Interpreting the new museology*

*Max Ross***

Lichfield

Abstract

The museum world has undergone radical change since the 1970s. Political and economic pressures have forced its professionals to shift their attention from their collections towards visitors. Whereas in the past the museum tended to be exclusive and elitist, signs of a progressive opening-up and greater accessibility have appeared. A climate of increasing reflexivity within the profession is identified as a 'new museology'. The paper draws on data derived from semi-structured interviews with curators and directors from five local museums. I argue that the movement towards a more visitor-centred ethos can be seen as entailing a corresponding shift in the identity of the museum professional, from 'legislator' to 'interpreter' of cultural meaning. The argument, adapted from Zygmunt Bauman, is that intellectuals are being redefined in a shift from legislator to interpreter. Finally, I argue that this process of transition, as it occurs in museums, is by no means complete. Drawing on Basil Bernstein's seminal work in educational sociology I propose that museums are also resistant to these forces of change.

Introduction: defining the new museology

The research on museum workers reported below was part of a larger study which examined the changing nature and social functions of the museum in the late twentieth century. The overall aim of the project was to reveal the socially structured ways in which meaning is made, communicated and reproduced in museums.[1] As part of this project the intention was to elicit, by means of in-depth interviews, museum professionals' beliefs about, and attitudes towards, the following things: their museums, their functions within the institutions and the publics and audiences whom they served. I was also concerned with their responses to the external, factors, social, economic and political, that had placed the identities of museums at stake and which had, in many cases, precipitated those institutions into crises, flux and transformation. The data were collected in the mid 1990s and were collected with the intention of understanding the social context of what had become known as the *New Museology*. However, as will become evident, I want to suggest that the data have a relevance to more recent debates about museums, social inclusion and obstacles to social change (Sandell, 2002; 2003).

In this article I deploy the concept of the new museology as a way of referring not only to the introduction of theoretical perspectives into museum studies but also to wider changes in the museum world. These include the changing character of museum work that is evident in the climate of institutional reflexivity that has emerged since the 1970s. The new museology, as interpreted in this article, refers to a transformation of museums from being exclusive and socially divisive institutions (see Merriman 1898:165; Duncan and Wallach,1980; Pearson, 1984:34; Hooper-Greenhill, 1988:224; Bennett, 1988). Since the late twentieth century there have, of course, been changes. In the UK, Europe and throughout the industrialized world, museums are more numerous and more widely popular than ever before. There has also been a widespread expansion in the social range of the material culture that museums collect

and display, which has come to represent not just the world views of ruling classes, but also popular culture and the histories of non-elite social strata. Museums, it seems, have become altogether more accessible - the old atmosphere of exclusiveness and intellectual asceticism has largely given way to a more democratic climate.

This article considers the climate of contemporary change as it affects and is perceived by museum workers themselves, and asks: what lies behind this movement; what social forces are shaping and propelling the new museology? In museums, in the professional journals and in the museum studies literature a critical stance is being taken towards old assumptions and ways of working. The perceived elitism, the divisiveness, the transparently ideological mission of many museums has been widely debated in the literature. Older narratives of empire, class, race and science are seen by professionals as inappropriate to the requirements of a pluralistic, multicultural society. Museums, it is argued, must rid themselves of their elitist image and outlook, and abandon monolithic visions of history, if they are to have ethical justifications for their continuing existence. Thus, one museum worker encapsulates the spirit of the new museology:

> Museums must come to terms with a plurality of pasts, sometimes in conflict with each other. As one of the principal means by which people gain access to their history, museums must dismantle the cultural barriers that impeded widespread participation in their activities.They must become more community-focused, and museum workers must look to the people they serve, rather than their peers, for approval (Lawley, 1992:38).

The question that I am asking is this: what are the relations of power that lie behind this new and democratized politics of representation? What political, economic and social pressures give impetus to change in the museum world? Drawing on data from interviews with museum workers, I identify what may be described as a central tension in the modern museum. Thus, on the one hand, there are pressures for museums to become more accessible and representative of multicultural society. On the other hand, there are forces of resistance for the dismantling of established cultural boundaries poses a threat to professional and social identities, and to the value of what Bourdieu (1984:12) calls 'cultural capital'.

In what follows consider some of the economic and political aspects underlying change, as these are seen by the curators and directors in the sample. Having sketched the backdrop to the new museology, I suggest that the role of the museum professional is becoming redefined, *pace* Zygmunt Bauman (1987), as an 'interpreter' rather than a 'legislator' of culture. Bauman's work can, I think, help to explain the changing character of the museum in relation to a long historical transition in the social function of intellectual elite. Finally, I argue that this process of transition, as it occurs in museums, is by no means as complete and as absolute as Bauman's thesis would seem to imply. Drawing on Basil Bernstein's seminal work in educational sociology, I propose that museums are resistant to the forces of change and reform.

Methodology

My general approach was a qualitative one in which I conducted interviews with the museum professionals, with curators, directors and public relations and promotions specialists. The aim was to generate qualitative data on the subjective perceptions, values and attitudes underlying the production of meaning in museums.[2] A small area in the West Midlands was chosen for the study so that the micro-level aspects of the museum's work: changes in its internal organization, the priorities of its staff and its relations with the local communities that it serves, could be explored. A total of twelve museum workers were interviewed, including four directors, one manager and seven curatorial and administrative staff, at five local museums including three Local Authority and two independent museums. This local focus, with its emphasis on qualitative, in-depth data, was intended to provide a contrast and counterpoint to the evidence of some large-scale questionnaire-based surveys of museums and audiences, most notably those conducted by Bourdieu (1991), and Merriman (1991).

Key to respondents

The following key represents museum professionals interviewed and quoted below:

A: Head curator, independent museum.
B: Director, independent museum.
C: Promotions Officer, Local Authority museum.
D: Director, independent museum.
E: Manager, Local Authority museum.
F: Director, Local Authority museum.
G: Curator, Local Authority museum.
H: Curator, Local Authority museum.
I: Public relations specialist, Local Authority museum.
J: Director, Local Authority museum.
K: Head curator, Local Authority museum.
L: Public relations and promotions officer, Independent museum.

Political economy of the local museum

One topic that I sought to open up in all interviews concerned the changes and trends in the contemporary museum world, as these had been experienced by my interviewees and by the institutions in which they worked. How far, I wanted to know, had any developments in the museum's internal organization, and its relationships with other institutions, with the Local Authority, central government or private sector enterprise, for example, been felt as either enabling or constraining?

The impact of economic factors associated with changes in public and private sources of funding, and the opening up of public museums to the multiple pressures and effects of consumer markets, are clearly decisive in the formation of a new professional discourse with its visitor-centred, or consumer-oriented emphasis. Together with political pressures in the form of Government legislation and the marketing initiatives of the local state, these external influences are bearing down upon the local museum and transforming, in the process, the contexts within which its texts are both written by the professionals and decoded by its various publics.

While the integration of museums into consumer markets has been taking place throughout the various sectors of museums provision in the UK, at the Nationals, at Local Authority museums and the independents, it is in the latter sector that the stresses of market forces impact most directly upon ways of working. One of the independent museum directors interviewed had previously worked, as he told me, at a Local Authority museum and a university museum:

> ...obviously, getting more involved with the independent museum movement I am very well aware that we have necessarily to be much more alert to our public coming through the door. Because ultimately it's a question of income ... in a Local Authority or National museum where you're not dependent on income from visitors, there is a good deal more freedom, obviously, to do the kinds of things which may only appeal to a minority (B).

While both the independent museums included in this study were in receipt of grant aid from the Local Authority, the money raised from visitor admission charges was seen as a vital life line. This situation of reliance on visitor income necessarily engenders a high level of sensitivity towards both public preferences, tastes and demands, and to the museum's efficiency in meeting these:

> When I leave at night I know how many people have come through the door, how well the shop's done and so on. Everybody knows that and obviously it concentrates the mind if things begin to get - and then you ask the questions, well why are we not doing as well as last year, what's going on, is it something to do with us or is it some broader factor like the recession which is affecting

> everybody. But at least the fact that you're in this situation of running a business and making it pay directs you towards asking these kinds of questions (B)

Asking and answering questions about visitors' needs and finding appropriate responses to these is then an extremely high priority that has to be balanced with the preservation and care of an historic structure and collection:

> ...and that is what we're into at the moment because we've had a major programme of building works and interpretation works ...increasingly the market for museums is the older age bracket - they've got time, they're often quite well-off and they obviously relate very well to what we're doing here because many can remember back to times when conditions were similar to those reflected in the museum - so it's a very important category of people and they're often not strong physically, so there are basic things you have to do, putting lifts in, ramps in and all the attendant things... (B).

As a result of this market awareness and reflexivity this particular museum was engaged most energetically, as I was told, in changing its story. For another director in the independent sector, the necessity to be able to respond to visitors' basic needs and demands was seen in pragmatic and stark terms:

> You can have high-minded notions about industrial preservation and what it means to the future, but if your toilets are fairly shabby, if your catering is just sort of minimal, because we haven't got the investment for lots of hot counters or anything like that; if your buildings, in the winter months, because we haven't got the systems, are cold and not particularly hospitable, then it doesn't matter what your purpose is, you're only going to appeal to a fairly narrow market (D).

This director's view was that, without the investment in visitor amenities, business in the leisure market would go to '...those attractions that are still in the business of drawing people, there's many of them locally that have got far greater levels of investment and consequently far bigger development and marketing budgets' (D). While there is, necessarily, a relationship of dependency that the independents have with markets, trends in the public sector have also drawn the Local Authority museums ever more closely into the cash nexus:

> ...that's been a development over the last ten years, the impact of, you can really call it Thatcherism, on the museum world, has been to make museums look towards their marketing...it's really funny, it's not the product that's wrong, it's the way we're marketing it... (C).

The promotions specialist who told me about this tendency spoke of the ideology of the free market as having scant credibility amongst the museum profession, where it is regarded as demanding lip-service rather than any actual action or commitment:

> You know that most directors of museums are very, you know, they know all about the Citizens' Charter[3] and, you know, performance-related pay and all the rest of this nonsense, and they have, er, they've taken on board a lot of the language of the '80s media speak - they speak it fluently but they don't act it! (I).

Asking about what respondents perceived as the most significant changes in museums during the past ten years, I became accustomed to such dour observations on the state's introduction of market-oriented initiatives. The prevailing fashion for concepts and phrases including management restructuring, accountability, performance indicators, customer care and so on: concepts which have been reshaping museum practices at the Nationals, for example, (Macdonald and Silverstone, 1990:178; White,1991) were seen by some of these respondents as part of a cynical language game:

> I mean, everyone likes to sort of hide from nasty things, like sort of using nice words to dress them up ... what's actually happening, I say 'restructuring' is a nice word, but people are actually losing their jobs and museums are shutting

> and that's the reality of an increasingly hostile environment for survival with limited funding (D).

The attitude of the director speaking here was echoed by museum workers that I talked to in both public and private sectors. A point that emerged most forcibly from these interviews was that museums cannot survive alone in the market place. For another public museum director, the reality of a changed relationship with the state was felt as a severe constraint throughout the museums service:

> I'd have to say politically that a lot of Local Authority museums and a lot of museums that receive grants from Local Authorities are being affected by changes in funding, er, so central government actions are making it more difficult to keep the funding that long standing museums have been used to, and creating, perhaps, in doing so, more competition between what appears to be always a larger number of museums that are emerging, um, so I'm not surprised that we're beginning to see some museums now having to close... (J).

This tendency, as the last respondent indicated, is as true for the independents as it is in the public sector - for the independents are, to a large extent, only nominally independent, heavily reliant as they are on grant funding from the Local Authority. Consider the viewpoint of this respondent, the director of a struggling independent museum:

> My brief has always been to run it as a business, but there's no museum in the country runs as a business, certainly not in terms of living off its visitor admission income...it's like the same silly attitude that the government is trying to encourage with education, which is that a school is a business - well all right, there's no reason why a school shouldn't run efficiently but education isn't a business in that sense ... God help us, all we seem to have generated for ourselves, despite all this crap from Mr. Major about a classless society, if you haven't got money you can't afford an education (D).

Producing Consumers

New ways of working and of conceptualizing the public were seen by a number of respondents as being imposed upon them by directives from the Government and the local state. For some respondents, such as this manager of a small industrial museum:

> It's all about 'customer care', I mean, that is something that the City Council is flagging up like mad at the moment - customer care, customer guarantees, this is what the Government is now sort of propounding, you know, everybody must now offer a service and all this sort of thing (E).

Now this city's museum service, as various respondents pointed out, is in a strong position in the City Council compared with other museums services under other Local Authorities because they have their own Museums Department and their own chief executive. The relatively strong influence that the department has within this Local Council is seen as having protected local museums and their staffs from some of the constraints that have been felt elsewhere. As one director explained:

> Government legislation, I would say, is constraining rather than enabling as far as museums are concerned ... this great wave, if you like, of paperwork they're producing, legislation that is clearly imagined to be of some good - I'm not saying that everyone's desk has to look like mine [a mass of paper] but I think that there's an awful lot more paper, an awful lot more detail, an awful lot more sets of measurements having to be produced in time that could have been spent on something more constructive…. and we don't yet know what the Government has in store for us in the future, in terms of competition for the

> management of our museum functions ... I can see, within the next two years, we're going to be expecting everyone here to account for every half hour or even quarter hour of their day, just to justify our existence at all (F).

The demand by the state for museums to be able to measure the service they provide, and to raise both income and visitor numbers is seen as imposing limitations that force museum workers to change their practices. New ways are difficult to reconcile with received notions of the museum's proper role:

> We need to raise income this year, or this month ... difficult to do really, I mean, you can do it with a museum shop, you can do it with a cafe ... you can raise visitor numbers by different exhibitions, but then you become a populist, you know, your aims and your mission is changing - you're not there to educate, you're there to get bums on seats, and this is one of the ways it's changing, I feel (E).

From the perspective of this last museum manager, the conception of the visitor as a consumer was part of a process whereby the role of the museum and its staff was becoming challenged and changed, and not necessarily for the better:

> ... people [museum workers] have strayed away, I think, from their initial aim and mission, and they're just following the crowd and thinking "oh God, that museum's getting so many more visitors per year than we're getting, how can we get more visitors in to make us look better - we'll have this really popular exhibition and we'll have it so that it doesn't really educate people but it excites them ... we'll have robotic dinosaurs, you know, we'll have, I don't know, special effects and all sorts of things, like the Alton Towers [a well known theme park in the county] of the museum world - that's one way it's changing (E).

A tendency towards populism then, is one way in which change is seen to be affecting the role of the museum worker: change, that is, in the institution's relationship with its funding body, the local state. As the last respondent saw it, the professionals are finding themselves constrained into straying from their historic functions as educators of the public, in the need to answer new and pressing demands emanating from market and state:

> I think museums have got to compete more now, there are so many leisure activities and leisure facilities around ... the fathers, the city fathers who give out the money are now saying, well, if we're giving you this money we want to see a return for that, you know, in terms of bringing more visitors to the city, say, increase our tourism numbers, get more people in and they'll spend more in our local shops and ride on our busses and all this sort of thing (E).

Implicit in the observations of this and our other respondents, is the notion that it is the changing political economy of the museums service that is at issue; it is the state's role in the generation of economic activity and wealth production, that lies at the root of change in the role of the museum professional. Museums, as a director in the public sector indicated, still have a vital role to play for the state, but it is not so much one of legitimization as of regional promotion and corporate image-making:

> A new Chief Executive wants to actually do something to improve the image of the city's existing services through the council, and sees a particular value in having much more of a corporate identity...there is an awareness at the highest level that the City Council needs to get the benefits, all the benefits it can, from what it is bound to see as a very positive type of service that people enjoy and can identify with, rather than just thinking of the council as the people who send out the poll tax demands (F).

The prevalence of such attitudes on the part of the City Council towards the museums that it supports is having consequences for the work that is done by professionals. From their perspective, image-making for the city, promotions and populism are beginning to take precedence over more traditional curatorial functions associated with research and the care

of collections. The tendency is one that is seen as threatening to undermine the long-term purposes of museums for the sake of improving public relations and access, and exploiting the marketing potential of the institution for benefits to be gained in the immediate present. One curator who had worked in the service for 25 years saw recent change in these terms:

> In styles of management there's certainly been worrying moves towards very much just the public front of museums - I think there's concern in the profession that museums wouldn't exist without the collections, so unless we safeguard the collections, the storerooms, the climate, etc. then we're not going to have specimens to display to the public in the future. And with our City Councillors, our governing body, if you like, there could be a tendency to think that as long as the display side is OK the museum's functioning very smoothly (K).

What these respondents were saying about relations between the local museum, the state, the market and the visitor as a consumer, clearly relates to the much wider transformations taking place in contemporary society - changes which have the most far reaching implications for the future of civil society and citizenship. As the modern state engages in the process of redefining the public citizen as a consumer, key institutions of civil society including schools, universities and museums, are being forced into new ways of working that facilitate this redefinition. Simultaneously, the relationships between individuals and communities and those institutions are sharply altered. From the perspective of my sample of curators and directors this process of redefinition, as it translates into the direct and closely-related constraints of state control and market forces, is one of the substantive elements constituting what I am calling the new museology.

Legislators and interpreters

Having considered some of the circumstances surrounding and shaping developments in the local museum, I now turn to the theme of change in the museum's social functions and of what it means to be a museum professional in today. My argument is that the attitudes expressed by museum people serve to identify them with a long term transformation of the intellectual in Western culture, a movement conceptualised in the work of Zygmunt Bauman, as one from 'legislator' to 'interpreter'.

Bauman charts a process of transition in the function of the intellectual in modern society, as definer and mediator of legitimate culture and knowledge, in relation to the historical development of the modern state and the market. My argument is that my sample of museum professionals displays signs of just such a change towards what is, in Bauman's terms, an interpretative role. This move involves shifts in priorities, including a heightened awareness of diverse audiences and publics; a commitment to facilitating wider access and dismantling cultural barriers, and to the mediation of social difference, in contrast to the presentation of ethnocentric, patrician or 'legislated' accounts of the region's history and culture: the grand narratives of class, nation and empire that, until now, have prevailed in the public museum since its eighteenth century origins.

'Changing our story'

Bauman's thesis is concerned with the discovery, or invention, of 'culture' by the intellectual theorists of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment - culture, that is, in the sense of 'cultivation', of human knowledge, value, belief and order, as made by man rather than as given in the natural order of creation (Bauman, 1988:1-25). With the Enlightenment truly novel ideas were born about the absolute character of the knowledge discoverable by the methods of rationalism, and the universal applicability of that knowledge, through rational government, to the remaking of the social order. The rational individual also was conceived in truly novel and revolutionary terms, as entirely malleable and flexible; as an entity whose thoughts, feelings and actions could become the subject of purposeful redirection. It was knowledge that shaped behaviour, and knowledge could be defined and provided by the intellectual legislators who truly were 'in the know'.

This period in history, from the late eighteenth and through much of the nineteenth centuries, is seen by Bauman as one when this original version of 'cultural ideology' thrived in conditions of confidence and certainty; of widespread and absolute conviction in the universal superiority of rationalist thinking. This intellectual and moral climate surrounded a crucial formative period in the gestation of the modern state, and underpinned the early development of official institutions of culture - including formal systems of state education, and also, the early public museums. Antonio Gramsci speaks of this period as one in which the moral, ethical state takes on the role of educator and becomes a legislator of truth, knowledge and morality (Gramsci, 1982:258). As Bauman puts it:

> Metaphorically, the kind of authority in which such a vision of the world established men of knowledge could be described as 'legislative'. The authority involved the right to command the rules the social world was to obey; and it was legitimised by a better judgement, a superior knowledge guaranteed by the proper method of its production (Bauman, 1988: 11).

Bauman's observations are particularly relevant to the historical circumstances of the museum's origins and development in eighteenth century Britain and France. The early public museum was to a great extent a disciplinary agency for the classification of artefacts, culture and knowledge, (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992) and also for the re-classification of problematic populations as orderly, self-regulating bodies of public citizenry (Bennett,1988). The hegemonic authority of Bauman's 'legislative reason' is implicit in the reforming initiatives surrounding the first Museums Acts in the mid-nineteenth century: a belief in the capacity of the state and its institutions of culture to remake society, to shape the taste and judgement of its citizens and to provide ideal moral and aesthetic models as an antidote to the perceived depravity and disorder of the working classes (Pearson, 1982; Bennett, 1988).

Bauman traces the changing fortunes of the intellectuals in relation to the development of the state and the market: the early dependency of the state on intellectuals for legitimization is seen as becoming superseded, in the course of the nineteenth century, by political technologies of panoptical power and seduction, fields within which ranks of experts, and fields of expertise, proliferate. Expertise, that is, in the creation of techniques of surveillance, correction, medicalization and education. A central role in social reproduction remains for the intellectuals, but it is a diminished role of bureaucratic usefulness rather than of legislative power. And, as the state's reliance on culture for the reproduction of its power diminishes, another set of forces - those of the market - arise to challenge their autonomy. Bauman sketches a conflict of interests between philosophers, literary theorists, aestheticians, with a new breed of intellectuals - market - oriented arbiters of culture in the various media such as art galleries and publishing houses where the production of culture, in serving the market, becomes a matter, not of uniformity but of diversity:

> It is plausible that in the new domination of market forces culture has recovered a mechanism for the reproduction of diversity once located in autonomous communities and later ostensibly lost for a time in the era of politically sponsored cultural crusades... (Bauman, 1988: 18).

It is through the operations of such forces, argues Bauman, that the hopes and intentions to power underlying the early legislative vision of culture were to be disappointed. From an advantageous situation as makers and mediators of true knowledge, the social function of the intellectuals came in need of redefinition.

In addition to the constraints and pressures arising from the operations of the market and a reversed situation of dependency in relation to the state, the intellectuals have now to accommodate themselves to a climate in which universal knowledge, as conceived by the authors of the Enlightenment, has lost much of its authority. With the apparent decline of Western modernity in the face of critiques by such widely-discussed contemporary philosophers as R. Rorty (1985) and J. F. Lyotard (1984), a new kind of mental climate has come about that radically reshapes the cultural vision of today's intellectuals. In contrast to the idea of culture as it is perceived by the philosophers, as pliant material to be crushed and moulded into

uniform images of perfection, now 'culture' has come to be seen as something irreducible. The diversity of ways to be human, of belief systems and forms of knowledge, are increasingly being understood and interpreted by social theorists, philosophers, academics, artists, writers, museum workers and other professional intellectuals, in relative rather than absolute terms. There is now no final standard for defining true knowledge and great art, there can be no legitimate means for differentiating between cultures and belief systems; for evaluating them in relation to each other and ordering them hierarchically. The mission of that earlier period to assert the superiority of modern reason and the inferiority of non-western world views, forms of human life and social organization, has been widely abandoned.

The question emerging at this point, then, is this: where can the mediators of culture turn in such a climate? What role is left for intellectuals in the so-called Postmodern period? Given the limited applicability and the relativity of validity claims to be made on behalf of the modern project, no definite laws and no legislation appear possible. This circumstance has some notable implications for the role performed by museums, where the old dominant narratives about civilization and progress, science and art, empire, nation, race and class, have become subject to critical scrutiny and revaluation (Macdonald and Silverstone, 1990; Shelton, 1992; Ballinger, 1992). I have noted how an awareness of, and sensitivity towards cultural difference and the legitimacy of 'other' voices, has grown within the museum world. In terms of Bauman's thesis the role of the museum professional is becoming redefined, to a certain extent, in a process entailing a shift in function from legislator to interpreter.

Mediating difference

Interpretative strategies were clearly exemplified at an independent museum of industrial archaeology where I interviewed both director and head curator. High on their agenda, as they described it, was a commitment to new ways of working, to new methods of representing work, workers, technology and product. Modification of the existing space was seen as a pressing necessity in order to realize the site's potential and to bring down some of the cultural barriers that deterred local people from visiting. Those barriers, as the director saw them, originated in the not untypical circumstances of the museum's founding:

> When it was originally set up it was very much a manufacturers' toy - the sort of people associated with it were the managing directors of all the major firms - there were a number of volunteers who were practical people, but on the whole I think the general atmosphere could have been a bit off-putting to people, in that it definitely had an upper-crust feel to it, in the way it was managed and directed, and some of the sort of people involved in it were not people to whom necessarily people living in the area could relate, so I think that is a factor which we still have not overcome... (B).

That 'upper-crust' feel, that aura of elitism surrounding the museum in its recent past, and still persisting, arguably owes much to an earlier cultural vision of the region's history, a vision in terms of which the historical significance of industrial technology and production processes would be asserted with an air of confidence and certainty. This may be deduced not only from the comments of the staff, but also from the fact that the museum remained, at the time of these interviews, much as it had been in the past, and was only just beginning major modifications. The old museum was about physical structures and machinery. In the absence of any active interpretation these elements stood as a monument to innovation and efficiency in industrial production technology; they were a celebration of the region's world historical significance in manufacturing and of the achievements of its industrial designers and entrepreneurs. This installation was a legislated account of local history -an excerpt from the Enlightenment narrative of science, industry and progress. There was very little room for alternative or oppositional versions of the industrial past. In that story, the voice of the narrator is that of a dominant class, speaking for the industrialists and entrepreneurs involved in the museum's origins.

I asked the director what he believed the local people, the people of a predominantly working class and impoverished Midlands town, thought of the museum, and whether he felt that the museum had a close relationship with the community:

> No it certainly doesn't have a close relationship, no, I think that's something we've got to work on ... I myself feel very, very aware that we are failing to be any kind of community museum, and I mean, it's a contradiction really because what we are doing is showing ordinary working class life, and that's going to be more the case with the interpretation because we're shifting the emphasis away from the technicalities of the process much more towards how people actually lived out their lives in the factory, putting more and more emphasis on it, and that should be something that people in places like this can relate to ... I think you've got to make a conscious effort to communicate things in ways that people can relate to. (B)

This respondent has described here some central elements in a professional discourse that is being pulled towards interpretative strategies and away from legislated accounts of the region's history. Now the voices of other cultures and classes are acknowledged as being of value, as having a legitimate place in the museum:

> I think it could be very valuable if we were that sort of [community] museum, with that sort of opportunity because obviously many of the people who live locally could contribute a great deal in terms of what they know... (B)

The museum's head curator also elaborated on this theme and on the desirability of more active interpretation:

> We're in the process of changing our story ... it may well be a progression rather than a change, and I think part of it is how times have changed and how people have changed (A).

This respondent expressed a keen sense of a relatively new climate within which museums now have to work, and the necessity for her own museum to accommodate itself to that climate. Her emphasis was on being sensitive and responsive to the visitors' own agenda, in a way that was not part of the museum's earlier ethos:

> I think it might be part of a general feeling out there in the environment that the people are more important than the processes - and certainly, in the early days the emphasis was on machinery and what it did, and our progression is towards the people who are there, in the ways they're working ... that area we've just been in is going to be set up with the same objects but telling broad sort of historical stories about how people worked ... (A).

And the people who will feature in those stories, as this curator told me, are not the inventors and employers of the past, but the ordinary workers previously silenced and excluded from these authoritative representations of the City's history.

Underlying this turn to more interpretative practices is arguably a new kind of cultural vision, apparently radically different from the view of culture informing more traditional and conventional modes of representing the technologies of the past in such as industrial and science museums. The unitary culture of high modernity, Culture, that is, with a capital C, is challenged by what seem to be anti-elitist narratives. Thus:

> The overwhelming tendency today is to see culture as the perpetual, irreducible (and, in most cases, desirable and worth conscious preservation) diversity of human kind ... it is emphasised now that there is an infinite variety of ways in which humans may be, and are, humanised: and it is strongly denied that one way is intrinsically better than another ... variety and coexistence have become "cultural values" - ones that the intellectuals are zealously committed to defending (Bauman, 1988: 18)

There is an echo of Bauman's observation in the words of the last respondent, in her identification of 'a general feeling out there in the environment that people are more important than processes'. The sense that people are of value, people of all classes, races, ages and interest groups, often emerged in the interviews. The felt need to dismantle boundaries between the institution and the multiple communities of the City was symptomatic of interpretative curatorial strategies. As one curator working in the state sector museum service told me, there is a new ethos, a growing awareness of the public and a need for '...ideas about what people think of us, what we're doing and where we're going wrong (H). This respondent, a curator of social history, was emphatic about the desirability of enabling diverse elements in the community to make use of their museums - in this case, the breaking down of barriers and widening access were seen as important professional objectives:

> ...one of our broad aims, in the area of contemporary collecting anyway, is to work with people outside the museum and allow them to view us as a resource which they can use... (H).

In this curator's section the goal is not the presentation of the 'true' social history of the city, but rather, it is the mediation of difference; the mission is to provide a space for the images and voices of the diverse and disparate elements that constitute community:

> ...we try to work with people who are, what should I say, attempting to preserve their own sort of interests in the area...they may be as disparate as the Miners' Wives Action Group, Bs' Arts, a community arts group who do a lot of productions that are based on events and individuals in the history of the area and they evolve a production by utilising material from our collection...then there are people like the Nursing History Group, the Regional Railway Company - there's a lot of groups out there, all with different aims and objectives, all with different characters, different backgrounds and everything, groups who are seeking to preserve some aspect of the heritage of the area (H2).

As with the previous respondents, a concern with the mediation of cultural difference is expressed in terms of a professional ethical imperative. This is a quest for a new and democratized politics of representation which contrasts with a monocultural, ethnocentric perspective -what we might call the legislative vision of culture encoded in the museum's past work. This new attitude emerged in discussion about the city's ethnic population:

> So far we only succeed in attracting the interest of the Caucasian, if you like, in its broadest sense - we're trying to encourage the Asian community to use us as a resource for their culture as well because their culture is now interwoven with the culture of the city and resources such as ourselves should be open to them, we should be encouraging them more into the museum, we should be going out to work with them...we've got a number of projects which are seeking to open up those links, we're very aware of our limitations in terms of the visitors we've attracted so far - now we've got to try and find ways of reaching a wider audience and we've got to sort of break down this idea of us being a white middle class institution (H).

This curator's misgivings about the public's perception of the museum as being for and of the white middle classes were repeated by workers in most of the museums in the study, particularly in response to questions about audiences and non-visitors; about reasons for visiting and for staying away. One director spoke of the assumptions he believed to be prevalent amongst sections of the working class population of the city, impressions of museums based on '...centuries of associations that might be off-putting, assumptions that they're not for them'. For another director, a key problem faced by his museum was one of access, of finding ways to gain the confidence and interest of the local working class communities:

> You know - (sigh) - the sort of people who go to museums, whether we like it or not, we tend, well we know jolly well they belong to socio-economic classes

> A, B and C.1 - there's probably a very small proportion of A, B and C.1s living within half a mile radius of this town ... so we are in an environment that would need a lot of working on, I mean, I think it could be very valuable if we were that sort of museum (B).

'That sort of museum', as he explained, was a more community based museum, representing both in its displays and its visitor profile the social composition of the locality. One curator of natural history who had been working in the same state sector museum for 25 years pointed out that his own research confirmed the resilience of class and ethnic barriers:

> I'm pretty much aware of who we do get in and in some ways it does go along with the views of museums, in inverted comas, of kind of middle class white people, and we keep on trying to promote aspects which will go to the multi-cultural society nowadays, but I don't know whether there's a reluctance or difficulty in getting these people in, but still the profile would be very much that way, I would think. And that's B's [promotions officer] work with us, to try and get to a wider audience, but that's very much as it is (G).

A colleague of this respondent, when asked why he believed that some of the city's population never visited the museum despite vigorous promotions campaigns, replied in similar terms:

> You can look at it from a sort of race thing ... there may be a race perception, you know - "oh, it's not for us, we won't go there" - there's a class distinction there, I suppose, if you look at the sort of traditional class distinctions of society, you know, perhaps we are a middle class institution (L).

The point to be emphasized here is that all these museum curators and directors are sensitized to the cultural boundaries that keep out social and ethnic groups in the city, and most are involved with seeking strategies for weakening or breaking down those boundaries - with developing what I am calling interpretative strategies.

We need now to digress however, into another area where established boundaries are also being called into question, but where the resilience of established professional practice is too great for us to be able to speak of any actual disintegration: the area of the strongly framed and classified museum subject discipline. Recent research (Sandell, 2003) into museums and social inclusion has drawn attention to the duality of commitment and resistance to change. The data produced by this research suggest that the tendencies associated with a move to interpretative functions are at odds with the internal culture of some museum sections and departments, where traditional subject divisions and classifications serve to define and defend professional and social identities.

Classification, framing and identity

> I think you've got to make a conscious effort to communicate things in ways that people can relate to (B).

This director's view was also expressed by other respondents. How the task of communication is to be accomplished, what modes of classification, interpretation and display can most effectively communicate history and culture in ways to which diverse publics can relate - these are central amongst the concerns of professionals seeking to widen the appeal of their museums and to entice the reticent non-visitor. In the course of talking to museum people questions arose about the purposes served by established, institutionalised forms of classification and curatorship, in terms, that is, of the academic disciplines including natural and social history, archaeology, fine and decorative arts. How, I wondered, do such divisions lend themselves to the fulfilment of certain professional objectives, particularly to the widely expressed concern with answering the needs and desires of different types of visitor, and potential visitor? Usually questions and theories arose in relation to the museological disciplines when I asked about the work of interpretation and the telling of (hi)stories by the museum. The answers were ambivalent.

Within museums this tendency we have been discussing, towards the adoption of interpretative approaches, and to the breaking down of established boundaries, extends, in certain cases, to some transgressing of the boundaries of specific subject disciplines. The clearly bounded academic subject classification in terms of which museums have been, and continue to be organized, we may see as very much the province of the modern professional intellectual. The boundaries demarcate the cultural territory of experts; they serve to define what constitutes legitimate specialist knowledge, accumulation and custodianship of which gives curators reason and justification for their professional existence. We need to ask this question: how does the compartmentalization of culture and history function for the public, for visitors from different socio-economic backgrounds? How do these conventions of classification and exhibition lend themselves the imperative of communicating things in ways to which people can relate?

At the forefront of interpretative approaches is the multi-media and multi-disciplinary exhibition. Instigated to a great extent, by new kinds of museum professionals (that is, the promotions, marketing and education specialists rather than the traditional curatorial staff) multi-disciplinary events have proved, as a number of respondents pointed out to me, extremely successful in terms of attracting those sections of the community that tend to stay away - including teenagers and the elderly. While such events have proved widely popular however, the multi-disciplinary approach is usually confined to temporary exhibitions, with the permanent collections and galleries retaining their subject-specific identities. One of my respondents, one of the new professionals in the public relations and promotions sphere, spoke regretfully of the failure of his museum, and of city museums generally, to take an holistic approach towards representing the history of their region:

> Frankly I don't think the museum aims to tell any story at all, and the museum is really in itself, an historic document that tells you rather more about the curators who set it up than it does about the region in which it is placed (C).

In this respondent's view, the compartmentalised organization of artefacts and information did not necessarily help to convey a coherent sense of the place and its past. As he saw it, most of the museum's sections are:

> ..either chronological of hotch-potches, and they're more related to the collection and its display than they are related to actually leading you through a process - consequently, our education officer can find it quite difficult to use as a museum - but then that's no different to most city museums in the country - very rarely do they actually attack the subject of their local area with a very great - um, I don't know.
>
> Interviewer: They don't take a holistic approach?
>
> C. Yes, that's it.

What might be the most effective means, in terms specifically of classification practices, to 'attack the subject' of the locality, was, as the interviews revealed, an unresolved problem. As one director explained it:

> ... erm, it's rather pointed in a way because there has been since the gallery was first set up with its permanent displays that, erm, about whether it would have been better to have tried to tell the story of the region, if you like, in a combination of galleries... all of those things have been talked about and may be the basis for future changes, but at the moment, we don't have the funding to realise any of those ambitious ideas, and nor, indeed, have we resolved that is the right way to do it ... (F).

Asking interviewees about whether they felt that their museum should tell stories about the region by integrating the insights of different disciplines proved to be a fruitful line of inquiry, in that the question seemed instantly meaningful and contentious to most people. The

possible benefits and defects of attempting holistic interpretations that transcend the boundaries of museological disciplines appeared to be the subject of a debate in the museum that preoccupied people:

> It is a point - would we be better served trying to tell the story of the city. At present I wouldn't say we do that, we only, if you like, show you vignettes, in a museum sense, looking at it with the eyes of different disciplines (F).

Touched upon here by one of the directors in the survey, this question was particularly engrossing for the curator of social history at the same museum. Having done much work on multi-disciplinary exhibitions, and being clearly gratified by the resulting successes, in terms of attracting new and wider audiences to these events, he had become conscious of limitations and constraints associated with established modes of classification and display. He put it to me that, insofar as the museum had an historical narrative to relate:

> There are those who would argue that it could be better done if there wasn't this strict division between the sections, like natural history, archaeology, social history - if the sections could sort of clear the first floor and re-do it as the story of the area, I think there would be a really good story to tell. As it is at the moment we're a bit fragmented ...there again, these academic divisions really, they're a bit sort of artificial... (H).

The point being made here is that the tendency towards the performance of interpretative strategies in the work of museum workers is one that pulls against established practice. The kind of weakening that we have been discussing, of established institutional boundaries, encounters considerable resistance and is therefore only partial and contingent. Changing your story, as this director made clear, may involve a long revolution:

> It's quite difficult, with an inherited structure, one that hasn't radically changed since our last restructuring as a department, to actually get people quickly into different ways of working - I mean, I feel that we are, again with the objection of one or two keepers a few years back, beginning to work ourselves more corporately and involve people more automatically in things that might have been just sections doing their own thing in the past, but it's a slow process rather than a revolutionary one, and, er, I guess, like many other marriages, I find that there's a sort of in-built resistance to change (F).

The significance of this point may be highlighted by reference to the theoretical writing of the British sociologist, Basil Bernstein (1971), on the framing and classification of educational knowledge. Central to Bernstein's thesis is the notion that the structure of frames and classifications institutionalized within the various agencies of cultural reproduction, can reveal '...both the distribution of power and the principles of social control (Bernstein, 1971: 203). In this context *classification* refers to the strength of boundaries between the differentiated contents of a curriculum, and *framing*, to the respective levels of control possessed by teacher and taught over what is to be transmitted in the pedagogical relationship (Bernstein, 1971: 205). Bernstein differentiates between what he calls 'collection' and 'integrated' codes in educational knowledge, the former being characterised by strongly bounded classification and framing, the latter by weaker and more permeable boundaries. The collection type of code is, in Bernstein's view, the dominant mode of organizing knowledge in European systems of education, and particularly in England.

I want to suggest that much of what Bernstein goes on to say about schools is also applicable in the case of museums: for our purpose the significance of the typology lies in its implications for the formation of social identities and the reproduction of cultural power. Strength of framing and classification of knowledge, in the context of both school and museum, may be seen as related to social class and cultural difference.

> Knowledge under collection is private property with its own power structure and market situation...children and pupils are early socialized into this concept of knowledge as private property... pupils and students, particularly in the arts,

> appear, from this point of view, to be a type of entrepreneur (Bernstein, 1971: 213).

Bernstein argues that children from elite backgrounds learn at an early age about what is appropriate knowledge for the classroom, that is 'uncommonsense (Bernstein 1971: 215) knowledge, as opposed to the everyday, experience-based knowledge of the child:

> It is knowledge freed from the particular, the local, through the various explicit languages of the sciences or implicit languages of the arts which make possible either the creation or the discovery of new realities...I suggest that the frames of the collection code, very early in the child's life, socialise him into knowledge frames which discourage connections with everyday realities...such framing also makes of educational knowledge something not ordinary or mundane, but something esoteric, which gives a special significance to those who possess it (Bernstein, 1971: 215).

Bernstein argues that the organization of education in Europe is characterized by rigidly defined frames and strong classification, a collection code that is highly differentiating and hierarchical. For those socialised into an expectation of, and familiarity with such coding - those students most likely to come from the privileged social strata - official pedagogy, with its relatively clear boundaries and definitions of legitimate knowledge, may appear as normal and meaningful. This collection code then:

> ...may provide for those who go beyond the novitiate stage, order, identity and commitment. For those who do not pass beyond this stage, it can sometimes be wounding and seen as meaningless, what Bourdieu calls 'la violence symbolique' (Bernstein 1971: 216).

While museums are clearly not the same as schools, the relevance of Bernstein's observations to the sociology of museums warrants consideration. In the museum, as in the school, power and authority structures are realized through knowledge codes, and through such codes those structures enter into and shape consciousness. Arguably, the clearly bounded classifications and frames that identify the dominant mode of organizing knowledge in museums with Bernstein's collection code, are closely bound up in the formation and reproduction of social identities, for both professionals and publics. In the case of the subject specific gallery, the museum specialism, one knows with relative clarity the social significance of where one is and who one is. Intellectual specialization, as Bernstein puts it 'reveals difference from rather than communality with [others]. It creates relatively quickly an educational identity which is clear-cut and bounded' (Bernstein, 1971: 212). The strength of these boundaries, I would add, serves to protect and perpetuate an effective monopoly on cultural capital, and to reproduce professional identity in its clearest form. At the same time, a sense of the sacred 'otherness' of specialized and classified knowledge serves to maintain cultural boundaries between those socialized into some subject loyalty: for the fine arts, say; for natural history or archaeology, and that mass of lay persons, those other classes who lack the cipher to the code. We can see then, how the reproduction of such coding, with its strong emphasis on hierarchy and the differentiation of legitimate, specialized, as opposed to common-sense or everyday, forms of knowledge, may be identified with the reproduction of Bauman's "legislative" project: we can also see how the imperatives of the interpreters, to efface such differences, are unlikely to proceed unopposed.

Knowledge as property

Returning to our data, the notion of 'knowledge under collection as private property' may point the way to an explanation of why it is that the museums in this study, despite the efforts and successes of interpretative approaches, remain as 'white, middle class institutions'. One respondent spoke enthusiastically about what can happen when multi-disciplinary modes of exhibition are employed and subject specialisms become integrated. He described to me an exhibition which involved the use of material from the natural history, fine arts and social

history sections to present an installation on the theme of gardening and horticulture. Amongst the photographic displays were pictures of individual gardeners:

> ...this one now in at the moment, the bloke whose picture it is, he'd never been to the museum before, and he'd suddenly got his picture in the gallery, and all his friends were ribbing him about it, you know, and eventually he came in, a coloured bloke called — , he's got a sort of, well he's a very shy bloke and his friends are all are all sort of taking the piss out of him basically, because he's there, you know, but he's got a sort of sense of importance because he's found himself in the museum, and to have people like that coming in - I find that rewarding (H).

The point is that an integration of knowledge may be an attractive and enabling factor for those groups usually excluded from the museum. But Bernstein's thesis suggests that there is resistance to such moves, and, as one respondent, a public relations specialist, put it '...if it is suggested that everything might be put together from different sections so as to tell the story of the city, some curators can get very upset (I).

For one social history curator the museum's audience was seen as demanding an holistic picture of the city's history, its modernization and change - in industry, the built and natural environments, work and social life - across a diverse range of regional trends and themes. In this sense, the museum's role was perceived as one of enabling local people to '...reaffirm their sense of locality' (H) and to facilitate '...an individual's sense of belonging to an area' (H). Wasn't it difficult, I wondered, to realize the interconnectedness of diverse areas of local life through the medium of physically and thematically separated galleries?

> There are good reasons for having these distinctions as well, when you look at it from a curatorial point of view, but, er, they may not make much sense to the visitor who wants to see the full story of the region (H).

A main point emphasised on this subject by respondents was that the established classifications of objects was a practice designed more for the purposes of curators than for the public:

> You know, from a curatorial point of view you need sort of pockets in which you can place your collections - there are reasons why we've got them, it's just that it's something I don't think works too well in a museum, in any museum really, where you've got these galleries which quite often feed into each other - they're separate areas and yet there's so much common ground that could be exploited by the museum in terms of display and telling the story (H).

Here then, we have what may be amongst the most important questions about access and identity in contemporary museums: the question of whether changes in the way knowledge is framed and classified in museums might have the effect of opening up museums to new and undiscovered publics, and what exactly are the obstacles to such innovations?. A possible answer is that for the professional curator, and for the more typical museum visitor, the white, middle class, educated citizen, subject specific galleries organized in terms of the academic institutional disciplines are encoded with a familiar pedagogic ethos, and are as repositories of private cultural property which subject boundaries protect.

> For it is the subject which becomes the lynch pin of the identity. Any attempt to weaken or change classification strength (or even frame strength) may be felt as a threat to one's identity and may be experienced as a pollution endangering the sacred. Here we have one source of the resistance to change... (Bernstein, 1971: 212).

Conclusion: museums, citizens and consumers

This paper has considered the ways in which local public museums have been changing in the course of some three decades, by drawing on the views, insights and attitudes expressed

in interviews with museum professionals. The aim has been to theorize the reflections of my subjects and to illuminate some of the internal tensions and external pressures at work on contemporary museums. I began by considering what was new in museums theory and practice and what constituted a 'new museology'. I then looked at some of the material factors implicated in these developments, associated with the political economy of a local museums service. I went on to discuss an emergent discourse in the museum world, concerned with advocating community-focused museums that are representative of the pluralistic and multicultural society they serve. I argued that this new reflexivity may relate to the changing social role of professional intellectuals. In Bauman's terms these changes are part and parcel of a shift from legislative to interpretive functions that is linked to a new domination of the market.

I am suggesting, however, that the new interpretative strategies, as they appear in my research data, are only partial, contingent and limited by what one director described as ' an in-built resistance to change'. Drawing on the sociological work of Bernstein I want to argue that the cultural barriers which deter many people from visiting have social functions in themselves and are not to be dismantled without resistance. The public museum remains a contested space where diverse social groups seek to assert a right to access and representation; to articulate social and cultural identities, against the long-standing monopoly of elite, for whom the function of the museum arguably remains as allied to a legislative project.

I do not intend to attribute all the developments and advances associated with the new museology, in some deterministic way, solely to economic change; to the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson, 1984). Yet it should be owned that material factors - the political and economic shifts that have thrust museums into the marketplace, along with other public institutions - have been decisive in bringing about a new climate of audience-awareness and reflexivity: this link between marketization and new museum theory and practice emerges distinctly from the professional interviews analysed above. The ostensible effect of these trends has been to propel museums in a progressive direction: towards greater accessibility and wider public participation; to dispel elitism and make museums more representative.

Thrown open to market forces, museums have to diversify; to target "niche" markets; to become responsive to their "customers" - we can see then how the market domination of culture might produce an effect of reducing elitism and exclusivity; of promoting cultural diversity and collapsing certain barriers: for example, between 'high' , 'middle' and 'low-brow' patterns of cultural consumption.

Together with banks, building societies, schools, universities, hospitals and railways, the museum has increasingly construed its users, not as citizens so much as customers, or consumers. It is clear that all these institutions have been, and remain, in need of reform: they must become less exclusive and more responsive to the diverse publics and communities they are supposed to serve. A positive revaluation and enhancement of the concept of citizenship, not its debasement, needs to be central to any extension of access. There is arguably a world of difference between the rights of access to representation enshrined in the concept of citizenship and the rights of the consumer. For the former, rights of access to participation in the public culture are guaranteed by the state, and the role of the citizen, ideally at least, is one of active participation in the collective shaping of the institutions of civil society, the social order and its future. The franchise of the consumer, by contrast, is limited to the individual's purchasing power. In museum terms, furthermore, consumer power may entail, not only the ability to pay, if required, at the door, but also the possession of the symbolic competence; for Bourdieu (1984), the 'cultural capital', itself dependent on education and privilege, to decode, appropriate, find meaning in the representations that museums offer. The ability to participate in this form of cultural consumption seems likely to remain the preserve of educated and privileged classes. It is questionable then, how far the debasement of the politically empowering concept of the public citizen, and its replacement with that of an individualized consumer of cultural and material values, can lead to any substantively democratized politics of representation in the public museum.

Notes

[1] The study (Ross 2003) which was concerned to grasp the 'complete communication chain' (Macdonald, 1993:5), emphasized both the production and consumption of museum meanings.

[2] The second research stage was based on semi-structured interviews with samples of local publics: the first stage, reported on in this article, considers only the perspective of the museum profession.

[3] The Citizen's Charter was an initiative launched in 1991 by the then Prime Minister, John Major, which aimed at improving the level of performance of public services in Britain.

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Max Ross is a graduate of Keele University.