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Section REVIEWS (pp. 129 - 132)

Review: The Museum's Borders: on the challenge of knowing and remembering well

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The Museum's Borders: on the challenge of knowing and remembering well, *S. Knell, New York 2020, Routledge, 212 pp. ISBN 9780367486488*

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As archaeologists know well, discussions on borders, frontiers and borderlands play a relevant role in how the past is studied and reconstructed in the present. Indeed, the concept of *limes*, in its physical and social dimension, has long attracted the attention of scholars and its significance has increasingly expanded beyond the Roman Empire to chronologically diverse contexts. By establishing borders, people define themselves, and at the same time create distinctions between places, communities, and things. The latter are necessary in order to make sense of the world's complexity and the central argument of this book is that museums, as institutions born out of a human desire of knowledge, mainly achieved their purpose through acts of border-making. Knell's study is the first one to apply a border studies perspective on museums, opening up many research possibilities also in relation to archaeology and its public dimension. It does so by engaging critically with how experts work in their everyday practice, by exploring ethical issues and highlighting tricky ways in which the past can be used to shape contemporary claims. In his canonical definition, Merriman (2004, p. 5) stated that public archaeology is about ethics and identity, therefore being "inevitably about negotiation and conflict over meaning". The term 'negotiation' is key here, as too often public archaeology projects deal with outreach and communication, without reflecting on the implications of what is being communicated and how. As trained archaeologists interested in the intersections between our profession and the wider world, we have to improve our self-reflective skills, and this book provides a useful starting point from a museum-centred perspective.

Following a prelude that sets the tone of the analysis discussing the political situation in the UK during the last ten years, the campaigns against immigration and the role of museums as strongholds of a 'knowledge-based democracy', the second chapter introduces the reader to the world of border studies. It defines some key terms and explains why the idea of the border can be effectively applied to museums. For a long time, these institutions did not question their practice and considered themselves as repositories of universal truths to be disseminated to the visiting public. However, towards the end of the previous century, the New Museology movement highlighted issues hiding behind the acts of exhibit making and museum representation. Consequently, museum studies progressively moved away from a universal and generalised idea of the world and the past, to promote instead themes of inclusion, difference and situational validity. Border studies followed a similar path; therefore these two academic specialisms can positively influence each other. Indeed, acknowledging that any form of museum work involves a process of representation that shapes certain borders around a chosen topic, allows to unveil the mechanisms of such practice and aids the development of mitigations.

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Chapter three offers a glimpse at the history of museum formation and the scientific construction of modern disciplines. This research line occupies an important place in the academic production of the author, but it is here recontextualised under the border lens. The gathering of objects into collections, in addition to their identification and classification, imposed a rationale over the world and created neat borders between scientific communities as well as material cultures. Archaeologists will find some food for thought in this section as typologies and catalogues are an essential part of their practice, yet "it goes (largely) unobserved that this abstract process of naming and ordering – of locating difference and establishing borders – comes with strong ethical underpinnings" (Knell 2020, p. 42). This is because the process of classification and the subsequent definition of hierarchies among things and specimens was usually hidden behind a veil of supposed neutrality. Indeed, while studying the material world, scholars created borders that affected not only objects but also people, establishing a distinction between an expert class and the public. The latter was expected to accept the authority and expertise of the former, listening to what the museum had to say, often translated into a paternalizing tone spreading from text, captions and panels. However, inside museum contexts, the curator's voice is never as neutral as it pretends to be and at the end of the chapter this argument is pushed even further, suggesting that "there is something sinister about the expert class and its museums" (Knell 2020, p. 57). Such a statement could easily attract criticism from the readers, despite its declared provocative intent. Yet the purpose of the author – who belongs to the same academic community under scrutiny here – is not to diminish the importance of the scholarly world, but rather to encourage professionals to think critically about their work.

The next chapter continues along this line by proposing case studies that demonstrate the value of such practice. It begins with an overview of theoretical developments happening in the field of museum studies since the 1960s. At that time museums and similar institutions entered a period of transition and change that caused them to progressively move away from definite and stable borders towards a space of confrontation and plurality. Knell identifies this new space with the term 'border zone', which refers to a liminal area of discussion in which the previous system is recognised in its fallacies and a different approach is sought for. The case study of the MoMA's transformation from the 1970s to the present day is then introduced, highlighting how this universally famous institution successfully worked on the issue of multiculturalism. From an originally highly bordered display that made clear-cut distinctions between categories of artistic production (Black Art, African Art, Modern Art), the museum shifted into a space in which traditional canons were challenged making diversity an integrated part of the narrative. The galleries still possess recognised categories that give a scholarly based picture, yet alternative interpretations are also presented, weakening the border and making it less definite.

Chapter five deepens the investigation focusing on national museums and their political and ideological use of the past. It is known that history and archaeology play an important part inside museums contexts, yet how do we analyse their role? According to Knell, the process of history-making as performed inside national museums repeatedly presents some key features. First, it showcases a narrative that stems from an edited selection of objects. Despite the selection being made by professionals and experts, rarely the mechanisms of curatorial choice are made manifest. On the contrary, the public perceives the narrative as coming directly from the objects, while the latter only accompany a story that was chosen ahead by the curators. Second, the importance of the story is established in relation to the present. This point is summarised by the expression 'who we were is who we are', that embeds the nation with characters and borders traced back in time to demonstrate their ancestral origins. Third, history is told through increasingly engaging methods but, as the last feature demonstrates, these communication methods are only the result of an editing act. The latter makes use of specific techniques to avoid difficult topics and presenting supposed objectivity that can easily slipper into propaganda. Several case studies are then presented to compare the way history is treated in different national contexts. Despite providing interesting and valid points on authority and power relationship at play inside museum exhibits, this chapter seems sometimes to forget that objects as well as visitors both

possess their own agency, quite separated from any curatorial intent and narrative.

Chapter six focuses once more on national museums dealing with a specific and challenging area such as that of the Balkans, where modern politics and historical past are closely connected in a story of changing borders and violence. The case studies presented are taken as an example of how the same objects, when imbued with different narratives, can be used to support contrasting if not completely antithetical claims. The topic of object agency and materiality is here finally addressed, however the idea that things are able by themselves to communicate to people is strongly resisted. As archaeologists know well, this is an old-debated point in material culture studies, with some authors defending one position and others supporting the opposite one (cf. Tilley et al. 2006). In the case of national museums, Knell explains how, from a political point of view, an object-centered perspective can be dangerous because it covers with neutrality and truth messages that are not innocently discovered but rather consciously built. As already stated, museums are spaces in which borders and barriers are purposely created to achieve universal knowledge. The mechanism of border-making works pretty much the same way in different contexts and that is why national museums around the world all display a similar set of topics and themes. Recognising this bias does not mean dismantling the value of museums but starting a process of organisational growth. Indeed, if similar topics and themes could be made to work in different world contexts, this means that acts of border crossing are possible and that museums can become spaces that at the same time establish and dismantle the border. In this scenario professionals and experts – stripped off their authoritative aura – become facilitators guiding the emergence of shared beliefs.

On this closing note, the following chapter introduces the ideas of the author on a new method of museum practice that he calls 'contemporary museology'. The method is described as a reaction to the reality people are now experiencing and it calls for a vision of the museum fully devoted to citizens and their contemporary living. This perspective places the human, in its global characters and not the visitor in its educated presence, at the heart of the institution. It focuses on the potential that museums have in shaping democratic communities able to share information and to separate it from fake news and propaganda. It applies ethical choices, and it is transparent about its knowledge-making practices. In order to do so, it pushes towards a redefinition of the expert-public relationship, which does not deny the importance of disciplinary knowledge, but acknowledges the need to change the ways we communicate it. To speak about contemporary museology means to recognise plurality, and ultimately to present a world where difference, rather than being a category, is a value.

The final chapter of the book discusses in practice some of the principles listed in the previous one. Interesting enough for the topic of this journal, it does so by focusing on the example, among other case studies, of an archaeological display hosted in the Historiska Museet in Stockholm. The *Prehistories* gallery tells the story of the people that inhabited the Swedish territory long before the formation of the modern nation. In encouraging people to recognise this fact, the display immediately sets contemporaneity as the time of reality, while granting situational validity to the past as well as the present. The way the exhibit is organised, the choices regarding the composition and arrangement of texts, all these elements work together to push visitors to become more than simple observers. There is no final truth or linear narrative with clear beginnings and even clearer ends. People are invited to think about what they see, to evaluate multiple interpretative paths. This is what the archaeological workflow is made of, and it does not need to be explained in a finite and fixed way to maintain its accuracy. Visitors take part in the interpretative process, and they are empowered with expertise and authorship. "Borders dissolve: between expert and public, past and present, disciplinary and humanistic" (Knell 2020, p. 179). This is what we should aim for when designing exhibitions. To work 'with' people and not only 'for' them.

From a theoretical point of view Knell's work rests inevitably on a UK and English-speaking perspective. Indeed, the reference to the most recent history of museum formation and disciplinary practice is largely informed by anthropological and social science perspectives that dominated, since the 1980s, the Humanities debate in this country. Nevertheless, despite other European countries stayed away from

such positions, this does not prevent the ideas gathered in this book to have value beyond their birth context. On the contrary, as discussions on the post-pandemic world push towards new ways for cultural institutions to have a real impact on people's lives and experiment with communication, it is possible to embark on a season of appraisal and change. If we consider the possibility that archaeological work, both consciously and unconsciously, constructs disciplinary boundaries on the past, and if public archaeology truly aims at bridging the distance between scholars and the public, then we need to move out of our comfort zone. This means recognising that "the past cannot simply be reduced to archaeological data or historical texts" (Smith 2007, p. 7). It is always someone's heritage, and it has values that go beyond scholarly knowledge (cf. Scarre & Coningham 2013). People establish a myriad of different links with their heritage. These links can be rational as well as emotional or personal, and they are all worth considering because they open a window into the past to tell stories and reflect on them (cf. Holtorf 2012). As archaeological museums have been rightfully identified as spaces in which communicative practices and storytelling can experiment better freedom and creative solutions (Bonacchi 2009, pp. 341-342), diving into their world will benefit both scholars and practitioners interested in building a better relationship with their audiences while improving their interpretative practices.

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