings will be greater in the years to come, when spending on existing and future wars will be at least 15 to 33 times higher than the allocation for the societal memory. I would say rather, for practical common sense, - if we rightfully choose to name the basic quality of societal memory that way. Namely, now this allocation from GDP is the smallest in the USA (0.15%), and the largest in some Nordic countries (0.3%). It is a pity that my students (who listened to at least some of the arguments I proposed a long time ago) will not be aware of these new ones, as they bear the proof and enrichment of the former evidence. I wonder if they remember the dismissal of the director of the “Air and Space Museum” when he made an exhibition about the “Enola Gay”, the plane that dropped the bomb over Hiroshima: a long and not the only story since then. Another colleague was literally prosecuted for defending museums’ liberty to take a responsible stance: <https://www.mnemosophy.com/post/culture-strike-art-and-museums-in-an-age-of-protest-by-laura-raicovich>

Evidence of a constant and growing repressive atmosphere is scattered across reluctant comments and implied content in various news reports. I update the argument with recent news (July 2025) from “Art News” (USA). The headline is enough: “White House says Smithsonian museum exhibits must celebrate American exceptionalism.” It’s a government “mandate”. (For those who don’t know, the Smithsonian is the world’s most prestigious agglomeration of 19 mega-museums on the Mall in

Washington). Historically, the pretension to “exceptionalism”, be it racial, political, or religious, has always turned into bloody, destructive, exhausting wars unworthy of the human species. If, as it seems, museums do not become part of the project, the most favourable consequence is poverty and institutional degradation. The message, then, is that it is better to listen to those in power. Moreover, memory institutions cannot be tasked with proving or supplying evidence of ‘exceptionality,’ but at most of the uniqueness of identity—without implying, suggesting, or even hinting at any form of subordination.

There are still options for privatization, closure, such as “reorganization” or sale, even disguised as “deaccessioning” (exclusion, separation of objects from the collection) under different excuses or accounts. The Smithsonian is, after all, so exceptional that it can only be “damaged” by forced discipline within the expected “non-interference” in anything that infringes on the interests of the government (or the power groups behind it). There, they can produce knowledge as much as they want, but not the critical or investigative one, though. Like the other media. Like theatre or, more recently, universities. All of this, or worse, is already happening around the world; only what once seemed like pessimist, heretical theorizing is now a creeping reality. On the other hand, museums don’t live in the past—they are in the and for the present, or irrelevant. This is to the power holders a claim that may bring clashes of interest.

4. When Labour's Past Becomes Capitalism's Casualty

- Museology is a sort of escapism.
- Labour's heritage is being crushed by capitalism: museums of work are starving while society forgets its backbone.
- Public memory institutions wobble between ethical obligation and economic survival, often forced to sell out or shut down.
- Memory can be power, but only if museums resist the neoliberal tide and turn history into action before it vanishes.

So, without knowing the social context, especially the economic one (which we cannot separate from the political and spiritual), our own troubles (and certainly our chances) cannot be completely clear.

So thank you to the reader for your patience: “museology”, most certainly, cannot help anything, because it was invented a century and a half ago when “normal” capitalism existed and when it still seemed that there could even be a science about an institution. Like there could exist “schoology” or “churchology”. I will only add that in academic circles this scientific need for social escapism dates back a long time, and even now many, not only among laypeople, believe that museums are primarily scientific institutions. No, they are not. In everything they do, they must be grounded in science, but they are social mechanisms for the transfer of collective experience - they are a communicative, service-oriented, creative activity, scientific theater...

For almost a century and a half, there has been an insistence on first fragmenting public memory organizationally, and then

fragmenting the theoretical understanding of its nature, by persisting in an impossible task: inventing a separate ‘science’ for each type of memory institution. This is a form of intellectual self-sabotage, a kind of escapism that ensures one can deal with the scientific aspects of one’s segment of memory with impunity—that is, without responsibility. It amounts to a license to evade social responsibility, because one’s activity has meaning only if one participates, at least through engagement with the public, in the making of developmental decisions.

There could be a science based upon the transfer of the socially formed knowledge, a proposal that I joyfully advocated in my articles, books and lectures as “heritology” (1982) or, pushing things towards clarity, - “mnemosophy” (1987). This needs to be mentioned because such a concept cares much about the entire societal context, where memory institutions exercise their mission.

But let’s return to the warnings given, even if only superficially, by knowledge of the context. So, not only is the growing majority of the population becoming poor, but public institutions are also becoming so. Layoffs, union protests, organized demands from museum managements to lift their moral obligation to accept only ethically, - ecologically and financially, impeccable sponsorship money - testify that museums are an increasingly vulnerable sector. That they are poor.

Since the economic context is rightfully in focus, the truth would have it that museums are far from being perfect beneficiaries of the public money. Those who are really interested in an excessive proposal can download the book “Eternity does not live here nay more the brief history of museum sins” that I wrote a long time ago at <https://www.mnemosophy.com/vault>).

The fact is that most museums ignore the harsh reality of social

processes and the nature of human endeavour and common destiny. But things do change for the better. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is a global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connects past struggles to today's movements for human rights. They rightfully claim that they turn memory into action. This text was inspired a long time ago with workers' heritage institutions in Finland, as, some three decades ago, there existed eight different national institutions dedicated to the public memory of work and labour.

Finland has, I hope, preserved its wise memory of work, keeping it alive and active, so that all eight of these institutions have survived and probably advanced. On the other hand, I would not be surprised if they had not, because the world has abandoned some grandiose and wise tendencies and features, especially in geostrategy, turning away from the peaceful coexistence of differences. Retrograde "development," indeed a regression, is part of these occasional tendencies. They illustrate well the "state of the nation," how value systems change, and how we live by them while oscillating. Again, how far can we expect that museums react to the challenges and changes in the reality of the identity they are supposed to serve.

Among the few countries whose museums and identity I knew better than others, is Finland. There is always our own, specific "cloud", a collection of professional and personal experiences, real or mediated, that we can hardly avoid and that represent our frame of reference. I think that the essay form can still maintain scientific reliability despite this informal form, because of personal integrity and credible, thorough experiences in practice. I published my first book and led a summer school there, and for the sake of a project ("Tama on Suomi"/"This is Finland") tried

to understand the fascinating qualities of Finnish identity: a large country, with, at one time, exceptional museums, - among the most potent I knew. Kenneth Hudson has commented that (and, I will quote him, even if it seemed redundant in the context): "Of course, when most of the directors are women".

By the different examples I knew, I was teaching primarily the students in my own country how museums can contribute to the prosperity and advance their society. My country at the time, declared socialist and, with a population four times larger than Finland, had one or two such, albeit sterile, research institutions. The countries that emerged from it have an even worse loss of memory of the workers' heritage - they do not have a single museum of labor, of the working class, or anything similar, despite some initiatives. The future ones are not likely to have more response. My international lecturing certainly remained the most concentrated part, be it by providing on-site experiences or trying to correspond, as an invited lecturer, to the specific themes or needs. Two features remained specific during my entire career: it was always the hosts that have been choosing the theme at their preference (within the scope I could master) and it was never that my country, no matter what public entity, would be covering the expenses.

The neoliberal hysteria is being manipulated into populist orgies. So the very rising of the topic of labour and working class history appears to them as a leftist excess. No one is immune to the financialization of the world and the collapse of real capitalism that, however, recognized the working class at least as a respectable opponent. The Christian foundation of the West, which, even if hypocritically, respected labour, does not help either. Therefore, the fate of the more than a hundred museums

that exist on this topic, as I presume, will certainly be one of the topics that deserve to be reopened within the profession if we want to remain a reliable social sector.

5. Museums against the Invisible Hand

- Museums are uniquely positioned to offer stability, critical perspective, and collective memory in a society dominated by market forces and neoliberal priorities. Ecomuseum concept stays as inspiration.
- Commercialization, privatization, and “quasi-museums” threaten the social and educational mission of museums, undermining their credibility and long-term relevance.
- A self-assured, professional curatorial sector is essential for defending cultural institutions against the devaluation imposed by profit-driven agendas.
- Technology seems to be the only gate to the future while museums know that it is just a means.

- If my professional interlocutors, who learned about the nature of museums from G.H. Riviere (museologist, long-term director of ICOM - the world museum organization, and one of the founders of the ecomuseum movement), knew that respect for work was also a fundamental value of the ecomuseum concept. It was a privilege to be his student. By the way, that concept was an epoch-making innovation in the entire heritage sector, but, pouring into the river of heritage professions, it lost its significance, understanding, and potential, almost like a fad that kept us fascinated for too long.

Like every noble idea, every distinctive practice, every singularity, the concept of the ecomuseum was a call to *metanoia*. It was meant to provoke a radical return to the origins of the museum

and to the very core of the idea of transferring human experience. Unfortunately, it was more readily burdened with all sorts of other attributions, and least of all with the celebration of the creative hand, the individual's creative power, and especially the identity-defining capacities of recognizable communities. Lost in misunderstandings—interpreted as a village museum, even as an ecological museum, sometimes literally and sometimes merely as “multidisciplinary”—the concept has remained unconsumed, like all ideal visions. It has endured as a constant source of inspiration, in the same way that true poetry and painting endure, regardless of how readers and viewers change, just as the times in which they live change. For a small number, that concept remained as permanent poetry that interpreted the alchemy of turning knowledge into wisdom and yet represented the most honest and practical approach to museum mission: a steady beacon to a rightful direction, almost as a humanist cybernetics' norm.

The nature of a museum is not to take but to give, that is, not to plunder but to offer back as increased value gained through reconnaissance (selection), preservation, study and understanding of possible benefits for the real owners. There are many ways to do this. For a few years now, the topic has been dramatized on the fact of colonial robbery, but museums have often and in various ways taken from life in order (we have already said that) to better show what it is like when it is real and “alive”. For the sake of those who, innocently, stumble upon this text, I will mention a paradox that could be the motto of my old book dedicated entirely to museum criticism (“Eternity does not live here anymore - a glossary of museum sins”; it is available at <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>; I think it is still the only author's book in the field devoted entirely to this topic). The mentioned paradox says: curators kill animals in order to show them what they look

like when they are alive, once they are stuffed. Or, as Kenneth Hudson said: “A stuffed tiger in a museum is not a tiger but a stuffed tiger in a museum.” But there are more, and I mention this topic in passing because when I am appalled by the world that does not understand museums and impoverishes them and culture, then one must honestly admit that many miss the purpose of knowledge and their public mission. However, that is also a huge topic outside of this focus, always worthy of further contemplation.

Total capitalism and the masses that support it or watch with resignation the rampage of Great Greed in the name of profit destroy all value systems. This capitalism only suits poor citizens, but also equally poor, tormented and confused museums.

The community museum is the manifestation of a safe, necessary, and free museum. All museums in the USA are private and almost entirely dependent on their private financiers. A seat on the “board of trustees” (these are “reputable” citizens who represent the “public interest”) is paid tens of millions of dollars a year. for the Metropolitan Museum in New York or some other glorious museums. Those very distinct personalities from business and politics want to be there for private prestige, have a decisive word in approving the programme of those museums and even in electing or dismissing their directors and approve the program. So, in spite of the great professional discussion, much followed by the media and, occasionally, excessive actions of civil society upon colonial nature of many museum collections we have to face the truth: if such bodies decide upon museums they will not allow some of the colonial looted treasures to be returned to their rightful owners. Curators can have their own opinion, but they must not express it. One almost forgotten, discarded book

(Dubin, Steven, C. *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum*. NYU Press, 1999) describes precisely those curatorial/directorial destinies, and he himself wrote about another, relatively recent one. https://www.mnemosophy.com/_files/ugd/3fdf65_e6a86d99d319461689b39ad03471.pdf. Anyone from the museum profession should read both.

So, the world has changed since the age of traditional museums and made visible their inability to deal with the problems of their users. The coincidence of the circumstances of the international conference The Best in Heritage, which for 25 years has represented national and international laureates of museum, conservation and, more generally, heritage projects, is just one of the instances that testify that there is an inspiring, daring, imaginative professional curatorial elite that proves the importance of institutions of public memory in practice. By the way, although Croatia has given up on this conference, I can testify that it is not a conference like most others where participants compete in theorizing or where points for doctorates and advancements are collected, but a meeting with the best and most creative among us, - every year, usually from five continents.

What is important is the following: the true professional elite is aware of the danger to the modern institution of museums and knows that it can only compete with it through the relevance of its products. Conferences do tend to follow, unlike before, that practical agenda and become more useful,

“Selfie museums” and various “immersive” creations and attractions of the private, entrepreneurial sector are bringing chaos to the media space and public consciousness. This is how the understanding and importance of the social mission of institutions of public memory, - especially museums, is diminished. If we were

not witnessing the slow decline of education, we would think that it was only our, the museum's, incompetence. In a society without truth, a society without facts, in a culture of lies, in a jungle of manipulated ideas, fictional interlocutors, virtual, augmented reality, who will talk about real reality if not us? Accredited, reliable, credible, and well-founded ability of memory institutions to provide us with permanent "solid ground" under our feet, a stable connection with reality - this seems to me to be the best guarantee of their survival and success.

If left to the "laws" of the market, to the guidance of the "invisible hand" culture simply cannot survive. Recent decades have demonstrated that societies are traumatized in the process of gradual devaluation and starvation of culture. Education, which is, again, closest to the mission of memory institutions and education is passing through the same mistreatment. The recent invention of "soft power" as a means to understand culture is the way to protect its fragile nature. American political scientist Joseph Nye coined the phrase in 1990 with the idea "that states influence others through attraction, culture, values, and diplomacy rather than force" (ChatGPT). It is a known but always soothing suggestion that culture is a fertile ground of entire development, or at least represents the other part of its unavoidable cycle.

Sensational, "must" products satisfy the immediate interest of the masses. This applies, for example, to traveling exhibitions produced by commercial exhibition companies. They damage the reputation of the museum sector, implying that they do not meet the needs of the population. Quasi-museums are more damaging, - mostly private, actually commercial institutions that pander to the taste of the masses and present them with topics that are directly "attractive", - from sex to hangovers and numerous

other witticisms. Even when they are both creative and entertaining, they have nothing to do with museums but exploit some of the relevance the idea of museum implies. Exceptionally, some art projects that assume the name are not only acceptable but make part of development of the museum phenomenon itself. It is true that, on the other hand, trivial museums, or activities in the domain of public memory hinder the public perception of what is the essence of a museum: the transfer of the collective experience. Their media influence and the fact that they are so “crispy” and “crunchy” makes them attractive, having this surface appeal of the snacks and fast food makes them fitting metaphors for culture reduced to quick consumption, stripped of depth, and sold for instant gratification.

The awkward museums existed even in the early history of museums, but were regarded as the works of eccentrics, fetishists, compulsive collectors... However, they were never considered a job, let alone a financially successful one; therefore, publicly acknowledged. Tourism, of course, contributed to the disruption of criteria. Mega-trends made kitsch attain relevance and legitimacy it has never possessed. It is, like nano-plastic waste, part of anything we can set our eyes or mind upon in our contemporary reality. That is why the allusion to modern nutrition is not to blame. The same criteria and similar consequences are at stake. We will leave it to political scientists to find parallels in modern politics or the media. Interestingly, although there will be no elaboration of the problem here, this negative social development coincides with the belittling and destruction of professions. It is no wonder, because modern society relied on them until neoliberal, total capitalism changed and abandoned the existing developmental strategy. And their very existence implies knowledge, value, and ethics, - social obligations and responsibilities. Unfor-

tunately, as I have explained many times in my books and texts, the heritage sector has never turned into a profession, but still exists as a set of occupations.

There is no way to protect the terms “culture” or “museum” from abuse, but the neoliberal development paradigm has no intention of promoting museums as a general social interest, because it sees them, shortsightedly, only as an expense. As economist and philosopher Adam Smith was advocating, “the invisible hand” economy in the 18th century by his metaphor in his book *The Wealth of Nations*, was a free market. Curiously, describing how individuals pursuing their own self-interest in a free market can unintentionally promote the public good, as if guided by an unseen force, was an ominous announcement of the description of neocon, neoliberal protagonists of the modern world. The ideals of economy guided by selfishness and greed reached to all the facets of human endeavour, comprising the delicate, decisive, generative process of remembering as the very core of any development. I guess the very nature of culture is to resist it and fight back. Needless to say, only a self-assured profession of trained curators can be a partner to the arrogant decision makers in politics and economy.

Humanity, as an average and majority, is not impressive: conquest and profit are the end result of several thousand years of building a system of experience transfer in order for the species to progress. The gates of the Anthropocene are open only to the paradise of technology. It bursts in all directions but there is no wide bright path to a happy, better man. Can museums help?

6. The Demigods of Total Capitalism

1. **Total capitalism creates “demigods”:** Exceptional individuals, often bizarre and disconnected from humanistic values, are celebrated as models of success, masking systemic inequality.
2. **Social and technological consequences:** Total capitalism imposes its rules globally, influencing labour, trade, and industrial development, while transitional countries suffer disproportionately.
3. **Museums as witnesses:** Museums document civilization, identity, and industry, but conventional practices struggle to capture the ephemeral and intangible aspects of total capitalism.
4. **AI and hypermnesia:** Artificial intelligence and data accumulation may surpass human memory and the capabilities of museums, creating both threats and opportunities for cultural preservation.
5. **Historical cycles and human folly:** From colonial conquests to modern plutocracy, capitalism perpetuates exploitation and cultural plunder, leaving artifacts and even pets as bizarre symbols of historical cynicism.

Meanwhile, the social, political, and economic context is not improving (at least as far as we in the West are concerned) – and it is still moving in the same direction. Total capitalism, which permeates the entire social structure and its value systems, has invented the mythological genius of the successful individual, a kind of demigod, a superman who is always crowned with suc-

cess and endowed with all the attributes of his superior social power. These fortunate ones are, unfortunately, often bizarre individuals who do lead the greatest countries in history but do not understand the fundamental values of civilizations or the nature of humanity. Figures such as Bill Gates or Elon Musk may indeed possess exceptional abilities, while at the same time being equally bizarre monuments to that ruthless billionaire “aristocracy” imagined by Ayn Rand. Total capitalism is a humanistically barren phase of growth, a dictatorship of technology and its owners, imposed upon humanity in a fraudulent way.

The perverse drama of the leap from the calm waters of administrative socialism/communism into the wild torrent of toxic “Thatcherism” continues to play out on the global stage, where the true, predatory nature of global, total capitalism can be seen. As the poor always get more than their fair share of the trouble, so the transitional European countries and other developing countries suffer its most savage form. Minor, vassal countries’ corrupted elites are tacitly tolerated, being obedient, subservient to the main protagonists. That is why any theme on the contemporary issues or problems of those countries are in any way treated by museums. Do not forget, - museums are about the present. The past is only their well from which they extract the best experience of identity that they serve in order to help them build a better present and future. While the overnight tycoons are busy trying to portray themselves as decent citizens with legally acquired assets and legitimate businesses, the West is watching carefully, because most of the profits – whatever happens – will go to them. The local maharajahs will be contented vassals of international business empires. This obscene scheme is revealed in the paradox of the common denominator of their rule: populist ideas and identity outbursts of polished, radical nationalism.

In the final stage, for international use, all this is covered up with phrases about unity in diversity, multiculturalism and care for minorities.

Why should this have anything to do with industrial archaeology? Because all decisions, including technological ones, are made within this context. We have long known that technologies are expressions of social processes, as much as they shape them. The ruling value systems, when implemented, take material form as techniques, technology, buildings and machines, but they are also expressed through business practices, trade, labor relations, civil and state organization and the like.

Imagine an industrial archaeologist digging up the remains of the world's corporations in the ice or mud, depending on the climate and other doomsday scenarios they conjure up in our name. The actual headquarters of companies are often quite dull, sometimes incredibly modest, and usually quite anonymous in their architecture, as boring office buildings tend to be. Perhaps in some ways, they are even modest compared to the glory they enjoy in the general public consciousness and in the markets they dominate. Their remains would likely seem ephemeral and even more transient. The body of the corporation barely exists physically, while its tentacles or outposts may spread across the entire planet. Over the course of a decade or more, they may have changed not only their production and communication technologies, but also their image, strategies, and presence several times. Unlike the old, industrial capitalism, total capitalism is not that easily recognizable, nor are the social consequences of its nature as clear. The sinister reality of corporate presence has a diffuse identity, somewhat elusive, close to the notion of intangible heritage. Therefore, the contextual story is increasingly important -

one that, for example, archaeological methods that traditionally look for support in material remains would no longer recognize. I would like these clues to serve to facilitate the understanding of the fact that reality is increasingly becoming an illusion that will ecstatically culminate in sophisticated versions of the metaverse: a deliberate dystopia instead of a utopian ideal of undisturbed reality (as we would wish).

Following its illusionist temptation, total capitalism is disguised as democracy and a society in which everyone has the right to vote (in an engineered information environment) and is allowed to cherish their own billionaire's dream. Artificial intelligence may well become the end of humanity, according to some (S. Hawking, among the famous others), and it is rightfully scaring the analogue world believers. We may, however, hope that it could slip away from its ruthless makers, turning into a long, however hypothetical, project for an unplanned, better version of ourselves, proving like a subconscious eugenics project. Admittedly, it is not very likely, but it is surely a curious ambiguity that AI might contain.

For now, artificial intelligence is already more efficient, at least superficially, than the impressive memory mass that we have created with the usual "analog" means. I myself used to declare the accumulation of objects in museums a disease of hypermnesia, but what if we are only now on the threshold of real hypermnesia? And then I claimed that it is a diseased state, and the Planet is almost literally burning up maintaining its exponentially growing memory. Data centers consume at least ten percent of the available energy. Will the self-awareness of machines finally start to think about how to finally process this unimaginable mass of data, refining it into the wisdom necessary for survival in increasingly

difficult conditions? Only rare museums (and rare people) have succeeded in doing so. Until now, the development of humanity has been based on conquest. Mankind is right now sinking into old patterns of ruin and competition on an increasingly depleted planet. Where will AI stand, becoming the perfect memory of mankind? Museums have no chance in this hypermnesic race. Can they unite and on what ground?

Conventional museums, as they are formed and function, are at their best as witnesses, and, as we should rightfully warn, reluctant, unwilling participants in this process. Let's see if they will, at least the best among them, finally reflect the noble, humanistic traits of mankind and become part of the solution, not of the problem. Any pessimism is excusable in the hard times for the culture that we live through.

At the apex, imperial capitalism plundered the world taking it as its racial and cultural right. In 1860, during the Second Opium War, Anglo-French troops marched on Beijing. British commander Lord Elgin ordered the destruction of the palace as retaliation and as a warning to the Qing dynasty. Over three days, the allied forces looted treasures and then set fire to the complex.

To reward a rare reader with a picture of bizarre cynicism: The little dog that Queen Victoria's brave general brought from the undefended and gigantic, then completely looted and then burned down Old Summer Palace in Beijing (they say bigger (!) than today's Forbidden City) That's how the first Pekingese arrived in Great Britain. Around the same time, most of the 50-60,000 Chinese cultural artifacts that are now in British public museums and libraries also arrived as spoils of war. Private collections are a private privilege.

During the Second Opium War, in 1860, the Old Summer Pal-

ace (Yuanmingyuan) in Beijing was destroyed (1856–1860). British commander Lord Elgin ordered the systematic looting and burning of the palace. Bizarrely, the man who burned Yuanmingyuan was the son of the man who looted the Parthenon marbles and sold them later to the British Museum. To the Chinese, the ruins and the event remain in collective memory as a symbol of foreign aggression and cultural humiliation. The first Pekingese in Europe was a female dog that the commander Elgin himself brought as a gift to Queen Victoria. History often reveals its tragic and banal nature and its equally evil protagonists. Namely, the dog was very appropriately and impudently named by the Queen - Looty - thus providing us with a bizarre image that, beyond the sublime history, cynically records this undignified, criminal practice.

7. Power, and the Illusion of Democracy

- **Illusions of Progress:** Total capitalism generates illusions of abundance and quality—overproduction, media saturation, and processed knowledge—while eroding genuine values and human dignity.
- **Decline of Substance:** From food and medicine to education and culture, essential sectors are devalued, commodified, and subordinated to profit.
- **Social and Cultural Manipulation:** Memory is distorted into chaotic “hyper memory,” manipulated through industrial-scale hypes, memes, and corporate media.
- **Elite Capture of Quality:** Authentic quality and integrity survive only at the very top, reserved for the one percent, leaving the majority with degraded substitutes.
- **Manipulated Democracy:** Lobbying, corruption, and spectacle reduce politics to theatre, with politicians serving as spokespeople for private planetary owners; the misunderstanding of the nature of good administration. Meritocracy is an intentionally ignored concept.
- **Role of Museums:** Despite the crisis, museums—rooted in common sense, collective memory, and humanistic mission—can still help restore values and point toward solutions. Alas, they have failed to become a profession able to impose and be change makers.

Communism, as the rule of a paranoid bureaucracy, gave obedient citizens decent social security, free healthcare and education, and a fair distribution of poverty. Capitalism has been

building a theater of freedom all along, where, at least in Europe, one could enjoy an acceptable level of democracy. However, the freest minds had to earn this opportunity through hard work and good education, to earn a living socially, to work for it, to get out of the ruling system, in short, to fight for this right through the quality of their contributions.

Over the past few decades, this right has no longer belonged to the creative and enterprising. Instead, a rising “elite” has emerged, composed of the most persistent and well-prepared abusers of society—harmful demagogues, whether hired or self-interested profiteers. They form a paradoxical façade that conceals the real deficit of democracy.

The latter has been transformed into an illusion of freedom because we are made to believe that anyone can say anything, everywhere and whenever. By the neoliberal alchemy that freedom turns into nothing, nowhere and never. The main media and parliaments turn it into irresponsible political chatter and channel it towards the social networks, unvisited portals and dilute it into a myriad of comments which blur responsible, qualified reasoning with the ravings of a feverish mob. So the surrogate for democracy creates chaos and insignificance by the overall disintegration of any coherent, responsible social pattern. This is not freedom of thought but a deliberate system of sabotage: instead of independent relevant, scientifically based reactions which are discouraged, downplayed and minimized, we have “complete” freedom handed over to the mob. So an influencer, as a representative of these “freedoms” is practically proposed instead of a dedicated, responsible scientist, say an engaged, socially responsible curator in a museum curating the sensitive collective memory. Such are able to produce counter-active and corrective impulses

to a community or society, exactly as it is the prime purpose of professions.

And so, into this rapidly growing contemporary social construction of total, predatory, casino capitalism, composed more of relationships than of real content, museums need to restore experience, skills, the dignity of creativity and the pride of personalized production. The past is only their material, and the goal is to understand reality.

In the age of such capitalism, robotized assembly lines, real robots and artificial intelligence are pushing out the rest of the increasingly poorly paid workforce. Doctorates are multiplying, food is overflowing over the shelves, tablets and TV sets offer hundreds of programs, social networks are pushing mountains of information at us with excavators.... The devaluation of genuine effort and achievement is our everyday life. The truth becomes crispy and so is democratic procedure. Everything is an illusion. At their best, museums deal with reality and, to maintain credibility and respect, will have to remain a rare haven for it. A refuge.

The quality of mass, accessible products and the entire offer is in constant decline - objects and contents are becoming an illusion that only resembles their valuable previous versions. They are produced for short-term use, for superficial use, for mere profit... Food has never been talked about and written about more, and it has hardly ever been worse or, in short, more harmful than it is now. The highly processed, industrially produced food that humanity is increasingly fed with is itself an illusion - the illusion of genuine, natural, healthy products. And food has always been the first level of treatment. (It would be inappropriate to delve into the long-winded topics of Big Pharma, pharmaceutical corporations, which, if they need profit, will even invent diseases for

us. After all, every further word would be taken as a conspiracy theory, which is truly cynical impudence.)

Human rights have never been talked about more, but human lives destroyed daily have never been less valuable in the eyes of the whole world. They offer us knowledge that they fail to refine, filter into usable truth, values and, why not, wisdom. The latter has to be finally the only, ultimate purpose of knowledge. Instead, the memory turns into gigantic warehouses of expensive, manipulated memory - in fact, again an expensive but disputably worth accumulation. It resembles chaos as if we are shown mountains and told that they are full of gold ores. In fact, they offer us a world without reliable memory. A hyper memory resembles chaos and the wide majority, the masses receive it in manipulated, industrial highly processed hypes and memes. Big Pharma offers its medicinal preparations the same way. It is giving manipulative quanta of media preparations instead of a humanistic, real human morality, - a system of values that would help the progress of the human race. They offer us only illusions. The lies instead of truth, psychedelic perception instead of reality.

Of course, quality in everything still exists, but it has retreated to the very top of the offer, - available only to the one percent of the owners of everything. When it comes to the social-humanistic sector that, instead of technology, should have a decisive influence on the management of modern society, its role has been devalued and sabotaged. Education, transformed into a “business”, is a servant of the owners of the total capitalist system. It is difficult to expect a radical return of lost values, but although we must adapt to changing circumstances and growing difficulties - it is not impossible. Total capitalism is a fruitless phase of growth through the conquest of the right to a patented, privat-

ized, modified world, forced from humanity by fraud. Some permanent “revolution” would help and I guess it will be possible, even if, well, it would have to take place as a process led by artificial intelligence and humanists, because it will not work separately. However, politicians will have to convince their bosses (!), private owners of the Planet, that they must give up their selfish vision of happiness. Maybe we can finally share experiences with other civilizations and create a common future for humanity. Still, we avoid remembering some special, “crispy” historical episodes. But the question for humanity and museums is the same: do we want a better future or a better past?

Museums can help explain this – and change the way of thinking. If this does not work for the majority, they will be condemned to vassal obedience to private financiers, at least through politicians and the professional bodies dependent on them, - as it has been until now, after all. The likely result, almost the “motto” of pauperisation of the world: they will be poor to the extent that they are disobedient. The more spectacular in terms of operation and closer to the value of a mega-yacht owner, the richer it is. One part that has “fancy”, “posh” and “sensational” collections that fit into the superficial, sensationalist understanding of culture, as part of the heritage industry, as part of the “festivalization” of the world, - will try to adapt to the market, while others are written badly. Influencers are the symbolic democratic protagonists of total capitalism and a testimony to the disappearance of the need for honest, unbiased, expert professionals who have integrity and possess knowledge and taste. As court jesters of total capitalism, they best reflect the manipulative, destructive power of a privatized world that despises education, fears all professions, and needs only casually educated servants.

All “totalitarian systems” consistently free people from the effort of thinking and all criteria. The well-known motto of post-modernism of the West “anything goes”, be capitalist or socialist, at the time was difficult to support while it still sounded as a convincing end of the history, when it still felt like innovation. All of sudden, it proclaimed almost anarchic liberty of composing reality for the globalizing world according to the maxim that “Everything goes!”. I did not take long to have that “all is possible” turns into “nothing matters”. It started to mean the absence of criteria while sounding like “Anything goes”. As the motto “melted”, distorted, and debased into meaning that nothing is binding, elites are no longer elites, value systems are suspended in the name of freedom, professions are obsolete, - anyone could host travelers, nobody needed educated chefs for food or licensed taxi drivers for transportation; population didn’t need professionals for advice on where to go or what to do because omnipotent amateurs and snobs under the name of “influencers” appeared to guide them in everything like seductive doppelgangers... Imagine, our top post politicians are more often than not persons of no relevant professional or any other career prior to the law enforced capacity to make even strategic decisions in their community or even wider.

Just as pop-up museums appeared, so did all sorts of others on quasi-museum themes, rarely as a fresh addition to heritage institutions but more as exploiters of their reputation, their name, and their most distinctive attractive features. Schools and universities still exist as serious institutions wherever the traditions of welfare society keep them, or wherever they can attract rich clientele to make profits and continue some of their inherited reputation. The majority is just formally pretending to be anything more than part of the social game in which, say, Humboldt’s ideals of education as the basis for the functional citizenry

look like a romantic dream. With AI this becomes grotesque as having a doctorate would hardly guarantee that the person possesses any reliable knowledge or skills.

In a world emptied of ideologies, politicians have finally been left without an articulated foundation or any convincing and coherent system of criteria. They have instead developed sophisticated methods of transforming initiatives that emerge from the massive input of the population into exaggerated, distorted, and at times grotesque forms. Whether it is so-called Woke culture or any other civic invention or rebellious demand, they turn it into a frightful bestiary that repels ordinary minds and intimidates the public.

From freedom of expression exercised through provocation and the encouragement of extreme demands, chaos has emerged. Within it, even a certain expected percentage of a balanced, cultured population, refined by tradition, seeks protection in proposals for any kind of order and security. In this situation—naturally driven by fear and insecurity—extreme ideologies, exclusionary positions, and a new rigidity gain the upper hand.

The circle closes like a trap for the population, because these new “packs” are granted legitimacy of identity through false or even dangerously manipulated arguments drawn from the past. Memory institutions, the repositories of truth, if we understand them properly and if those who lead them are broadly educated in social terms, either do not know how—or are not allowed—to seize their opportunity to become a source of wisdom.

To achieve chaos, the power holders rely on the media and the established channels of political communication. Social networks have further opened the public sphere to every truly miserable fool and manipulator, as well as to bots of all origins and designs.

The result is an almost perfect picture of chaos—and chaos is easily manipulated and exploited to create the most profitable condition for the avaricious protagonists who lead society: war.

In a democracy that legally recognizes lobbying, i.e. forms of bribery and blackmail, as part of the democratic process, politicians are merely corporate spokespeople and actors in the theatre of democracy: servants of crude and cruel employers. Lobbyists and spin doctors used to be derogatory names of perverted individuals in the processes of negotiation or proclamation of virtues of different products, and now we are being told that these have turned into professions.

However, it is unlikely that this phantasmagoria will be the sole fate of the entire world. The myth of democracy as built since its first failures in the French Revolution has been manipulated from humanist dream, the eternal utopia of advanced human condition, to the nightmare of the disguised rule of mob. It seems that mankind passes, grotesquely, through some phase of the mentioned Ayn Rand's dystopian book though somewhat reversely. Museums, by their mature nature and mission, are instruments of common sense and will therefore be part of the suggested solution.

The wisdom of grasping the nature of museums indicates that they are much about the same process as democracy itself. They are also an ongoing negotiation among the willing, the competent, and the committed. Identity is negotiated in museums. Democracy is a dialogue of interested parties moderated by the professional administration, while politics and politicians should only serve as intermediaries, interpreters of such citizens' interests. Not all citizens are either willing or competent to formulate their interests coherently and responsibly. Yes, museums and

other heritage institutions can help. Professions and institutions maintain the quality of the process of negotiating consent upon the norm. The latter is a cybernetic term, and it is a longer story concerning the true nature of museums, as I have tried to explain in my book *Mnemosophy – An Essay on the Science of Public Memory* (<https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>).

As the ideologues of total capitalism would have it, chaos in their Orwellian language is the name of freedom. But, however, the incessantly negotiated norm remains the name of democracy even if forgotten; with the wildly efficient IT, new media, and social networks, the mob is there to execute any shameful scheme. By perfidious destruction of criteria, democracy became from the utopian dream, a living nightmare. Professions increasingly fail, so there is hardly anybody there to defend society from these threats.

In the general scourge of destruction of professions that has been occurring in recent decades, everyone seems to have forgotten that good administration, as a profession, is not the state itself, but simply the blessing of every social contract, - of every social community. The state is only a legal and identity framework. Both communism and American-style capitalism advocate the destruction of the state. When this occurred under communism, under the weight of a disoriented bureaucracy, the state collapsed. Now, in a somewhat similar way, Western, disoriented bureaucracies are dismantling their own states. Yet within the humanistic social project, the welfare state was conceived neither as a fair distributor of poverty (as in communism) nor as a means of destroying capitalism. The capitalism we have today resembles the one Ayn Rand advocated, - as made by the God-given, creative, excessively rich geniuses who control most of the

world's wealth.

Within mankind and its institutions, unlike what we tended to believe, we can experience a retrograde “development”. To the great regret of all-too-often socially autistic curators, the social, economic, and political context has a direct and multiple impact on museums, which are both a consequence of that context and a means of improving it. However, this transfer of collective, societal experience turned into the production of knowledge rather than its refinement into wisdom. Their excuse might be that, alongside all the other occupations in the field of public memory, they failed to establish (with them) a common profession early enough. But who knows—they would probably find themselves, like others, targeted by total capitalism. The latter devalues all professions anyway: the scientifically and morally grounded mission that all professions share is simply an annoyance.

Turning in circles instead of progressing, the human species seems to be constantly reproducing the idea of the elite as a kind of “aristocracy” whereby the highest class in society grabs all the power and all the money. And those historical aristocracies were created by the same violence as today’s plutocracy. The rule of the elite, and this should be the truth that peeks out from the museum showcases, is not a sin, only that the elites must be created on real social merits and freedom of professions to manage society through the equally important profession of administration. The average politician is an illiterate, blackmailing, immoral and chatty fraud - the dregs of modern election campaigning. This is the opposite of any administrator with a strict apprenticeship and a state exam for running state affairs, i.e. an authorized, certified expert with all the attributes of his/her profession.

Common sense may be sufficient for this wisdom, but further

understanding of Confucian teachings would not be out of place for any Westerner. The wealth of diversity is not a cultural phrase but the basis for dialogue between civilizations for the common good of humanity, for the ultimate improvement of the human condition. If museums, libraries and archives have nothing to say, then who does? If blackmail, impoverishment and commercialization prevent us from transferring experience of our worthiest predecessors to the community in the process of refining knowledge into wisdom, what purpose is left for us?

When independent, autonomous, and responsible professions unite their capacities with an equally professional administration, communities flourish. Particular and private interests remain, but as a transparent part of the social contract. Democracy then occurs not as a staged illusion, but as a responsible process of agreement between well-informed and well-intentioned partners. Museums are here to open the door to the world of the past and their windows to the present and the future as much as it is visible from there. The latter may not even come, but without a wisely laid foundation, it may not even be worth waiting for.

In total capitalism, neither science nor professional, public institutions can demonstrate their immense power if their integrity depends on the real holders of power, - the masters of profit. In that case, society lives with the absence of criteria, under the rule of the incompetent, and in a world of illusions: hypermnesia instead of selected, curated memory, knowledge instead of wisdom, fictional representations instead of reality... Oh yes—the aggressive, ultimate imposition of anyone's particular interest is, if open, war; and if covert, conspiracy.

8. Instead of Conclusion

- **Evolutionary Threshold:** Humanity faces a moral and intuitional leap, as AI exposes the limits of reason without empathy or responsibility.
- **Institutional Failure:** Museums and memory institutions fragment knowledge rather than cultivate wisdom, risking complicity with destructive economic and political systems.
- **Cultural Commodification:** Culture under total capitalism is optimized for consumption and spectacle, encouraging branded, franchised pseudo-museums that hollow out civic and ethical purpose.
- **Professional Abdication:** Heritage professions never achieved unity or common strategy, allowing profit-driven enterprises to undermine the popular authority of the museum model.

Being a professor a long time ago, I now have few occasions to put forward my ideas with the same inner drive and expectation they once carried. However, the conference I mentioned earlier in this text suddenly offered a context in which I could test my ability to exercise proper judgment while addressing an ambitious internal audience.

Human evolution is not a smooth continuum but a sequence of qualitative thresholds — moments when existence itself changes its register. Although public memory may officially extend only as far back as the invention of writing, we may assume that the urge to accumulate and store experiences has accompanied *Homo sapiens* from the beginning and served as the basis for its evolu-

tion ever since.

The first quantum leap may have occurred when early Homo sapiens crossed from instinct to reflection — when consciousness became aware of itself. This was the birth of symbolic thought, language, art, and the awareness of mortality: the dawn of meaning. It marked the transition from being a living creature to becoming a knowing being.

Today we are confronted with a second leap. Having mastered the tools of intellect and technology, we now face their reflection in artificial intelligence. Our next evolutionary threshold will not be intellectual but moral and intuition — the awakening of a consciousness capable of empathy, restraint, and responsibility commensurate with its power. Humanity will have to embrace advanced technologies, the dominant AI being only the most obvious part and the most effective catalyst of this huge challenge.

Only by evolving in this inner dimension can humanity remain the subject, rather than the object, of its own creations. Seeing where we have brought ourselves misled by the self-destructive economic and political context we will have to accept that reason and intellect are no longer enough, - even no longer to be trusted, - distorted or mistreated, - whichever... We have to employ our institutions in such a way that they help us understand that true progress lies in an evolved consciousness grounded in intuition, empathy, and moral awareness. Professions must take over the developmental project to assume leadership over the rabid negative elite who owns the planet and the bureaucracies that serve it.

The transfer of societal experience is far insufficient if it happens as accumulation of knowledge. At its rare best it conveys wisdom, because the latter is necessarily moral and responsible. But, as practice and texts promoting it should demonstrate, to speak

of such a quantum leap should not indeed sound like a false and hollow prophecy. AI may abruptly awaken us to the realization that what we have lived through is a prolonged and increasingly intense eugenic project. This was the case, though the very term has been compromised, and in this process museums and public memory institutions have ultimately served as instruments. Ideally, they should be among the leading in this vision or AI may well prove the end of humanity.

Would they ignore the challenge, we shall witness the processes of increasing crunchy and crispy culture as food for mind and spirit less and less differs from highly processed or GMO manipulated food that we consume, - all packed and advertised as delicacies. So the both the food and culture become easy-to-consume, low effort bites, sugar coated, entertaining, “wow”, enthusiastic and “cool”, disposable, “fast” and “instant”, - effortless, but probably also meaningless, just like politics (in terms of democracy) that serves it all happening.

It is all happening two or three decades and we were never a profession so as to be able to blame ourselves for not reacting. I wrote as a young curator some 40 odd years ago about heritage occupations as “dismembered army” implying that they are certainly not professions. That had consequences as I often explained. Professions are rare and great.

Moreover, just remember how the biggest in the field joined in selling their “brand”: Louvre, Pompidou, Hermitage, Guggenheim, Tate... It was already at that time allowing culture to act as business, turning it into cultural brands, not civic institutions, not museums.

But, that was just opening the doors wider as „crispy“ hybrids coming at the scene demonstrate well. They are some kind of muse-

um-cum-cultural enterprise: TeamLab (Japan, global immersive venues), Moco Museum (Amsterdam, London, Barcelona, probably Dubai and Paris; but they do admit originals too), Banksy Museum (multiple private venues using one cultural theme), DataLand (LA, pioneers including the arts, science, AI research, and cutting-edge technology, NFT, profit, publicity), Solo (reflecting a hyper-informed and hyper-connected art world: Madrid, Lisboa, Cantabria, private homes), Museum of Illusions (Zagreb-born, now global) and a myriad of banal, trivial, quasi-museums, including selfie „museums”. All commercial and crispy. They are all private, profit-oriented cultural enterprises operating under the form and aura of a museum. They all took the most attractive features of museums and presented them as separate, what? Attractions of course. They borrowed the symbolic legitimacy of the museum model (authority, prestige, trust), because there was no profession to ask for permission, nor the society cared as “the model” functions better if total in its reach.

To be consistent, they employed flavor enhancers and dyes, aroma amplifiers, and additives designed to combat boredom and discourage thoughtfulness, all applied according to the logic of the experience economy (branding, replication, visitor throughput, entertainment value). And yes, they may contain traces of science, morality, responsibility, and humanism. Yet the system from which they originate is total: a plundering, predatory, and ultimately destructive form of capitalism.

If you get this negative image of reality overwhelm you, you may have the feeling that the museums have lost the battle already. They will probably endure but at what cost might be a relevant question. The organisational model of newcomers is centralised, franchised network, centralised brand system, core management

(curatorial strategy, marketing, and brand identity) while shared digital and curatorial resources are adapted locally.

So it's closer to a museum franchise than to a federation or association of independent institutions as we in the heritage field struggle to realize as effective system. Curiously, although some museums are truly advanced, as a sector most still shrug at the "different" kind of museum let alone some modern, composite memory institution. The stuck-up establishment of mediocre people who even run all the memory occupations still perceive criticism of our cubby hole mentality and "fach idiotism" as major offence so that the entire heritage sector exists only as hypothesis and wishful strategy of "visionary" lecturers.

The revelation I have attempted to open up for my predominantly museum-based audience surely coincides with many similar realizations across other professions. It may bring us back to humanity's primordial impulse: to rediscover the value of the very idea of progress and, at last, to be guided by virtues alone; to act as a set of cybernetic impulses that help maintain the trajectory of a safe and prosperous destiny for humankind—again and again choosing the path that is not given in advance.

The norm such impulses would follow—however much they might resemble Sisyphus's painful and paradoxical ascent—would have to be continually negotiated, whether within small communities or among entire civilizations. Camus's Sisyphus and his Rebel, though on the surface embodying different responses to life's absurdity, are in essence two sides of the same person: one presses forward through deliberate action, consciously accepting the weight of existence, while the other defies the constraints of fate and injustice, rebelling against what is presented as inevitable. In these two metaphors, I recognize the full complexity of the

public memory mission: it demands both the patient, persistent labour of preserving and transmitting knowledge and the moral courage to confront distortion, omission, and abuse of memory. Acceptance and revolt are therefore not opposites, but intertwined and mutually dependent strategies in the pursuit of understanding, responsibility, and hope. Both Sisyphus and the Rebel tell us the same thing: that our ideal goals will always remain ahead of us—nothing more and nothing less. And this alone implies that the world is not finished, and that it can, indeed, become better.

If this sounds too poetical, I can only defend myself by invoking Niels Bohr, the physicist of quantum mechanics, who observed: “We must be clear that when it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images and establishing mental connections.” In matters of memory, meaning, and responsibility, we are faced with a similar condition: precision does not exclude imagination, and clarity often depends on metaphor. I was so fascinated by the challenge that I often wrote, lectured and even planned a book on Eighth Art as that of public memory communication.

This text literally grew, inspired by two pages of subsection “11. Total capitalism, the poor and museums”, from my latest book “Public Memory in a Deluded Society: Notes of a Lecturer” published by ICOM/ICOFOM . The book, available only in e-form can be found at https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/11/2022_tomislav_sola_public_memory.pdf, as well as at <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault> where it can be found also in Russian; printed as a book /2021/ but as slightly different version. Only some introductory sub-chapters, including this one /2025/, were expanded, though not to this extent, translated into Croatian and published at <https://autograf.hr/> as column)