

# The main task of institutions of public memory is to enable understanding of the world

Tomislav Šola, June, 2024

Understanding the world is largely about choosing the right attitude, way of thinking, value system from which we look at it, but also from the available offer of providers of usable, filtered knowledge. On any variety, be it institutions or individuals, the understanding of the world of the latter depends on the character of the sources of information we use and the intentions they contain. Unfortunately, media and political messages are strongly polluted by private interests and are increasingly manipulative. We can only oppose these discredited sources to public institutions and hope that they will maintain a minimum of freedom and integrity so that they can propose a scientifically based, socially responsible and morally impartial position.

Much of what we strive to achieve in museums stems from how convinced we are of our social mission. On the other hand, much of what a community seeks to gain as an understanding of its own reality in time and space, in any aspect, will directly depend on what sources it uses as relevant to that end. : a system of values that they respect, supports (frame of reference. So, on the one hand, there is a belief that we must build relevance and trust and justified expectations from a public institution (or one that is declared to serve the public interest), moreover, that we must raise our quality, - and with on the other hand, we don't have a neutral context, and neither does the public. It seems paradoxical, but at some crucial moment the public can threaten or belittle the quality, because it has too few expectations and too low criteria. In a post-democratic society, the level of collective consciousness can be fatally dependent on the media and politics to that same majority, now according to general belief, they are not inclined: they overwhelm it with ignorance, collective obsessions and lowering the criteria of values.

(Those who are somewhat aware of museums will remember that those among them who offer sensations, attractions and so-called "blockbuster" exhibitions, which in small environments like ours are usually part of the new, routine international cultural business, are doing ever better. This business is thriving on inferiority complex of smaller, vassal nations and incompetence of politically positioned directors who do not know or do not respect the museum profession; one does not expect, understandably, that the public is at all aware of the difficulties of museums that swim "upstream" of these trends).

But how can we ensure public attention and relevance? Only, by serving its needs, using the enormous wisdom that we have gathered as a sector and doing it with the self-awareness of a profession that changes the world for the better. It sounds ugly, but impression books best show that the public is mostly of good will, trusting towards museums but also ignorant, - without clear demands and cultural taste that would formulate them. There is no other or lesser benefit that we could aim for. It is not presumptuous: with a big goal in mind, quite small things can be done leading to greater impact. The mission is important. The world is

drowning in data, information and knowledge, but in it we are clearly regressing as a human species due to a lack of wisdom. We need to attract our communities of users by providing a practical, enriching, beneficial impact on their lives. If we cannot do this as institutions of public memory, we will be doomed to increasing irrelevance as forgotten cemeteries of great human experience or just another entertainment industry. A less knowledgeable museum connoisseur should know that this, even if imaginary, heritage profession often loses a lot of its once indisputable public trust. When it is not very obvious, it is a matter of comfort provided by examples of advanced practice, but also of a decline in criteria in the context of wanton neoliberalism. The choice of viewpoint and the resulting context determine what we think and how we act.

Communism and Soviet-style socialism have failed. Their historical idealism had the power of inspiration, but it never constituted a practical plan. It was only natural that ideals were hijacked by bureaucracy. The amount of absolute power that was protected by big ideas was barely manageable. The more grandiose the ideal, the stronger the manipulation. But such was the idea of capitalism that was stolen from believers in human creativity and entrepreneurship by fraudsters and thugs among tycoons and bandit politicians; their credibility deserves to be called false elites. The monstrous power won in a few decades, since the 80s, has been usurped under the alibi of unlimited individual freedom within a deregulated economy and the supremacy of individualism. The goal was hidden, this time with libertarian ideology and the attractive "image" of successful participants of boundless greed. Its result is that the owners of half the wealth of the planet can fit on one bus.

The planet is now closer to self-destruction than it has ever been. Social humanism in the welfare state, as Europe has successfully proposed for decades, remains the most likely solution to our problems, but it is increasingly eluding us. Now, when neoliberalism is so firmly installed, overthrowing the power based on an unprecedented concentration of money seems impossible by some legitimate, evolutionary means. The welfare state guaranteed its citizens free access to air, water, education, healthcare, culture, science... everything that was taken for granted before the 1980s. In any decent society of equal opportunity and government based on personal merit, institutions of public memory are very accessible, if not completely free, to all citizens. But the ideal of a noble social contract has been brutally snatched from the reach of modern civil society despite the entreaty in the so-called the "civilian" character and values by which it is guided. Thus, paradoxically, the idea of civic prosperity was devalued through their supposedly independent association. The creation of modern states involved a constant striving for the humanization of society, which was always threatened by latent temptations to the contrary. This is how public institutions were created, which are now being robbed of their legitimacy and endangering their independence. Now this social project of a society of freedom and prosperity has been rejected and discredited with hollow arguments in the name of failed revolutionary experiments.

Social experience concentrated in all knowledge should by definition be public property, especially in knowledge and values from the domain of social sciences and humanities. A legitimate and justified demand for access to all knowledge is a condition for a prosperous world, safe for humans as well as for (other) animals and for nature. The very essence of public memory institutions is enlightening, - meant to participate in development decisions or at least the worldview that creates them. Knowing the world and understanding the nature of its condition is therefore the only starting point for a meaningful stance on issues of public

memory. In other words, if you do not understand the world, you are not qualified to manage its interpretation. The paradox of the profession is that it works weakest in critical circumstances, crisis periods in the world like the one we are going through, - that is, when it is most needed. Then, like any system of great public influence, it is mostly suppressed and controlled by the rulers of our destinies. You have noticed, we are being overwhelmed more and more by knowledge and less and less by wisdom, which, let's not be fooled, is primarily humanistically responsible and ethically chosen and transmitted knowledge.

(This text is much enlarged, reinterpreted subchapter "**5. Understanding of the world is choosing the vantage point**" from the book "*Public memory in a deluded society: Notes of a Lecturer*" dostupne na [https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/11/2022\\_tomislav\\_sola\\_public\\_memory.pdf](https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/11/2022_tomislav_sola_public_memory.pdf), and at: <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>)