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**Silence is not neutral and objectivity does not exist: Challenging Museums' Socio-Political Messaging amid Contemporary Challenging History**

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In 2013, the then-Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government of the United Kingdom published a policy paper on national events and ceremonies, including the centenary of the First World War (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2013). It stated that the government wanted 'people to find out how the First World War shaped *our* society today and continues to touch *our* lives at a personal level, in *our* local communities and as *a nation*' (my emphasis). Through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) projects were made possible that 'explore, conserve and share the heritage of the First World War' (Heritage Lottery Fund 2015, 3).

Most museums in Britain responded to this call. Projects funded under HLF's First World War programme include 'Fellowship and Sacrifice – Hampstead and the first World War', 'Remembering the Fallen' and 'Lest We Forget'. The Imperial War Museum in London spent £40m to open new permanent First World War galleries (Imperial War Museum 2014). But perhaps the most visibly striking commemoration was the 2014 installation 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' at the Tower of London, which filled the Tower's iconic moat with 888,246 ceramic poppies – one for each British or Commonwealth soldier who fell during the war.

This commemoration of the First World War was arguably *the* key feature in museums' programmes as Britain entered 2015, the year of the General Election. During the election, immigration ranked amongst the top three issues of concern for voters (Clark and Mason 2015). Newspapers mentioned

immigration on a daily basis, with none of the major parties mounting a challenge to the negative tone of the debate (Nikolaidis 2015, 20). In the end even the Labour Party issued a mug emblazoned with the pledge to place 'controls on immigration' (Perraudin 2015).

While museums in Britain in large numbers created exhibitions and programmes to commemorate the First World War, there was little response to this debate on immigration. What response there has been, was predominantly focused on the past. I want to argue that neither approach – silence or history – is satisfactory, not the least with regards to museums' claims of social impact, contemporary relevance and inclusion (see for example Museums Association 2013).

Turning to silence first, I want to pose that such silence on the debate on immigration in fact sends a very strong message – not only, but perhaps more starkly in contrast to museums' apparent support for the official and exclusively British narratives about the First World War. In remaining silent in the discussions about immigration, museums left an empty space that was occupied by other players in society. In doing so, they signalled that they either did not see an issue of importance to their work, or that they – silently – agreed with what was being said by others. Neither message may have been one that museums wished to send out. The point is that by *not* stating their position, the absence of that statement made a statement nonetheless.

It may be worth considering here for a moment the impact that the debate on immigration has had on individuals living in British society. During the EU referendum campaign, for example, the hostility aimed at EU citizens living in the UK for some was devastating. One Belgian resident in the UK noted that, 'Some of the things being said make you feel like you're not wanted' (O'Carroll and Obordo 2016). A French resident observed that the debate 'made us realise that we were not at home here' (Walsh 2016). She and her family have decided to leave Britain independent of the outcome of the referendum.

These quotes highlight that contemporary debates do not take place in the abstract. They are a reflection and negotiation of the values of a society with tangible consequences for the people living in it. They have the power to alienate and exclude when mainstream society does not present a counterweight. And museums, for the most part, did not participate in this debate. They remained silent.

Silence is not neutral, and even neutrality, in some circumstances, is not a desirable position. As Elie Wiesel said in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, 'Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented' (Wiesel 1986). In this case, the 'victims', the 'tormented' were and are immigrants in Britain.

One particularly troubling aspect of museums' silence on the debate on immigration is the fact that in doing so, museums supported a mainstream narrative that *excluded* and vilified people. I suggest that this is ultimately irreconcilable with museums' claims of being inclusive (Museums Association 2013). It particularly raises questions about the sincerity and effectiveness of the practice in museums of targeting audiences, including minority groups such as immigrants (see for example Heritage Lottery Fund 2012, 10; Association for Heritage Interpretation 2015). Museums cannot expect immigrants to think of them as *theirs* while they appear to sanction and support the very narratives that exclude them. The reality is more likely that over the last three years, an immigrant in Britain has looked at the exclusive narratives of the First World War in museums' programming and noted the similarities to the 'us' and 'them' immigration debate that already excluded them elsewhere. Museums' silence in that debate may well have persuaded immigrants that museums are firmly part of that British mainstream that offers no place to them.

At the height of the 2015 General Election debate, the editorial of April's *Museums Journal* by the British Museums Association stressed that, 'museums [...] are often brilliant at exploring untold stories, including the experiences of immigrants to the UK' (Stephens 2015). The editorial further

suggested that this made a valuable contribution to contemporary conversations. However, two of the three exhibitions on immigration that were noted in the editorial focused on historical immigration. So it is to what I call the history approach that I want to turn next.

I want to suggest that behind this approach lies a continued, and flawed, belief in objectivity: the objectivity of facts and history, and the objectivity of the material. It is the idea that history and objects can combine to provide the 'historical and social context' of which Steel (2016) wrote in the *Museum Journal* during the EU Referendum, and through which museums are said to contribute to contemporary debate. I want to challenge this assertion.

One example given of an immigration exhibition in the *Museum Journal's* editorial was Norfolk 2000. This project dealt with Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Flemish 'immigration' to Norfolk, in other words, with migrations that happened nearly 2,000 and just over 400 years ago, respectively (Norfolk 2000 2016). Artists were invited to respond to the museum service's archaeological collection to explore immigration, and there were public workshops on each of the three historic 'immigrant' groups. The one on the Flemish immigrants – they were in fact refugees fleeing religious prosecution in the Low Countries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century - celebrated one 'contribution' they made to Norfolk society and which is still particularly relevant to local people today: the 'much loved Canary, the mascot of the Norwich City football team' (Reeve 2015). The workshop did not, it appears, dwell much on the term by which the refugees were known. They were called 'The Strangers'.

The stated aim of Norfolk 2000, and one which must be applauded, was to 'show [...] how beneficial [immigration] has been for Norfolk, and continues to be', particularly as 'immigration can be a contentious issue for some' (Knights 2015). The approach used by Norfolk 2000 was to focus on history and objects: both, I want to suggest, seen as above personal opinion which may alienate and upset audiences, a concern that is often voiced by museum professionals (see for example Smith's comment in Mohammad and Smith 2016).

However, for a start, history is not objective. It is famously shaped by the sources passed down through the ages, the biases both of authors and researchers, and a succession of new discoveries that alter previous interpretations. Add to this historians' arguments over one and the same source and it becomes clear that far from stating fact, any recourse to history is itself riddled by subjectivity and a representational undercurrent. In theory museums would strive for complete representation (see for example MeLa\* Project 2015). In practice, however, much representation of 'facts' is selective, leaving out some and including others. A key practice of museum work, that of interpretation, is still built on the selection of facts for themes that will support an acceptable range of meanings (see for example Ham 2013).

Similarly, objects are not singular in their meaning, and still museums present them regularly as unambiguous witnesses. Materiality is used to pin down a single narrative without objection, grounded, as it seems, in what is undeniably *there*. What this conceals, however, is the fact that objects, like any other material source of history, depend on the framing applied to them to obtain their meaning. It is not objects that tell a story, it is people who tell stories *about* objects. This we know, too, and yet in practice objects continue to be represented in museums in ways that support one narrative, rather than many. Thus the canary tells a story of open-armed welcome as opposed to one of discrimination and exclusion faced by a group the locals called 'The Strangers'.

Objects used in this way not only become a vehicle for safe narratives, they also become a material shield behind which museums hide from the messiness of contemporary debate. In displaying these objects related to historical immigration, museums perceive themselves as contributing to contemporary debate. But unless the connection is made directly, for example between the story behind that term of exclusion, 'The Strangers', and the hostility toward immigrants in Britain today, I argue that museums' focus on history at best allows, and at worst promotes myths about Britain that cannot be reconciled with current realities. As studies have shown, unless such

myths are directly challenged, visitors will find the positive affirmations they seek (see for example Waterton et al. 2010, 30): in our case, that Britain has always been, and continues to be a welcoming place for immigrants. By not tackling directly the not-so-comfortable truths about modern Britain and the current debate on immigration, I suggest that museums contribute to maintaining the status quo (see for example Waterton et al. 2010; Basham 2015). They do not, as the Museums Association had hoped in their vision for museums, help *advance* society (Museums Association 2013, 3).

In this paper I have argued that in remaining silent on the debate on immigration museums in fact send a strong signal to immigrants and the rest of society in Britain, which is that they are either not bothered by the debate or in fact agree with it. I have also argued that objectivity does not exist, neither in history nor in objects, and that both are currently used by museums one-dimensionally, supporting singular narratives that fail to tackle the painful truths about contemporary society. I have posed that in doing so, rather than advance society and make a positive impact, museums in fact maintain the status quo.

So is there another way? I want to end this paper with examples from Germany. In the autumn of 2014, a group began marching in the streets of the city of Dresden to protest what they called the islamisation of society. The group, called Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident, or simply Pegida, would gather in front of the Semperoper, the famous Opera House, to express their islamophobic and xenophobic views. In response, the Semperoper switched off its external lighting and declared on its digital advertising screen, 'We are not a stage set for xenophobia'. It thus strongly and visibly disassociated itself from the movement that had chosen it as a backdrop to its gatherings. But the Semperoper did not stop there. It also projected slogans onto its walls and hung banners from its façade, which read, in German, 'Open your eyes', 'Open your hearts' and, my favourite, 'Human Dignity is inviolable' – the first line of the German Constitution. This was directed at Pegida members: a clear statement of where the opera stood in relation to the views of the movement. Importantly, however, the opera also

directly addressed those who may have felt attacked and intimidated by Pegida. In English, the Semperoper projected the slogan, 'Refugees Welcome'. Soon, other institutions in Dresden and Saxony-Anhalt, as well as in other cities in Germany where Pegida groups emerged, followed suit: they turned off their lights when Pegida assembled nearby, and they declared their opposition to Pegida's agenda, and support for those vilified by them, through banners and projections. Earlier in 2016, cultural institutions in the town of Halle in Saxony-Anhalt started an initiative in response to what they called 'callous statements [that] have found their way into [...] social debates'<sup>1</sup> (Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle 2016). Again banners were used, reminding people of the basic rights enshrined in the German Constitution.

These actions directly contribute to contemporary debate. They are not exhibitions, nor are they linked to objects and collections. I am not aware that any of the institutions involved support these initiatives with special exhibitions or programmes. I don't think they need to. What is important is that the institutions have taken their place as actors in society. They have offered their view in response to a debate happening right on their doorstep, in the societies of which they are part and which they serve. The Semperoper responded to Pegida because silence would indeed have turned them into that backdrop for xenophobia. The cultural institutions in Halle made a choice to remind society of what they perceived where the fundamental values that guided them and that in their opinion should also guide others.

If museums are serious about making an impact in society and promoting social justice (Museums Association 2013), then there is no alternative to such direct action and statements (Jennings 2015). This does require institutional clarity and honesty about values and ethics. It requires a guiding compass on what the institution stands for, and the courage to enter a real dialogue with the people around it, even if some might disagree with the museum's views. As I have argued in this paper, museums have no other choice, because silence is not neutral and objectivity does not exist.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Dabei haben sich auch menschenverachtende Töne in die gesellschaftlichen Debatten gemischt...' (my translation)

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