



LONDON DEBATES 2 0 0 9

What role do museums play in
the globalisation of culture?



The **London Debates** at the School of Advanced Study is a series of discussion workshops that bring together outstanding early career researchers to consider a subject of broad concern within the humanities and social sciences. The three-day workshops are attended by a small group of invited senior academics and fifteen early-career researchers – in their final year of doctoral study or up to ten years beyond the award of their doctorate – selected by an international open competition. The Debates include lectures, plenary seminars and small-group discussions and the final sessions of the workshops are dedicated to the drafting of a report, subsequently published by the School of Advanced Study.

London Debates was launched in 2009 and the first in this series of international debates was held on 14–16 May 2009 on the subject: ‘What role do museums play in the globalisation of culture?’.

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London Debates 2009

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Executive Summary

This report underlines the central role museums play in the globalisation of culture. Coauthored by a selected group of early-career researchers drawn from across Europe and North America, it incorporates innovative research in the humanities and social and information sciences and presents the most important results of a debate led at the School of Advanced Study at the University of London in May 2009. Further to summaries of the five dichotomous relationships through which museums are seen to play a key role in the globalisation of culture (continuity/discontinuity, the local/the global, the unique/the universal, inclusion/exclusion, the material/the immaterial), the report sets out a series of action points intended to guide academic research, museum practice and policy-making. More specifically, it points to the unique position museums hold between the 'past' and the 'present' as well as between the 'local', the 'national', the 'regional' and the 'international'. It argues that museums, which are key to the production of knowledge, need to be more inclusive and critically engaged with global developments, both in their material and digital/virtual representations. To negotiate these roles successfully they need to be recognised as central actors in the globalisation of culture and should be provided with adequate permanent funding.

Introductory Essay

As many scholars have pointed out, and as participants in the London Debates 2009 also demonstrated, museums have long been tangled up in processes that we could call globalisation. They have been subject to changes wrought by the time-space compression of changing modes of travel and new communication technologies, and by changing finance- and media-scapes; and they have themselves often been active in bringing different parts of the world to our notice, through collected and exhibited objects. Yet as the Debates also clearly showed, there is much – historically as well as in the present – that is not yet well understood about the kinds of roles that museums play in these processes, and there is even more that is not understood about the kinds of roles that they *might* play in future. Equally importantly, there is much that is not understood about the *implications* of the various roles that museums adopt or might adopt. How active should they be in, say, fostering links between particular parts of the world or in setting themselves up as ‘global’ institutions? And what does it mean to do so – and with what kinds of social, cultural, political and economic consequences?

While museums have long, and in a sense always, been implicated in globalisation, they have not always been so in quite the same ways. Figuring out the shifts and changes – some fairly obvious, others more subtle – is a key task facing scholars; and it is for this reason that it is useful to bring together researchers of different time-periods and different topic areas. Collectively, we can address the question not only of ‘What role do museums play in the globalisation of culture?’ but also ‘Are we seeing transformations in that role?’.

Many topics included in the Debates highlight areas in which we may be witnessing significant transformation. These include: the digitisation of collections and the potentially increased ‘boundary-less’ access that this allows; repatriation and calls for it; continued expansion of museum numbers, especially in countries which have previously had relatively low numbers of museums; the development of further international policies, frameworks and institutions; new collaborations between museums and source communities or other groups; greater numbers of travelling exhibitions; continued escalation, at least until the recent financial slump, in international cultural tourism; the orientation of exhibitions and museums around ‘cosmopolitan’ topics, such as human rights; and the attempt by some museums to identify themselves as ‘world museums’ or museums of ‘world cultures’. Not all of these developments necessarily pull in the same directions; and not all are equally relevant to all museums. But all speak to possible transformations – in challenges posed to and in responses made by – museums today.

Martin Prösler’s now classic essay on museums and globalisation sets out well some of the ways in which museums may be involved in globalisation; and in doing so he also effectively poses some intriguing questions about whether the situation today is as it was when his essay was published 13 years ago. He argues that ‘Museums, realizing the “world” in their modes of ordering, are actively involved in globalization’ (1996: 40); and goes on to highlight some of the different ways in which that may operate. He reminds us that the princely and gentlemanly cabinets of the 15th and 16th centuries were conceived as *theatra mundi* – representations of the world in microcosm – and also points out that the global spread of the 19th-century Western metropolitan museum model was part of global processes of imperialism and colonialism. In his more detailed attention to the National Museum of Sri Lanka, he shows how local culture becomes refracted through what he calls ‘First World categories’. The Kolam masks used in village performances, for example, are transformed into ‘folklore’, ‘art’ and ‘representations’, rather than seen as integral parts of life (1996: 39).

In passing, he notes that even within this there may be scope for different kinds of local interpretations; but it is clear that these will be somehow against the grain of the museum offer. His account of globalisation, then, even while it draws on Robertson to stress the differentiating tendencies of globalisation (‘glocalization’), as well as its more obvious homogenising capacities, tends to see even that differentiation as primarily on the West’s terms. It is like Richard Handler’s nice description of multiculturalism as ‘Like a row of ethnic restaurants in any North American city – all making use of a set of presuppositions that they share with their customers about what constitutes ethnic food, how, where, and when to eat it, how to pay for it, and what its value as nutrition and authentic experience is’ (1988: 195). What is involved, he says, is ‘a common market to produce differences that make them all the same’ (*ibid*). One question, then, is whether this is the kind of role that museums inevitably play in globalisation.

In 2009, demands by source communities for repatriation, active partnerships between Western museums and museums in other parts of the world, attempts to set up alternatives to Western museum models, and the setting up of branches of the Guggenheim and Louvre in Abu Dhabi are among the many developments that suggest that there is no such inevitability – though the tendency identified by Prösler and Handler has certainly not disappeared. Instead, as the London Debates 2009 thoroughly demonstrated, what we have is a more complex situation, with museums playing often difficult, challenging and sometimes even contradictory roles. Highlighting some of this, and suggesting possible lines for further analysis, research and policy are among the important tasks ahead.

Works cited

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Sharon Macdonald



London Debates participants at the Foundling Museum

Key Issues

The discussion sessions at London Debates 2009 laid particular emphasis on five areas: science museums, 'difficult museums', 'world museums', museums and their missions, and material and virtual museums. Each of them was facilitated by two senior academics and based on papers given by three junior academics. The papers can be accessed at www.sas.ac.uk/londondebates.html.

What follow are summaries of the five dichotomous relationships through which museums are seen to play a key role in the globalisation of culture: continuity/discontinuity, the local/the global, the unique/the universal, inclusion/exclusion and the material/the immaterial.

Continuity/Discontinuity

Globalisation is often understood to have generated discontinuity and to represent a break from what went before. However, globalisation generates contradictions that require museums to offer a sense of continuity whilst simultaneously adapting to change. For example, museums often attempt to mobilise continuity in the form of authenticity and local specificity in order to attract tourists, while also striving to attract new audiences and take account of evolving knowledge. Due to the accretion of buildings, objects and collecting traditions, continuity has proved to be easier to manage than change.

A desire for innovation has led to a range of new interpretative approaches such as re-contextualising objects through artistic or historical reclassification, unsettling the visitor or encouraging new forms of visitor participation. While such experiments have responded to central museological criticisms, they have been working in a context of the residual power of large, permanent collections as well as the privileged status conferred by certain exhibitory forms. Streams of project funding – and specific initiatives relating to key events such as the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the UK – have been important to enable innovative work. However, there is a danger that one-off projects fail to underpin longer-term changes. Therefore, innovative programmes and their funding schemes should span longer periods of time as a means of reconciling continuity and change – core characteristics of both culture and globalisation.

Dominik Collet, Helen Graham & Eva-Maria Troelenberg



Helen Graham at the Wellcome Collection

The Local/The Global

Museums, and especially those considered of 'national' importance, enjoy a unique position between the 'local', the 'national', the 'regional' and the 'international'. Operating within a system of multi-layered scales, their material collections and interpretative representations are subject to contesting claims. It is within this context of competing identifications and interests that the 'local', at the one extreme, and the 'global', at the other, inform each other and undergo constant change and redefinition. Thus, museums are embedded in an ongoing process of scalar reconfiguration.



London Debates participants at the Wellcome Collection

At worst, the 'local' and the 'global' clash, such as when the celebration of human commonness overrides ethnic divides or when the endorsement of cultural diversity suppresses local specificities. The resultant tensions have direct implications for museums. For instance, what should a 'world museum' be – a material and/or virtual project? – and whom should it be for – the local/national/regional/international visitor? Likewise, how does an ecomuseum position itself between the aims of preserving local contexts and traditions and the impact of global economic, social and cultural change?

At the same time, the 'local' and the 'global' must not be irreconcilable opposites; indeed, the 'global' already manifests itself in various guises in the 'local' around the world and, vice versa, the 'local' appears in various guises in the 'global' around the world. At best, the 'local' and the 'global' complement and enrich each other, such as when global interest and international law extend support to protecting local heritage as world heritage. The tangible and intangible heritage safeguarded by UNESCO is a case in point here. Nonetheless, critics have started to cast shadows on such initiatives. At worst the 'global' reduces the 'local' to an illusory uniqueness which is mobilised to succeed in the global marketplace. While museums must, of course, also capitalise on market opportunities, they equally have to ensure that they sustain the 'local' vis-à-vis the 'global'. Appreciated in balance, ethnic divides and local specificities can be given as much a voice as human commonness and cultural diversity.

Mads Daugbjerg, Gabriel Gee & Uta Protz

The Unique/The Universal

Globalisation entails a movement along a continuum: from the unique, the local and the nuanced to the universal through publicising processes. By disseminating knowledge about cultural artefacts, practices and expressions, museums play a fundamental role in the globalisation of culture. Nonetheless, the role museums play is not without a multitude of challenges, which serve to highlight the issues intrinsic to globalisation.

It may be argued that the notion of the unique also having universal value is the principle underlying the museum project in its broadest sense. At the core of the movement from unique to universal is the attribution of new values to a cultural entity which serve to raise its universal status. However, the question remains: who has the power to define what is of universal value? While some commentators argue that when a cultural entity is deemed universal, it is celebrated, promoted and, to a certain extent, safeguarded for future generations; others highlight the potential loss of original values, meanings and contexts. Furthermore, it can be argued that universality generates homogeneity, erasing the unique, local and nuanced, and that this selection process is political, involving a top-down approach lacking in democracy. A cultural reconciliation between the more personal perspective and that of humankind must be reached in order to maintain the balance between uniqueness and universality. In essence, the processes of such a negotiation should be at the core of museological practices: safeguarding unique cultural entities whilst advancing their connections to all.

Sally Hughes, Michelle L. Stefano & Valentina Vadi

Inclusion/Exclusion

Museums have tended to act as cultural brokers in a colonial context, imposing some truths and ignoring others. Today, some museums are also claiming a 'world museum' designation, acting as corporate and political agents. If museums are going to develop their roles within a global citizenship, they have to stand accountable for the histories of their collections. Indeed, there is a growing need for museums to commit to long-term plans to reinterpret their collections in collaboration with multiple community voices, both 'at home' and internationally. Museum collections have complex geographies and histories, which can challenge the authoritative voice of the curator and the museum.

Engaging with these debates is the only way museums can claim to be part of an equal global citizenship. There is also a growing call for museums to acknowledge that global cultures exist not only 'out there' but within their own collections. Moreover, the need to clarify the 'authoritative' voice of the museum for the public as well as to be more open to alternative voices is increasingly important. Through this, the visitor can be offered, and encouraged to accept, a more active role in the museum narrative, leading to a sense of inclusion. The hidden histories and alternative stories of collections need to be supported through new research and by promoting an expansion of the curatorial voice. Allowing for the re-interpretation of collections, and involving these new interpretations within physical and virtual realms, will enable museums to develop methodologies of accountability. However, this can only occur if museums care to become spaces that serve, engage and challenge a global community.



Dominik Collet and Caroline Bressey at the Foundling Museum

Susan Ashley, Caroline Bressey & Gabriela Petkova-Campbell

The Material/The Immaterial

Modern technologies, such as audio guides and PC terminals, allow visitors to access museum collections from a multitude of perspectives. Interactive graphics, for example, enable visitors to view objects in reconstructed original contexts. Equally, modern technologies not only allow museums to reach audiences around the globe but also facilitate a two-directional flow of information. Museums can now record 'difficult' histories from some visitors and communicate them to others. Modern display techniques, such as the use of light and sound effects, ensure that exhibits move as much as inform visitors. Furthermore, the conservation field has also benefited from technological progress, facilitating the storage of data and files and their continual updating. These improvements have led to a greater capacity for museums to share their resources and, in turn, to a greater democratisation of museological practices.

Shifts in the presentation of knowledge, as well as the need to attract visitors, have led museums to adopt more engaging and entertaining modes of display. The positive impacts aside, the importance upheld by the education and entertainment sectors has occasionally led to excessive use of new technologies. While there is little doubt that the virtual dimension has opened up new possibilities with regard to the management, presentation and study of collections, there remains the fact that immaterial collections will never be able to replace material collections. As modern technologies increasingly shape exhibitions and museums, material objects continue to define their existence and appeal.

However, as in the case of holograms replacing genuine paintings, new technologies present museums with an opportunity to address the contemporary confrontation and issues stemming from the opposition of reality to the virtual. Where will the global information explosion and the multiplication of virtual identities lead to and what impact will these have on our 'real' existence? Interestingly, a striking correlation can be seen between André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire* and the exponential densification and expansion of the repertoire of data through new technologies.

Antonio López Jiménez, Fredrik Thomasson & Maria Toscano

Action Points

Globalisation presents a multitude of challenges and opportunities for museums. The question as to what role museums play in the globalisation of culture was debated by a selected group of early-career researchers at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, in May 2009. The following action points summarise their main recommendations:

- Museums should be aware of their unique position as guardians and interpreters of the 'past' in the 'present'; they should utilise their position more effectively in order to show and negotiate the continuities and discontinuities generated by globalisation.
- Museums should be aware of their unique position between the 'local', the 'national', the 'regional' and the 'international'; acting as intermediaries, they should make better use of their position to interpret the multi-layered meanings of their collections to audiences ranging from the local to the international.
- Museums should offer various perspectives on the 'past' and the 'present' as well as on the 'local' and the 'global' and reflect changing understandings in their collection displays, education programmes and mission statements. This applies to the representation of historical events, in particular, which should make competing, or even conflicting, interpretations visible.
- Museums should be less elitist in their leadership and more transparent in their governance to allow full public scrutiny of such sensitive issues as the display of human remains and the long-term loan of cultural entities abroad.
- Museums should be more inclusive in the production of knowledge (e.g. collecting, research, interpretation); once the reserve of the expert voice, the modern museum has to accommodate multiple voices.
- Museums should engage in public debate on global issues, contributing both at the specialist level and as institutions open to alternative views.
- Museums should make maximum use of modern technologies and, at the same time, they need to be critically aware of the cultural competencies that these demand. Used judiciously, such technologies allow museums to engage and interact with local as well as international visitors, in the museum space as well as over the Internet. Modern technologies thus allow museums to relate the multi-layered meanings of their collections at a multitude of levels and in a multitude of ways. Used by visitors as a social platform, modern technologies can also enhance democratic ownership of culture.
- Museums should remain material collections at heart: digital/virtual representations can be no more than extensions of material collections, and the link between the two ought to be as close as possible.
- Museums should adhere to internationally agreed collecting standards and support the repatriation/restitution of illegally removed cultural entities.
- When moving a cultural artefact, expression or practice to the universal level, attention must be paid to the original values, meanings and contexts with which it was once invested. This care ensures that the entities are not de-valourised and, ultimately, lost. This is especially crucial when dealing with living heritage, or intangible cultural expressions, which owe their vitality to networks of people, as well as the environments and social contexts within which these expressions have evolved.
- Museums play a central role in the globalisation of culture. They should be provided with adequate permanent funding to be able to negotiate this role successfully.

Contributors

Authors/Editors

Gabriel Gee

Université Paris X Nanterre
gabrielneilg@hotmail.com

Uta Protz

European University Institute, Florence
and Saxo Institutet, København
uta.protz@eui.eu

Michelle L. Stefano

Newcastle University
michelle.stefano@newcastle.ac.uk

With sincere thanks to:

Naomi Segal

Director, Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies
School of Advanced Study, University of London

Sharon Macdonald

Professor of Social Anthropology
University of Manchester



London Debates participants outside the Foundling Museum

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Rosemary Lambeth
Emily Morrell
Barry Smith
Miles Taylor
Lars Tharp
Sir Mark Walport

Reader, Institute of Archaeology, University College London
School of Advanced Study, University of London
Vice-Chancellor, University of London
Keeper, Department of Africa, Oceania & the Americas, British Museum, London
Program Director, Jewish Museum, Berlin
School of Advanced Study, University of London
School of Advanced Study, University of London
Director, Institute of Philosophy, School of Advanced Study, University of London
Director, Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London
Director, Foundling Museum, London
Director, Wellcome Trust, London

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Authors

Susan Ashley

York University, Toronto
susanltashley@yahoo.com

Caroline Bressey

University College London
c.bressey@ucl.ac.uk

Dominik Collet

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
Dominik.Collet@phil.uni-goettingen.de

Mads Daugbjerg

Aarhus Universitet
mads.daugbjerg@hum.au.dk

Helen Graham

Newcastle University
h.graham@newcastle.ac.uk

Sally Hughes

Oxford Brookes University
shughes@brookes.ac.uk

Antonio López Jiménez

Universidad de Murcia
leserv@hotmail.com

Gabriela Petkova-Campbell

Newcastle University
gabipetkova@yahoo.com

Fredrik Thomasson

European University Institute, Florence
fredrik.thomasson@eui.eu

Maria Toscano

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
maria_toscano@libero.it

Eva-Maria Troelenberg

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
Troelenberg@khi.fi.it

Valentina Vadi

European University Institute, Florence
valentina.vadi@eui.eu

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LONDON DEBATES
c/o Rosemary Lambeth
School of Advanced Study
University of London
Senate House
Malet Street
London WC1E 7HU
UNITED KINGDOM

rosemary.lambeth@sas.ac.uk
+44 (0)20 7862 8695

www.sas.ac.uk

