The Welfare Society and Public Memory

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Although the term "welfare society" is often casually dismissed, scorned as a form of historical communism, "cultural communism," or dangerous socialism, an informed and experienced inhabitant of this planet will easily understand that there is no alternative. In the name of some imaginary freedom for unlimited acquisition and the right to all sorts of diversities. Most of them we neither cherish nor need, except to grant them as a right to those who explicitly demand them. The rulers of the world have given us a society without a prevailing Proposal (ideology, tradition, religion, value system—in short, coordinate systems that, by their very existence, were a freedom we failed to appreciate as a constant opportunity for negotiation. Democracy, like identity, is essentially about that. The bureaucracy serving our corporate overlords offers us nothing but insecurity, fear, and chaos.

Every religion is valid, and therefore none is entirely right—or rather, all of them are. Each possesses the same right to provide its followers with a personal or collective meaning of existence, acting as a sort of "coordinate system" by which they have the right and privilege to live. However, the moment someone calls this a norm—even if they mean only a (always, in fact) temporary agreement on what we, as a community and as individuals, wish to have as the desirable version of our human condition—there immediately appear those who, in the name of some philosophically neurotic freedom, advocate the absence of any need to determine how we should live with ourselves and with others as individuals.

Our institutions and the professions that govern them in our name are both the result of a shared need and the freedom to enrich our knowledge and skills with spirituality. (Those who have read some of my writings know that I primarily refer to heritage institutions and the never-fully-formed, unified profession that serves and manages them.) Humanity has survived and evolved—at least technologically and in its humanistic visions—only through networking, connections, and collective, social memory. The latter has enabled the transfer of experience and expertise, literally fostering the stability and prosperity of communities, whether they were initially as small as a single family or grew into tribes and various more complex forms of identity.

Development, as well as its transformations—whether through revolutions or gradual improvements in the functioning of society or the economy—has always been led by inspired, capable, or otherwise motivated individuals or groups that communities managed to form around their aspirations or visions. There is no need to prove this. Simply invoking the common good makes them aligned with our modern understanding of peace and welfare as (even if unattainable) goals.

A welfare society is democracy in materialized form, for no society could exist without norms, the rule of justice, and the enjoyment of equal opportunities regardless of the differences that divide its population. Interestingly, museums and other memory institutions are not the product of this democratic striving but rather a legitimization of a set of values upon which governance and decision-making are based. Paradoxically, museums in particular, as the most communicative among them, most directly display these

criteria—justifying themselves even when they swear that their institutions are not instruments of conquering nature and other cultures.

Take curators as an example: they typically have a university education in some general scientific discipline but almost no education in transferring collective experience (not even science itself), which is actually what they engage in throughout their careers in museums. It is only at the beginning of the third millennium that the most progressive among them have implicitly acknowledged that, even while supported by science, they have faithfully served the ambitions of their masters. That is, the masters of the world's political and cultural narratives managed to outsmart them. The contemporary artists are equally deceived and talked into some neutral or mild critique as mutually acceptable self-interested deals.

For the less informed: repression in museums (supposedly) did not exist, but those who doubted the impeccable morality of museums were never popular—and certainly never became museum directors. Museums were established as trophy sites of conquest, and securing a scientific alibi for them was easy: a mix of frustration, vanity, and scientific idealism was sufficient to provide institutions with social credibility.

Western Christianity, which, from its most important book onward, bore the obligation to dominate nature and spread its faith across the world, is the cradle of the museum institution. The transfer of collective experience occurred in other civilizations as well, but not under the pressure of plunder and the arrogance of institutions created by the Industrial Revolution to mark the triumph of a new era over both its own and others' realities. The newly established museums directly demonstrated this newfound superiority, confirming it as a right.

The sudden enrichment of triumphalism naturally aligns with the idea of entertainment—whether as pleasure, a new source of income, or, as was then unclear, the introduction to a vast media power over the masses. Barnum was a circus but also a primitive idea of a museum, and perhaps the best example of the initial confusion in interpreting the world.

After cabinets of curiosities and oddities, followed by almost two centuries of serious institutions (depending on the region), museums, even when not always pleasant or truthful, were indeed very serious scientific enterprises. In this entirely new era, however, we see that—strangely, bizarrely, and somewhat paradoxically, often with the help of information technologies—museums have become part of what Mario Vargas Llosa calls the "civilization of spectacle."

As a superior intellect otherwise inclined toward a calm, slow (conservative?) society, he fiercely opposed something that is seen as part of today’s chaotic, almost anarchic, "free" and unruly world. They failed to sell him the neoliberal chaos as a form and content of freedom. In this, like some remaining conscious minority, he sees only additional space for hypertrophied private interests that subjugate the world to their obscene profits.

It seems that with the abolition of ideologies, the opportunity for a clear choice of visions on how to improve reality has disappeared, leading to a sort of medievalization of the world. The emergence of a handful of individuals who control the vast wealth and power of the world, the decline of the middle class into a kind of precariat, and the rise of extreme poverty are not

processes that will unfold unchallenged. For the first time in history, humanity faces multiple, diabolical choices of extinction. The geopolitical situation could lead us more easily than ever to nuclear catastrophe, while only slightly slower, yet equally monstrous and bizarre, are the scenarios of humanity's extinction through the uncontrolled development of artificial intelligence.

If all previous positive efforts of humankind have been attempts to create a better, more spiritual, and noble human being, then intelligent robots or perhaps cyborgs represent the ugliest possible end to that good intentioned eugenic project. Now that we know more than ever before, we are also the least certain of who will be the true ruler of the Tower of Science that we have been building for thousands of years.

Museums and other memory institutions have always been among humanity’s greatest ideas: their purpose was to extract wisdom from knowledge through a kind of spiritual alchemy and pass it on as a guarantee of the successful survival of our species. However, paradoxically (since science is supposedly pursued by the most intelligent among us), it is not difficult to prove that without morality and a system of values, knowledge is a dangerous potential.

No matter how much the intention of improving the human condition—progress, advancement of the human species—has been part of historical dilemmas and confusions, in combination with robots and artificial intelligence, it can manifest itself in what is, in reality, the ultimate mistake of our ambition for a better world. When science, education, and the transfer of collective experience fail—essentially, all memory institutions—then instead of creating a nobler human, we will create its substitute out of metal, plastic, and chips. A robot or, ultimately, a cyborg will be a shameful testament that our ambition to create a better human being has resulted in the degradation of ordinary people into an inferior biological mass, while their technological replacements are established as superior and ruling entities.

Is the fate of the "democratic" majority to receive a universal basic income and wander aimlessly through mega-playgrounds—real, financial, or imaginary (as in VR or AR)—for lower-intelligence beings who do not know how to manage their instincts? Even without Jonathan Swift’s lessons, we know many of us would tacitly agree with his seemingly rude claim that the human species, in its vast majority, is only just competent enough to reproduce. Unlike other animals, humans are capable of mating at any time of the year, and almost every individual carries genetic flaws that are hardly a credit to the species. These dilemmas have existed for a long time and should have already been presented as alarming warnings, visibly demonstrated in our institutions and professions. Naturally, more than any others, I refer to institutions of public memory—archives, museums, and libraries—as mechanisms for transferring collective experience. Otherwise, they have no real purpose.

Honestly, who cares about a famous collector, compulsive hoarder or a mythomaniac robber baron, who, by mere luck and greed, left behind the largest collection of furniture, weapons, artworks, and "curiosities" (often looted, incidentally)? What we need are instructions for survival in a dignified and increasingly dignified continuum, so that we can establish ourselves as spiritual and solidaristic beings, marked by love for ourselves, others, and the environment that generously hosts us.

When the interests of the community, particularly its elites, are formulated into clear visions, this must be demonstrated and proven. This knowledge is long-lasting and must be

considered beyond our own time. We should accept and endure the media's neglect of these values while respecting institutions that, through their professional responsibility, provide a usable system of values for the long term.

Roland Barthes claimed that the only eternity granted to us is that of the human species. The moment it was recognized that humanity's greatest affliction is the fear of the unknown—the incomprehensibility of existence—priests became, it seems, the first in line after warlords to offer norms as security, becoming the greatest authority within communities. Memory institutions, which are meant to serve as history, the teacher of life, seem to have fundamentally failed. They have proven nothing to us except that we exist on a speck of cosmic dust, a small planet lost in the infinite universe. Instead of providing a view into our own spirit as part of nature's entirety, they have offered us, through microscopes, yet another hopeless and incomprehensible infinity.

The knowledge acquired along the way may be useful, but for the most part, it has not been transformed into wisdom within memory institutions. The best exception was initiated with the concept and practice of the ecomuseum as a unique form of a total museum—an awareness of wholeness with a changing environment. Yet, this project has not been structurally completed. But more on that separately.

We must refuse to think outside of this, even if only vaguely outlined, vision of solidarity. We are increasingly living in a world where values are devalued and disappearing. The current collapse of values and the hypocritical manipulation of personal freedom harm every social project—except that of neoliberal chaos and its masters. Manipulation takes place under the guise of Western democracy, which has been subtly devalued, primarily through the media, into a manipulated civil society (as if some other kind of society should exist). Ultimately, "freedom" is being redefined entirely in terms of unlimited liberalization in the interest of those who own power and wealth. That is why we are being offered "civil" society, when in reality, it means unregulated—seemingly free—but effectively de-institutionalized. As if to suggest some kind of "freedom" from the necessary assistance of those professionals we have sought to train to help us manage social reality.

However, freedom, no matter how manipulated, has never been mere chaos. And culture, despite being noble by definition, always consists of criteria—excellence, quality, virtues. Norms, in their best role as regulators of social development, were envisioned by early cybernetics as applied to harmonious societal growth—a platform for constant negotiation among stakeholders of the social contract. These norms are always evolving because they mediate the social contract through which we aim to progress as a human community.

For those who poorly understand the nature of society, "norms" are an annoyance and provoke anger as if they were some form of restriction. But to be forced to avoid the term "norm," as we actually do, is merely to aid a twisted, disguised tyranny.

(This text is a translated, updated and, as it happens, enlarged fourfold version of the subchapter "10. Welfare Society in the Contemporary World" from the book *Public Memory in a Deluded Society: Notes of a Lecturer*, available 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).