

# Understanding the world is the basis of every profession

(expanded notes of a lecturer)

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## Introduction

In a column I run for some time in Croatia (<https://www.autograf.hr/category/mnemosofija/>) I occasionally use some tiny chapters from my book on public memory, which was written and published in English by ICOFOM (Public Memory in a Deluded Society, 2022; <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>). It is my long-time obsession to affirm that there is a need and a chance that we form a great profession out of the dismembered memory institutions sector. Such would then represent a move towards strategic partnership so lacking in the growing sector of public memory. Ideally, creating a sort of mega profession of heritage curators, well positioned and strong to propose strategies, would make possible participation in decision making while serving society with its developmental potential. How on Earth can we move forwards as mankind if we are not able to profit from this immense, collected, researched, selected, studied, recorded, cared for and communicated human experience? Heritage curators need to be (or in some cases are) alchemists who distil wisdom for today and tomorrow from a vast mass of -sometimes dangerous or even unusable- knowledge, by giving insight and making suggestions.

So, translating some chapters into Croatian and re-writing them in the process has led me to re-writing the English original. I presume that any author is tempted to see the imperfections better once the text is published. Good editors are rarely attainable, so one may play that role by trying to make oneself clearer and explain ideas better while correcting the weaknesses that have found a way to the book. In brief, I could not resist using the English original as inspiration for, practically a new text. Without the final help of a language editor, I leave it in my international English. But the text is updated, (hopefully) upgraded and about four times enlarged in that process. I retain the title though the text is practically new despite the likely impression of mere recycling, - a temptation typical to many with a small production. Incidentally, I am not the one. As former art historian and curator, I know that some painters do this when "revisiting" their canvases, which causes fear and discomfort to art museum curators and gallery owners. But a new painting with the same theme and title, even if on an old canvas, is a tolerable and honest temptation I thought.

Writing is, finally, a competition with one own self, about knowing the subject, constant improvement by needing to share it while caring to reach the precise core of the subject. Even if feeling that one understands it, concepts and ideas get clearer once trying to explain them to the others in the most effective, preferably simple way. It is a fulfilling game as this example demonstrates to me, but, again, as former lecturer I am aware of the old wisdom which says that we learn by teaching (*Docendo discimus*).

Be them small articles or books, I let them all and always copy-paste ready and have it published either on my mentioned website or offered at <https://independent.academia.edu/TomislavSola> (I never imagined that AI would bring the problem of personal creativity to unthinkable risks, so that we, humans, will be recognizable only by our imperfections and personal stance). If this experience proves positive, I will do it again.

## The personal experience in the emerging public memory sector

Think about the history and importance of public memory when you notice the innumerable famed, even “great” personalities (for whom we have documented memory they were rascals and often perverted) with tombs, cenotaphs, monuments, and golden lettered plaques. Many of them are forever remembered in our museums. In a spontaneous lecture (this text being composed originally out of a particular power point lecture notes) I would have used a contemporary example to illustrate my points about human nature so well registered by sinful nature of conventional museums. Almost a benign, relatively recent among such, could be Silvio Berlusconi, who has privately assured that the memorial power of prestigious international funeral in Milan cathedral continues in his mausoleum “Vault of Heaven”. Posthumously, he was playing with the fascinations of museum/mausoleum connotations now rather well hidden also in our public memory institutions. Pictures on Internet serve well to illustrate otherwise boring professorial claims, especially to, say, student audience which had no life or work experience of the sort.

If I was, thus, more successful with students, I doubt the professional establishment cared much. Like in all trades, the important people have the same mentality be them in business sector or in science. They are prevalently composed of successful personalities, - no matter what the world around them is or has become during their time. In science, they are in fact the most obedient scientific administrators, whom you recognize because they always give an outer impression of being serious and important: at least by the number of footnotes in their impeccable scientifically looking texts and lists of hardly consulted or relating literature. There are also those with great (factual) knowledge and energy, but superficial social morals, with little empathy, and conformist disdain for any change of paradigms. Most of them occupy roles of importance in the society and are well networked and “multiplied” by belonging to power-groups. So, every one of them is a member, in a bearable number of prestigious societies named after lions, dragons, masons, cogs, knights, cloaks, swords, garters...; all are members of miscellaneous management committees and presidents of some institution or foundation or society (or of the many of the at the same time). The deep and intertwined roots in the society assure their position while they are exercising their importance and guarantee that they will be remembered or even buried among the greats. Any occupation, let alone a profession is dependent upon such power structures and prevailing patterns of thinking dictated by this subtly imposed power. Back in 70s we used to call it “establishment” but it outgrew that simplicity since. Mediocrity and status quo are simple, frequent common denominators of these “elites” practically in any sector, - the heritage one included.

The big, important countries, that is, most of them, are still thriving on their profitable colonial past. Though being convincing and overly represented they demonstrate that there is a pompous kitsch to any authority. Mass media and karaoke culture that allows unprofessional improvisation made it part of the international culture. The problem arises in its grotesque dimension when small neocolonial vassals, usually failed countries (like many in the EU) turn easily into some papier maché improvisations of imposed cultural models or mystify their national history. It is usually both at the same time. Thus they are lowering the standards of their proper cultural achievement and the profile of their own authenticity. The fundamental feature of kitsch is imitation, - like any unfounded claim leading to self-denial. Public memory institutions are the most exposed proponents of self-assurance and self-knowing. It is “just” about being or remaining active in the first person, - real, autonomous... Culture precedes economy and politics or, rather, without being yourself one is lost in all the rest what makes us specific.

Again, I am suggesting that heritage (entire, not only cultural) should be viewed as some sort of cybernetic, counter-active and corrective action upon problems created by such degradation; I have chosen to call it public memory as it is composed all (other ways of remembering) but understood as pro-active and publicly responsible. When best, even without museum-specific professional education implied, practice demonstrates that quality, but we cannot survive upon talented, eligible and creative only. Institutions of public memory are a defense mechanism of one's own specificity, or, conversely, guardians of the wealth of diversity that is always (whether in nature or society) an inexhaustible reservoir of development as a coherent change: that between loyalty to one's past and the present and the need for a future, yet different, self.

Curators (like archivists and librarians) are not a profession, - as explained on many occasions before, but they could or at least should be. Wrong assumptions and inherited misconceptions are part of the problem. Let's finally consent, contrary to the common misconception of both laymen and curators, that museums deal with the present: they only use the past to, somewhat paradoxically, create and interpret it. Most of my students, when we were dealing with the process of how to train them for the “best profession in the world”, the important profession of curating, - it turned out, lacked a fundamental understanding of their real life context, often in a way that was distorted by increasingly biased media. Of course, we are talking about the extended influence of social decision-makers, - the real owners of politics, production, money and other forms of power. Teaching about the concept of heritage and the institutions and actions that serve it without proposing a frame of reference turned out to be a hardly sustainable task and an almost impossible job. It is futile to act or create heritage institutions without knowing the reality and the needs to which they must respond. Therefore, I increasingly offered lectures whose content was actually a series of slides, later essays, - actually an attempt to explain the world to my audience, be they students or colleagues. I am sure that many have misunderstood and disagreed with my engaging assertions about social, economic, and political reality. Some attributed much of this to my "cultural Marxism", as it has been, for a decade or two already, a common practice in the West to denounce socially engaged thinking. At one lecture, a distinguished colleague from the most important country claimed, simply, that I was an anarchist. I have asked myself more than once what the public performance of real anarchists looks like, because I neither wanted to become one nor had time to join them. I guess they entirely lack any significant

public performance, being forced to address each other, or rather limited audiences anyway. But, fragmented society, outside the mainstream media is alike, including the avant-garde curators and their theoreticians.

Socialism, even cultural, is supposedly a sin as well, but so be it if it is called such that because of some rigid ideology implied. Its idea is only a humanist project imposing nothing but societal responsibility and basic morals of living with others.

Of all the "post-" variants (legitimately disparaging truth, facts, humanism etc.) that our western world has turned to, the only positive one is, generally speaking, that we live and favour a post-ideological time. Communism is long dead while capitalism faded out, existing no more either, because its neo-liberal, financial, casino-variant is not an essential economic system but a speculative scheme with wars as its highest reach in "business". It is not product based but concentrated upon transactions using products to generate obscene, illogical profits. There are still, however, socially sensitive systems and environments in the world, which more or less value work and the public good. They still have (or, rather, still haven't lost) public institutions and systems such as education or healthcare, but not by retaining socialism(or inventing one). We may have discovered that welfare society is just a humanist scheme in which ethical values count in practice and are part of the societal deal (if it is so scornful to call it social contract. It does not have to be an impressive social vision, but just a commitment to the rule of justice and equal chances, - without socialism, the latter being so smeared and detested for its deviations.

Unfortunately, there is no democracy either, as we also live in post-democratic times despite the pretentious double-speak of the great powers. That is but a subtle theme about deceptive appearances, about "mob rule" as a semblance of majority rule... (Why is it that no museum I know deals with this? Was it incidentally that some labour museums have changed both their name and content because labour itself is not valued anymore; cynics will say, that before it is abolished, it is simply devalued). There is no harm in a different opinion, but every profession must agree on the basic principles, because otherwise, it disavows its institutional and, therefore necessarily organized social effort and role in the community. So, there we are! Yet ideology! Well, it's not. A welfare state in which the common good is the goal does not need an ideology other than humanistic ethics. Politics, as a process of agreement in the social contract, will always exist, but it should be led by the best representatives of the professions, - certainly not by the bribed chatty amateurs and clever media charlatans. In the "karaoke" world, the current politicians are just another group of intermediaries for the owners of the morbid global casino, - who we all serve anyway.

When curators claim 'neutrality', which is often the case, I find it frivolous and irresponsible. Heritage, public memory or whatever one may term a collective experience, is by nature a political category; just as being a citizen is a political qualification. So, investing a certain effort in interpreting the world and its memories is essential for any form of participation. It is almost impossible to do any meaningful work in the heritage domain without looking at the needs of the users or the community. Whose museums are they? Who are they addressing? Can they really reach all the interests of their real owners? What to recognize as important from the vast past, what to choose for memory, what to document, what to study, what and how to preserve, what and to whom to communicate? The definition of a museum, the fate of the profession, and society depends on good answers. Museums, archives, and libraries, as

well as city spaces (which are themselves a memory configuration, with all the statues of statesmen, poets and philosophers), do belong to politicians, and they should be private or dependent on particular interests. Neither water nor air nor knowledge should be private. It is possible to help the service by paying, but public memory accumulated, exposed, and communicated in public institutions is like public air and public water.

## What is publicly financed should be publicly available

So, I'm all for free museums, and not just for them: without risking advantages of individual creativity and the right to difference even social status or property. Whatever is public, needs to be publicly available and free, if considered crucial for improving humanist values of the world. For the price of one nuclear submarine, it is possible to build at least 25 Guggenheim museums - to be graphic. For the price of a first-class aircraft carrier, you can build exactly 30 museums the price of the Tate Modern! And, while at that, to demystify alarms against some ghostly socialism, it is all about the shameful fact that the wars and poverty are such open signs of the failure of the liberal capitalism and the West that for so long governed the world. Each piece of a broken hologram bears recording of the entire lost picture and so the analysis of any part of societal institutions bears evidence of the quality of the social contract. Public memory institutions, if analysed demonstrate it themselves. (To this end I have offered to the museum profession, back in 2012, a book: Eternity does not live here anymore - a glossary of museum sins (available at: <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault> ).

What is publicly financed should be publicly available. A humanist concept of governing the world, for example, should purport that all knowledge from the humanities should be freely available and, in fact, public property while it is less and less so in reality.

A theatre ticket that can cost 300 Euros in Europe means that culture will not fulfil its enlightening and beneficial role for which it was intended. Free access to museums? How else, for God's sake? It is a beneficial transfer of collective experience. The famous improvement of the world will never happen through technology. The latter is merely means to a goal that is in domain of peaceful development and resulting prosperity. A chimpanzee with a stone will certainly eat better than one who does not know how to crack a nut with it, but a chimpanzee with a revolver brings no benefit to chimpanzees, but it strongly resembles the traps of technologically tuned "knowledge society". The public profile and mission of institutions needs to be high as otherwise the society slides easily into servicing chaotic, dangerous. Insatiable. Particular interests.

I use 'public' as opposed to 'private', be it the property of any other individual owner, - so in the sense of public health or public transport. In no way this should exclude the entrepreneurial individual. There is an enormous space for private initiative, for personal or group distinction and creativity and that space needs to be there. Yet, public funding makes it illogical for public institutions to serve any other special interest. Private museum may be publicly relevant or even tuned to one, but it has the liberty of serving the particular interest of its owner and founder.

My long and complex insider experience comprises being a curator, director, editor, publisher, conference organizer, writer, professor and consultant, an accidental witness to war

and the devastating political and economic transition and neo-colonialization. I mediated my domestic and international experiences, but I also witnessed that the institutions that I would like to consider the bearers of that collective experience were mostly absent in helping citizens. How else could we as a world face the growth of radical right-wing politics, world war and other scenarios of self-destruction of the species? When public institutions become privatized, or at least serve the interests of dominant groups in society, be it through lurking censorship, personnel policy or budget blackmailing, we are bound to feel helpless lacking all we need to resist successfully; probably the same way that humans, in general, are helpless before the monstrous outlines of AI technology, likely a new Golem endangering everything we find supporting our basic humanity. It can upgrade our human performance but like any technology if left to act with no ethical humanist determination it may be used for destructive purposes.

The vision of the world that emerges from these lines is intentionally naive, and so are some of the solutions to its problems that I propose both in the book(s) and here. What is said there remains but cared to reinterpret some of it and probably take a clearer stance. The claim was to say more clearly and perhaps prove that museums make sense only if they are part of the process of spiritual catharsis through creative "curating", cleansing the moral and emotional state with truth, or perhaps even more "Greek", - by knowing oneself.

The texts that dealt occasionally and partly with the same set of themes are at the mentioned sites. They often bear the motto "salutation to the benevolent reader" (*Lectori benevolo salutem*) as has been the modest appeal of all writers since Roman times. (The practice was so well-known that it took the form of the abbreviation L.b.s., written at the beginning of a book). Everything that turns knowledge into wisdom with responsibility and nobility, as is the case with museums, nevertheless places understanding on the side of the reader or listener or visitor. They offer their research, responsibility be it with exhibitions or publications, but the public accepts, or refuses based on its value system. Benevolent trust and an unconditional attitude, a pure soul and unrestrained thinking, devoid of prejudices and prejudices certainly make the process meaningful. Should curators have all these qualities? Well, having them is a condition for any professionalism and yet we know that, nevertheless, many among them lack these qualities.

Public memory institutions are there to give an opportunity for wisdom and that they do through deep insight into the matter, scientific and social responsibility, benevolence, and openness as typically expected from public institutions. They are there to offer an understanding of the world and at least provide us with useful advice, - as a smart grandfather, grandmother, experienced uncle would have done once, by the hearth... But to be more honest and clearer, I, like the curators, prefer we welcome visitors who do not bring with them their judgments or prejudices, but the will for peace, the hope for a better world than we found it, - actually inherited. Both, locally and globally, as the two were never separated.

The Editorial Board of the publisher's English edition of the book mentioned, which was originally titled "Public Memory in a Betrayed Society" (with the subtitle: notes of a lecturer) demanded that I rename the book so that the word "deluded" is used instead of "betrayed". The West has become restrictive towards criticism of society, and it is a sad fact, and we should oppose it. But, I agreed, because important publishers are neither offered nor do I

know how to look for them. Comfortingly, - "deluded" can mean also misled, deceived and even betrayed, but they cared that the title was as neutral and social criticism implied in the title, as polite as possible. The word "betrayed" from the original suggests betrayal, that is, a fraud committed by someone against someone. Advocating the world run by professionals instead of what we have, I am aware that the continuous re-invention, re-definition, and re-conceptualization of institutions is probably what is the essence of true democratic processes. Having norms but keep re-inventing them as challenges and threats change, is the very essence of the cybernetic guidance of any system. And, to repeat the claim, systems should be in charge of meritocratically organized professions, as, speaking about the modern times, - politicians, priests and corporative baron moguls proved disastrous for the (Western) world. Their project is pretended democracy hidden in the curious forms of ochlocracy, - the rule of the mob, there only to hide the obscene fascination with profit. (This article may thus be a beginning, - itself an introduction to a some texts to be published at the site. They will reappear at <https://independent.academia.edu/TomislavSola> and further distributed if the need arises).