

Museums in the Age of Lobbying and Bureaucratized Reality

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Modern democracies are expected to rest upon informed public debate, transparent institutions and decision-making in the general interest. However, between citizens and decision-makers, an increasingly powerful intermediary layer has gradually grown up, composed of bureaucracy, lobbying organisations, consultancy networks and communications industries. None of these phenomena is in itself illegitimate. In principle, their task is to facilitate decision-making by providing expertise, information and coordination. But when they begin to operate as autonomous systems serving primarily their own interests, they cease to support democracy and begin to distort it.

Institutions and professions in the field of public memory are part of this process. What shall we remember? How do we hierarchise past experiences according to their importance and humanistic value? Take one set of memories and you will come into conflict with your neighbours. Take another and you will forge alliances for the common good. (I must admit that in the world as it is — or as it increasingly becomes — this eutopia, as a need to improve contemporary society, feels like a professor's delusion. There is no help for it if that is so, but do we, in the end, truly have an alternative?)

Lobbying originally emerged as a way for individuals, associations and professional communities to draw decision-makers' attention to ideas or needs that might otherwise go unnoticed. In that sense it was a useful supplement to the democratic process. Today, however, its nature has fundamentally changed. Persuasion by argument increasingly gives way to pressure. Instead of the strength of ideas, influence increasingly depends on financial power, privileged access to centres of decision-making, professionally managed communications campaigns, or the systematic production of selective information. What was conceived as a channel of communication easily becomes a mechanism of manipulation.

If we count individuals holding a permanent pass to the European Parliament, there are around six to seven thousand lobbyists in Brussels who can enter the Parliament daily and contact whomever they wish. But if we count all the organisations and experts who daily influence EU legislation — including that concerning the institutions of public memory and cultural policies that interest us — then the real number is close to 25,000. Nor are the rest barred from entering the EU Parliament. Incidentally, for those interested, only Washington has more.

Their existence is not in itself proof of corruption, but what exactly is their job description, and does anyone actually control how they serve the interests of those they represent for a fee? Lobbying, as organised pressure on decision-makers, is a symptom of a political system in which organised interests become permanent — indeed, legitimate — participants in the decision-making process alongside democratically elected representatives. Such a state of affairs inevitably raises questions of equal access, transparency and genuine democratic legitimacy. Citizens, genuine civil society associations and independent experts can hardly compete on equal terms with well-funded interest networks representing major economic sectors. How does one win for culture and heritage a position that allows them to be co-makers of developmental decisions in contemporary society? Can and should universities educate a future curator who is convinced that the museum, as collective social memory, is a

magnificent but also obligatory source of inspiration for the development and self-respect of the community in which it exists?

Democracy presupposes informed judgement. This becomes impossible when even the decision-makers themselves are surrounded by carefully filtered and managed information. At the same time, the public is exposed to communications strategies whose aim is not to inform but to persuade. A paradox arises: democratic procedures continue to function smoothly. Consultations are held, reports written, analyses, strategies — even exit and crisis strategies — produced, committees convene and formal consensus is reached. Public consent is a matter of good media support, and the media, to put it simply, are controlled by the same bosses as the lobbyists. From the outside everything appears legitimate. Yet if the information upon which decisions are based is systematically incomplete or biased, the democratic process easily becomes nothing more than a convincing façade.

This goes a long way towards explaining the growing crisis of trust in public institutions throughout the world. Political parties, governments, international organisations, and increasingly the media too, are often perceived as representatives of special interests rather than the common good. The contemporary information environment, dominated by market competition and instantaneous communication, deepens the confusion further by giving priority to emotional impact and speed over understanding.

In such circumstances, museums occupy a special place. Despite their own limitations, they remain among the institutions that enjoy the greatest public trust. That trust is not accidental. It has been earned over decades through professional ethics, accountability to facts and relative independence from daily political conflicts. It represents a valuable form of social capital that should not be carelessly squandered.

The responsibility of museums therefore extends far beyond the preservation of collections or the organisation of exhibitions. Museums are institutions of public memory. Public memory is the long-term conscience of society. It provides historical perspective, enables the recognition of patterns of human behaviour and helps citizens identify manipulation when it appears in new forms. Without reliable public memory, societies become vulnerable to constructed narratives, selective forgetting and the continuous production of politically or economically desirable "truths". The quality product of a museum is therefore feedback indeed, - that necessary corrective impulse in the conscience of society without which no governance of any system cannot function. But this is a topic that leads us towards a (humanistic) cybernetics whose scientific term was usurped by the IT sector, and which, as we now see, politics and corporations use to manipulate collective as well as individual conscience. Liberties and rights that utopians worked for were turned into illusion, or probably worse, cunningly manipulated rule of mob. The most they will allow, museums included, is awareness of something (climate change, for instance), but not that knowledge as conscience. The latter, after all, implies action and decision-making. (On this subject, in my unsuccessful engagement with the birth of the heritage profession, I have written numerous articles and a few books.)

Nor are museums, then, fully immune to the bureaucratic logic that increasingly shapes public life. Cultural policies, especially in large international programmes, often measure success by procedures rather than actual outcomes. Projects can generate vast quantities of administration, endless meetings, international travel and impressive networks of partners,

while their actual cultural or social contribution frequently remains shamelessly modest. The persistent creation and tolerance of this "emptiness" and uselessness produces unwritten criteria of negative selection and suspicion towards those who desire genuine progress. They become "radicals", unwanted by the system, and are pushed out of it. This is how the quiet tyranny of mediocrity arises. Cross-border cooperation undoubtedly has its value, but it easily becomes an end in itself when procedural correctness and hollow phrases replace genuine benefit to society. In the same way, dependence on projects and "handouts" has created the semi-profession of so-called non-governmental and non-profit organisations, which now almost without exception represent a corporate and political "mercenary" force for creating the appearance of action and accountability: they channel healthy social energy either into programmed inefficiency, into unacceptable and self-disqualifying radicalisation, or into disciplined "coverage" of territory designed to keep things unchanged.

A cynical observer might conclude that certain cultural programmes benefit conference organisers, transport companies and the hotel industry more than citizens or culture itself. Such a judgment is deliberately provocative, but it points to a real structural problem. Bureaucratic systems naturally tend towards their own expansion. The production of reports, performance indicators and the multiplication of meetings easily become more important than the creation of knowledge, understanding or social progress.

Museums should consciously resist this tendency. Their success should not be measured primarily by the number of completed projects, conferences held or partnerships established, but by their capacity to advance social understanding, from that of their immediate community to the international. Their unique contribution consists in helping citizens distinguish information from knowledge, communication from manipulation, and administrative procedure from genuine public interest. Few museums have shown themselves to be, admittedly, elegant display cases for looted colonial wealth, while those that would demonstrate that colonialism has merely changed its forms of operation are altogether absent. The same can be said of natural history museums. They too are often collections of trophies, in their case, of the conquest of nature.

I spoke publicly about zoos as a disgrace of modern civilisation long ago, and was called an anarchist for such views. ("Eternity does not live here anymore..." was a book on museum sins and translated in a few languages: <https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault>).

And now, the recently opened National Geographic Museum of Exploration in Washington, with its immersive experience technologies, is perhaps the most persuasive argument (among many) that we are not always obliged to be slaves to the primitive obsession with "originals". With those perspectives in mind, some four decades ago I was expounding how audio-visual media — as it was then called — would be the "new wealth of museums", thinking that not everyone with something to say would need to have it all in their own collection. A long story. The head, however, is still more important than mere technology.

If they wish to remain among the most trusted institutions, museums must guard not only objects but also their own intellectual independence and a certain conscious superiority — the kind that the proverbial elders possess. Society is incapable of formulating a collective, simple demand: offer us wisdom! We have had enough of knowledge, and still more of mere information. Their allegiance should belong not to administrative systems, political fashions or influential interest groups, but to truth, public memory and the long-term wellbeing of

society. In a time when organised influence increasingly shapes public space, this could become one of their most important social tasks.