

Museums, Democracy and Peace: A Conceptual Approach to Museum Operation

Rodney J. Reynolds
Barbados Gallery of Art

You come as light rain not to quench
But question out the pride of fire...
From *Bringer of Peace*, Wole Soyinka

Introduction – Learning the Western view

When I was five or six years old, my Montessori school instructor, Mrs Kay, called myself and the other students to Group. In Group we shared opinions and solved problems as a collective body. I remember we sat in a circle on the floor and listened to Mrs Kay read to us from a newspaper clipping about a group of people who could not get along with each other. As the problem was presented to us, because these people did not like each other, they refused to share their resources and the land that they lived on for each other's benefit.

The ostensible purpose of that day's exercise was to teach us to co-operate, and how and why to get along with others. We learned of the potential consequences of selfishness (the people in the story killed each other) as well as identified the benefits of sharing (full happy lives) – all of which were concepts, skills and desires that our parents were paying good money to have us inculcated with. We discussed the problem and presented solutions that our teacher wrote down. We decided to communicate our suggestions in writing, and together crafted a letter to the President of South Africa offering our solutions to his country's problems.

Many weeks later we received a very polite letter back from him thanking us for our suggestions and expressing the opinion that he found them to be inappropriate. Looking back on that experience as an adult, one of the many reasons why Group was significant to me is that it introduced me to the concept of democracy and how it operates. Through this exercise I also felt the consequences of learning the fact that my values and those of my peers were not universal, and that the simple expression of beliefs may not be sufficient to influence how an event is perceived and addressed. As students we lacked the ability to impose our will. We had no power or authority. Why did we not have it? How did we get it? Did we want it? What was our responsibility? Was "our" peace more important than South African equality? We had followed the rules and participated in the democratic process, but all we achieved was a letter of rejection. Did democracy fail?

Democracy defined and its relationship to beliefs, values and ideology

Democracy at its most basic assumes an equality of rights and privileges. It is a process that invites group participation in making a decision because the decision will in some way impact the group. Structurally, democracy provides a way of organising a group for particular action; sociologically it supplies rules and a framework to define how majority and dissenting opinions are to be expressed and ideologically reveals itself as an acceptable way to support the accrual and exercise of authority and power.

Democracy should not be thought of as synonymous with the concept of freedom. Rather, democracy informs our understanding of freedom by revealing the means by which most Western people believe that limits on freedom should be determined. In other words, in the real Western world, freedom without democracy is inconceivable. In fact, the notion of freedom without democracy is considered by many to be either an oxymoron or a threat. As a result, the idea and real world practice of anarchy, communitarianism, communism, some forms of socialism, fascism, libertarianism, tribalism, totalitarianism, dictatorship, etc., are defined and understood as bad while democracy and its practitioners are defined and understood as good.

Thinking about democracy then immediately requires consideration of how individuals form beliefs, and how those beliefs come to be shared by groups. While beliefs are informed by values, values are the product of a belief coupled with an objective. A belief is a judgement that results from the consideration of information, whereas a value is a measure of equivalence between different things. Beliefs and values are related but distinct. They tumble together, one giving rise to the other.

As beliefs are communicated they assume the nature of values. This act of sharing is purposive. It encourages a response from those with whom we are sharing that will tell us how similar what we believe is to what they believe. If, having recognised difference, we seek to actively impose our beliefs then we have begun to transform our values into ideologies. Ideologies that we support through the exercise of whatever power and authority we have at our disposal. Ideological promulgation can take the form of letter writing, non-violent demonstration, diplomatic intervention, martial acts, manipulation of symbols and information, for example through the use of the arts and the media, or through any number of other means.

The problem

The fervent belief in and use of democracy as an ideological construct often leads to aggressive proselytising. It can take the form of “humanitarian”, military, economic and/or cultural foreign policy action as well as have significant localised influence that can define the orientation of cultural institutions. The platitude the best defence is a good offence states simply the ideological agenda, and in some instances becomes a mission statement as well.

Yet it is the aggressive promotion of such a worldview that brings Westernised people into conflict with notions of peace, democracy, responsible management or governance and our

own values. An ideology is a tool that can be used as a weapon. Museums use it as both, and must be prepared to acknowledge and address the issues that arise as a result. While it is difficult to separate cultural practice and these issues from the impact of economics, tradition, history, convention, etc., in this paper I shall attempt to construct an understanding of what these ideas have to do with, how they impact upon, and what they mean for contemporary museums that engage in collecting and exhibition activities.

Peace and democracy – functioning in the real world

The obvious answer to the question, should museums strive to promote peace and democracy, is yes. After all, a standard exclusion in our insurance policies addresses acts of war and insurrection. But the reference to peace, I think, is inclusive not only of martial acts, but also of any acts that create stability. Stability, which I would like us to think of as an acceptable and manageable level of conflict, is obviously a dynamic concept that varies with time and our capacity to enable it. Peace exists only if we create it and our ability to do so changes from day to day. Peace requires knowledge, experience, willingness, stamina, focus and luck. Sometimes peace can only be achieved through increasing instability to the point of intolerance. The bombing of Kosovo is an example of this situation. Is it okay to use the power and authority available to you to pursue an ideological objective if it means creating instability in the process? Is it okay to create intolerable instability because you can and because it supports your personal or institutional authority? At what point does the use of authority granted by a democratic majority or as a result of ideological conversion become an expression of inequality? Can the creation of intolerable instability have at its base a belief in equal rights and privileges? In what sense should we speak of preventing conflict? Instability is after all a necessary precondition of peace.

These questions notwithstanding, a peaceful environment helps to protect our collections, facilitates visitation, and generally provides philanthropic and funding environments that support our continued institutional operation. Peaceful environments also allow for individuals' attentions to be scattered with greater and lesser degrees of focus on a variety of things. Peace helps to create options and decreases the consequences of poor decisions. Peace and democracy are probably laudable value orientations, but are they values that should inform museum activities? The answer to this question is important because as non-commercial institutions our orientation is defined rather than given. One of the most critical things for the staffs and boards of museums to understand are the values that support the structure and activities of their particular institution, and what kind of possibilities for relationships they create between the institution and its real and potential audiences.

Should not institutions have a primary allegiance to their collections' protection and use? We protect what is important. The necessity for protection, which is to say preservation, is a statement of relevance, and assumes that what is relevant today should be so tomorrow, and may have a larger audience to relate to. At the very least, future generations of cultural custodians and consumers should have the opportunity to decide this question for themselves. Providing the opportunity is a consequence of resource management, and the primary task of the museum staff

and board. It is this kind of planning for the transfer of cultural patrimony that is made possible by peaceful operating conditions. But getting to that point can be fraught with contradictions and paradox.

Opportunities of instability

During periods of great stability or peace, community attention is expended with increasing diversity. While stimulating the conditions that enable the existence and exploration of divergent and varied opportunities is generally desirable, such situations cause the answer to the question of why one attends to this and not that to become important. What attention is focused upon and why is an indicator of the beliefs of a society, and can lead to an understanding of the ways in which a culture is changing. Among the consequences of attention scattering are an increase in security of ones values and usually the emergence of a more competitive operating environment. Initially during such periods, the use of values as ideological tools is unnecessary, and over time the expression of cultural values takes on an increased subjectivity and ambiguity. As stability leads to instability out come the tools of ideology, authority and power. The conventions of expression and meaning tell us that the presence of ambiguity indicates instability and instability can be manipulated. The American Congressman Howell Heflin once said ‘when you have the facts on your side argue the facts, when you have the law on your side argue the law, and when you have neither confuse the issue.’ His rather colourful point was simple, use ambiguity to create instability and thereby increase the likelihood of achieving your objective.

It is during times of instability that cultures tend to focus and concentrate on the things that give them meaning and provide for the expression of those things. Museums are thrust into existence because of the cultural desire to give form to societal values. Museums provide cultures with a basis for determining their similarity to other cultural groups. As a result, the collections, programmes and activities of cultural institutions necessarily open a window onto a society and become emblematic expressions of the conditions and values that motivate counter-stability movements at home and abroad.

If peace is a measure of stability, then it can be thought of as the degree of order in an environment. Information theory suggests that as order decreases the simplicity of communicated messages increases. If the expression of values conforms to these rules, during times of instability consideration and discourse about the nature and complexity of the values that we hold, and the consequences of how they are shared, will be neglected in favour of their straightforward unambiguous representation. If we accept these ideas as valid then museums and what they exhibit, collect and programme can be indicators of the condition of cultural stability in a region, and provide insight into the operation and accrual of cultural and institutional power and authority.

Recommendation for museums – musings on authority

I believe that what can be taken from such a situation is the necessity for museums to adopt a contrapuntal stance to fluctuations in peace. In other words, as stability increases museums must focus on how they address and express their basic values through their operations including but not limited to planning, human resource practices, acquisition (information and object), exhibition, and programmatic activities. They must focus on what is contemporary. As stability decreases they must diversify focus, expend their resources and give priority to what was past and what may be future. In short, museums must refine their messages during good times and shout them during bad. Because of their critical role as a cultural indicator, museum boards and staff are in a position to raise issues before they begin to dominate societal discourse. Should museums do this depends upon institutional values, objectives, resources and creativity.

While I believe that this kind of orientation is critical to museums' successful existence, three barriers that stand in the way are capitalisation, information distribution and convention. Where do the money and audiences come from to support such activities and how do we alter the thinking of boards and staff to enable this kind of change?

During periods of decreasing stability, museums must be in the position to broadcast messages of security and validation. The message becomes horizontal or thematic – varied but not divergent. How collections and exhibits are formed and accessed should be oriented to facilitate this. If one thinks about the problem in terms of a standard sorting exercise, the aim becomes plain. If a set of paintings is grouped according to subject, say landscape, one point of differentiation occurs at the level of content. Content variations indicate the opportunity for interpretation and create the necessity for a range of interpretive approaches which then open many possibilities for varied meaning and programmatic significance.

Interpretation raises the question of authority and how it is achieved, and inevitably leads to a discussion of money. Authority, as indicated above, can be validated through the democratic process. Outreach programmes are generally built around this particular idea. It is assumed that outreach audiences share a belief in the values that have given authority to the cultural institution. In other words, new audiences are not so much engaged, as they are confronted with the cultural institution as authority. They then validate that authority through participation in whatever activity has been crafted for them.

In the above example democracy means inclusive – particularly of persons who do not normally visit museums. Their non-participation has defined them as other, and some characteristics, economic status, perceived race, etc., make them a desirable target. In a democracy, non-participation is not tolerated. It is an assault on the democratic tradition. As a result non-participants are either shunned or proselytised. In recent times, tight funding environments have pressured museums to move from the former approach to the latter. One consequence is that museums have become the beneficiaries of directed philanthropy in proportion to the funding agent's belief in the museum's ability to successfully convert non-participant other communities into active, engaged prodigals. Another consequence, and I believe the more important one, is that targeting non-traditional participants has meant using non-traditional resources. The result is a redistribution of influence inside of the museum away

from curators, who nevertheless retain a position of privilege, to educators and marketing officers.

The museum practice of using their authority such that it is reinforced by community response rather than also created by it is not only not democratic, but alienating. But is not this central to the democratic problem? How does one protect minority interests, views and values while doing your best to convert them to your views because of your majority mandate? I would like to suggest that “other communities” marginalise museums at the individual level because they understand this problem. Significantly however, these “other groups” are targeted through institutions that they have some affiliation with such as community or service organisations, schools, churches, etc. Belonging to such a body communicates to the museum the value orientation that on some level the target group ascribes to, which then allows the cultural institution to use its authority as a benefit. One institution delivers its constituents and the other conveys the validation of being associated with its authority.

Democracy is organised at a certain level around institutions, and could not exist as we know it without them. Structurally, validation is the particular activity that the democratic tradition requires. But used in the way that I have outlined above, what is communicated is a message that reinforces pre-existing cultural attitudes for immediate objective gain – money, visitors, status. To diversify and validate as I mean it is to work outside of extant community groups and invest individuals at the community level with an interest in both subjective and objective outcomes which could be through exhibitions, or any of a number of educational activities. In such an instance, object resources must be shared to ensure both museum and community input. Such an approach will probably have a great material culture emphasis and will necessarily challenge curators to re-think the role of the object and its relationship to individuals.

However, this question of authority and interpretation is not yet dispensed with. Ironically, as museums focus on interpretation they often destabilise their institutional authority, which creates cultural ripples. We can accept that interpretation is informed opinion and must necessarily respond to the quality and emergence of new information, but can we also accept that interpretation is a tool used by museum staffs to different and sometimes contradictory ends?

Standard practice among museum educators today is to shift their dialogue with groups from the expository to the interrogative – regardless of the level of the group that is being addressed. The implication of what is really meant by the phrase “there is no right or wrong answer” is neatly avoided by focusing on the fact that contemporary education theory and practice tends to emphasise process over predictability – how and why over what. Similarly, museum marketing officers understand the selling value of institutional authority, but need to construct narratives that will be engaging, easy to understand, interactive and have the structure to be packaged. Such emphasis on the narrative tends to decentralise the object, which is generally the foundation of institutional authority. Museum curators on the other hand, need to accumulate and verify facts – an important part of protecting their collections. The objects they are able to acquire have name, economic, historical, scholarly and cultural significance. For

them the object must be primary and the value of an acquisition must be validated by the authority enhanced by its purchase or acceptance.

While one might expect interpretation to be the greatest common denominator between these various museum interest groups, I hold instead that it is the concept of validation. Through interpretation all of the three groups named above (which could of course be expanded) seek to validate themselves and their target audiences. If museums are to be in a position to broadcast messages of validation is it important to reconcile these various needs of interpretation? I do not believe so. Interpretation should be regarded as a tool of validation rather than an end in and of itself. Museums validate in ways that can operate in concert and support one another if we as museum staff allow them to.

Curators must lead the way. Attitudes towards the objects that cultural institutions hold in public trust grant authority. Collecting institutions protect their collection through the imposition of rules and procedures that limit collection access, and restrict the actions and activities that can happen around objects and their environments. These decisions are not arbitrary, but rather are based upon a knowledge that has been built up through tradition, trial and error, experimentation, research, the application of available technology and common sense. These rules are meant to be safeguards, not barriers. Most importantly, they are necessarily open to refinement based upon new information or the dictates of circumstance.

Circumstance informs tradition, and it is tradition that is most in need of alteration. If, as I suggested earlier, collections are built and exhibitions are conceived laterally, then curators are free to contextualise objects in ways that will prioritise their interpretive and validative potential while providing the greatest opportunity for divergent interpretive needs to be met. This will mean, of course, addressing the object in such a way that its contemporary role is excavated, presented and emphasised, while philosophies of aesthetics, and ideologies of authority become still important, but secondary concerns.

During periods of instability however, the contemporary role of the object must be displaced to the background to enable exhibitions that will allow the historical and potential role of the object to be expressed. By presenting future possible object roles, museums will deliver information to audiences that, because of their contact with interpretive programmes, have developed the skills that they need to have a dialogue about how, and most importantly why, their society is changing. What kind of impact might an exhibition held in South Africa in the early and mid-1970s that focused on the role of the gun or of agricultural tools in their society have had? The museum becomes empowered to raise urgent and relevant questions by virtue of how it chooses to address the object that it has responsibility for.

Participants in democratic processes have great need of accurate information. This information should be the basis of any decision that they make. In reality the information they receive is packaged for them and usually agenda driven. Museums, through some of their interpretive activities, prepare learners to participate in democratic structures by inculcating procedures of information gathering, expression and review. Yet, in museum education programmes, fixing meaning or a point of view through consensus is discouraged. Instead, the

means becomes the end, and such practice is opposed in the most fundamental of ways to the use to which democratic processes use information.

Democratic processes use consensus to validate. Museums, through allowing divergent interpretive needs to be satisfied, validate every time and at every level at which interpretation occurs. Also museums encourage the expression of an opinion in an environment that is not emotionally threatening. This is critical as it helps to build the confidence that is needed to maintain integrity of opinion in the face of hostility – a potential consequence of consensus needs.

Such a procedure seems to me to be the one way that museums can focus on their primary responsibilities to protect their collections, while allowing the values that this responsibility gives rise to, to be addressed with integrity and without contradiction.

This kind of approach is consistent with the needs of educators, marketing officers, funders and other interest groups who have a stake in what museums do and how. Through how museums address interpretation, not only do they validate, but they can also peel back the covers that obscure how and why decisions are made and invest individuals and institutions that previously would have been identified as “other” with an interest in museum activities. This kind of investment would necessitate that museums do things differently. I believe that the benefits would be enormous.

Museums should be value driven to meet the protection needs of their collections. This means that they privilege practices that will enable them to respond to changes in their operating environments. Peace and democracy do contribute in some positive ways to how museums address their responsibilities, but because of the contradictory way in which these concepts find real world expression, museums must be careful of making these ideas central to their operations. Only by asking and continuing to ask the question how do museums validate and who is benefiting from museum activity can museums find their maximum point of relevance, attract funding and engender appropriate governance.