Instrumentalism in history museums - can it be justified and does it work?

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This brief paper seeks to question two myths currently circulating in publicly funded history museums in the western world: instrumentalism is a good use of museum resources and consultation results in more democratic museums.

Publicly funded history museums, by adopting instrumental attitudes to history, attempt to rewrite certain established national or local versions of history to introduce more inclusive and tolerant stories, or to acknowledge specific past injustices by a nation or community group. This would appear to be a good use of museums – who would deny that they should do such important work in society? However, well documented high profile cases have illustrated that such approaches, particularly when applied to the national history narrative, provoke outrage and hostility from certain sections in society. Perhaps we should begin to ask the question does this sort of re-writing of history in museums actually reinforce traditional views and prejudices. If so why? If we understand better how communal memory works can we avoid some of the problems museums have faced in the past? The premise of this paper is that utilitarian uses of history in museums are rarely thought through, nor are their consequences understood. Indeed the best intentions of historians working in museums sometimes have the worst outcomes.

At the same time history museums increasingly enter into dialogues with community representatives. For many this approach is a welcome one. It demonstrates the liberal, thoughtful and inclusive character of museums in the twenty first century. However, consultation is rarely the democratic process it appears to be. It involves choices about who is to be consulted and there are few, if any, public debates about how much or how little respect is paid to the results of the consultation.

I wish to use the commemoration of the bicentenary in 2007 of the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the UK to illustrate these arguments. This abolition has long been part of the British national narrative. William Wilberforce, other abolitionists and their supporters, (from all classes and backgrounds), are celebrated in school text books and in popular narratives as examples of Britain’s championing of freedom and its determination to act against its economic interests in the name of justice. Most museums before 2007 (with notable exceptions) rarely engaged with the slave trade at all except through the lens of abolition. However, the Labour Government under Tony Blair, anxious about a fragmented society that could produce the 7/7 bombers in London, determined that the commemoration (and the funding for new museum displays) should emphasise that this was ‘everyone’s bicentenary’ (Smith and Waterton 2009: 67). Museums consulted with different groups notably those from the Afro-Caribbean community and some developed new displays that focussed on the suffering of the slaves rather than the work of the abolitionists, having heard that this was one of the stories the Afro-Caribbean communities wished to see. In so doing they encountered a great deal of
opposition. Some organised Black British groups resented what they saw as the failure of the museums to acknowledge the impact of slavery on the lives of their descendants. Other British visitors disliked the alteration of the emphasis of the story of abolition and wished to see more about the complicity of Black Africans in the trade and the continuation of slavery after it was abolished in the UK, including information on contemporary issues such as people trafficking for prostitution (Watson 2009). Smith and Waterton (2009: 66 – 67) explain this confusion and anger by suggesting that the government failed to acknowledge the ‘dissonance’ of heritage that would allow different groups to explore their own feelings and versions of the past and its impact on the present. They make an important point. However, interpreting heritage as implicitly dissonant, and acknowledging it as such in displays in order to support the needs of various stakeholders, as opposed to promoting the traditional British reaction to this one event, the Abolition of the Slave Trade, creates as many problems as it solves. At a time when Britain is attempting to develop a united and cohesive society, this approach appears to do the opposite, drawing attention to the differences between citizens rather than their similarities, and casting some in the role of victims, some as the descendants of perpetrators. Moreover visitor research found that many people were unwilling to engage with the idea of slavery at all. Both some Afro-Caribbean and some White British thought the slave trade had no relevance to them today.

Barkan argues that ‘the interaction between perpetrator and victim is a new form of political negotiation that enables the rewriting of memory and historical identity in ways that both can share’ (own emphasis). ‘Instead of categorizing all cases according to a certain universal guideline, the discourse depends upon the specific interactions in each case’ (2000: xviii) (own emphasis). What happened in the bicentenary was not a sharing of ideas between different interpretive communities (Hooper- Greenhill 2007) but a polarisation of them. Neither black nor white British, on the whole, liked these new displays. Why could these communities not embrace a new set of meanings promoted by the government and the museums? Perhaps the answer lies less in the implicit dissonance of heritage but more in an understanding of communal memory and its role in constructing and using certain histories.

Avishai Margalit, writing on The Ethics of Memory, suggests some ways in which communities remember and commemorate their pasts, and I will attempt here to apply some of his thinking to history museum processes. Margalit suggests that relationships between people, and between individuals and the groups to which such individuals belong, can be understood to be either ethical or moral. Ethical relationships have what he calls ‘thick ties,’ strong bonds, such as those between family members or communities to which people have a strong sense of affiliation such as a nation. The ties that bind such communities together are concerned with survival. People act ethically because they need to co-operate with each other and trust each other. They also have a fondness or emotional attachment to those within such communities even if they have not met them – they care for them albeit often at a distance both in time and space. Margalit argues that these communities are bound together by positive memories, even if they involve sacrifice or suffering. Such memories elicit gratitude from community members for those who died or struggled against the odds. They are memories which we view through the
lens of pride. We can identify such thick ties because, when we talk about these communities, we use words such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ and ‘our’.

If we extend this argument about ‘thick ties’ to history museums that serve a purpose in community identification such as national museums, we can understand them to be places where such positive memories are preserved. These memories have to be positive to allow us to retain our emotional bond with this community. We may chose to remember difficult and harsh times, for example, famine and struggles for survival, but these have to have a positive role – to stress the attributes of the community such as its ability to endure and survive its past sufferings.

On the other hand relationships between those who are not closely associated by some emotional tie are moral relationships. Here they are ‘thin ties’, ties of common humanity. Margalit argues that the candidates for memory in the case of humanity as moral community are negative ones. Such memories do not inspire gratitude. ‘Instead, they ignite an appetite for revenge’ (Margalit 2002:73). Museums deal with these ‘thin ties’ by telling a moral story about humankind in general. Thus a national museum might tell a story of the Holocaust, as the Imperial War Museum does in London (a national museum about the nation at war). This story is not so much about Britain’s role in liberating the camps but the suffering and destruction of much of European Jewry and the evils of Nazism. Here negative memories provide opportunities for moral reflection. European Jews are linked to Britain not by ‘thick ties’ but by ‘thin’ ones. The Jews in this story remain ‘them’ not ‘us’ or if ‘us’ they are us by the tie of common humanity not nation, something that may not be entirely positive for Jewish Britons (Kushner: 2002).

Similarly the story of the suffering of slaves and their stories during their transportation to, and after they reached, the Americas becomes a story of those with ‘thin ties’ to the nation. The emphasis on their suffering allows us to adopt a moral attitude to slavery – we see it not as something to which we are attached by ‘thick ties’ of community but by ‘thin ties’ of moral outrage. This approach emphasises the differences between Afro-Caribbean and white British citizens by being focussed on thin ties of morality not thick ties of ethics and belonging. The displays have the opposite result to those intended, they divide a national community, not unite it – not because of inherent dissonance in heritage but because of the way in which that heritage has been used instrumentally, failing to understand how community memory is constructed.

What is interesting is that the resistance to these messages was well known before the exhibitions were created, partly because the consultation process exposed this confused reaction to the whole issue of slavery. In some museums discussions with representatives from Afro-Caribbean British citizens revealed they did not want to commemorate the end of slavery at all. They wished to focus on the experience of slavery itself and its long term impact. Others preferred to ignore it. At the Science Museum consultation on how the museum should represent the slave trade resulted in several seminars on the topic of scientific racism. This is what the individuals consulted indicated they would like. The Science Museum listened and the seminars were very positively received by all who attended them.
To conclude, I would argue that the deficit approach to historical events, by which I mean that museums take complex national narratives and try to instruct the public in new inclusive ones, is unlikely to be successful, and may re-enforce traditional prejudices and views, particularly when it focuses on victims and past evil doers. This is not to suggest that we should attempt to avoid the injustices and cruelties of the past, nor provide an anodyne version of events. However, history museums, especially national ones, require a much more nuanced understanding of the complexity of community responses to events upon which significance of identification is attached. An understanding of the role of ethical and moral ‘thick’ and ‘thin ties’ may help museums avoid some of the anger they have inadvertently aroused in their visiting public in the past. At the same time if museums are to be truly democratic they need to listen to what people say, even when the public says what museums do not want to hear.


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