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Museums as the catalysts for a democratic revolution in cultural policy

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ABSTRACT

As culture exists and evolves predominantly in society, democratic principles provide a strong foundation for future cultural development. Through a range of case studies and provocations from Latin America and Europe, this paper delineates the necessary debate on urgent challenges and opportunities for practitioners, researchers and communities in working together with indigenous and marginalised groups to extend democratic cultural practice in the creative and museum sectors. It also considers some of the barriers that may stand in the way of transformation to democratic legitimacy, alongside recent international collaborations that provide examples of commitment to cultural change. Finally, the paper suggests that the cultural sector should step back from the colonial model of culture and the arts in buildings and collections, which framed the creation of the dominant model of cultural institutions across the world.

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Introduction

The Welsh philosopher, essayist, novelist and social theorist, Raymond Williams, was a key member of the New Left in Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s. In his foundational essay, "*Culture is Ordinary*", first published in 1958, Williams wrote:

> "Culture is ordinary, in every society and every mind. […] So who then believes in democracy? The answer is really quite simple: the millions in England who still haven't got it, where they work and feel. The technical means are difficult enough, but the biggest difficulty is in accepting, deep in our minds, the values on which they depend: that the ordinary people should govern; that culture and education are ordinary; that there are no masses to save, to capture, or to direct, but rather this crowded people in the course of an extraordinarily rapid and confusing expansion of their lives." (Gable (ed.), 1989, p. 4 and 18)

In this essay, Williams's sensitively explored the characteristics of thought of his working class family and community in Wales, and those he had encountered in Cambridge as an undergraduate. The implication of this reflection is that society is culture, and culture is

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society. If so, society and culture should be integrated, so far as possible, not separated, and the purpose of creative practice is not only institutional practice but change in society. Much has changed since this essay was published, but the principles of his analysis remain relevant, and they underpin the contribution of the authors of this article, all of whom have experience at a senior level as museum professionals, policy makers and academics, and have engaged with equalities, equity, inclusion and social justice in cultural policy and practice in Europe and Latin America.[1] In 2022, they pioneered an original collaboration leading to the organisation of a programme on *Cultural Rights and Cultural Democracy in Celtic and Minority Nations* held in Caernarfon (Wales) (National Museum of Wales, 2022b). For many participants, the main outcome of the conference was a deeper awareness of the impact of the colonial nature of culture and the arts in the Celtic and minority nations, and the persistence and resilience of deep currents of ideological and methodological control, beneath surface appearances of social accountability.

In exploring how cultural practitioners should go beyond this model, the authors look outwards for inspiration to other cultures, and within to the diverse contemporary practices of their own cultures, as well as to surviving traditional and indigenous ways of knowing that respect the connectedness and intelligence of all life forms, beyond the human. The projects described in this article were not conceived as part of a shared programme. In this respect, they reflect reality. The authors propose to explore how democracy in museums can take diverse forms that respond to different contexts, shaped and led by communities, and the benefits to society of co-created and community-led museums.

To this end, this paper proposes to take the reader through a series of case studies and provocations from Latin America and Europe. Firstly, the authors interrogate the concept of the museum and its role in a globalised and post-colonial world. This leads to a questioning of the positionality of this modern institution, based on examples drawn from Latin America, where the ownership of heritage has been contested throughout history and remains a subject of ongoing tensions. Furthermore, rethinking museums requires questioning the inclusivity of the institution. This is illustrated through two further case studies: one focusing on children and museums, and another on the heritage of Irish Travellers – both considered seldom-heard communities in the cultural field. Finally, this paper identifies some of the barriers that may hinder progress toward democratic legitimacy, alongside recent international collaborations that exemplify a commitment to cultural change as a framework for further critical debate.

What is a museum?

Prior to going deeper into the analysis of the approach to cultural rights in the museum and creative sectors, it is necessary to better define the concept of museum, an organisation born from an eighteenth century Europe-centric vision of the world and shaped by the Industrial Revolution. Can museums unite around a common, global definition of their work? It seems not, if the bitter and still largely unresolved debates within the International Council of Museums (ICOM) at the Triennial Conferences in 2019 and 2022 over a proposed new definition of museums is any guide. At the Triennial Meeting of individual members and national committee representatives of ICOM in Kyoto in September 2019, attendees considered for approval a proposed new definition of a museum. With

some changes, the most recent made in 2007, the previous definition had stood for more than fifty years. However, this proposed new version was not an incremental iteration:

> "Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing." (Kendall Adams, 2019)

The proposed new definition immediately faced fierce criticism from some museum professionals. The chair of ICOM France, Juliette Raoul-Duval, denounced it, telling the *Art Newspaper* that it was an "ideological" manifesto (Noce, 2019a). This led to the postponing of the decision on the new definition by ICOM members present in Kyoto[2] (Noce, 2019b) . Following this, the chair of the Committee responsible for developing the definition, Jette Sandahl, and other members of the Committee resigned from their positions. These included George Abungu, former director of the National Museums of Kenya; Margaret Anderson, Director of the History Trust of South Australia; and Walter Richard West, citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes in Oklahoma and the former founding director of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Together, these Committee members, who are globally respected thought leaders in the sector, issued a detailed public statement summarising their concerns about the rejection of this proposed definition (COMCOL, 2020). Three years later, in Prague, an Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM approved a different definition, one that was significantly closer to that of 2007:

> "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." (Seymour, 2022)

This resolved the public conflicts, but not the fundamental tensions over the purpose of museums that have swirled around ICOM over years (Sandhal, 2019). The time may have come to abandon attempts to achieve a global consensus on definitions of museums and culture. However, how can this be achieved in a global museum sector imbued by the colonial culture that shaped the institution?

The coloniality of culture and museums: a Latin American perspective

Several important questions arise regarding the geopolitics of the terms culture and democracy. Both were originally coined within a Eurocentric pretence that claimed universal value, while in reality serving to justify the imposition of a colonial pattern of domination and exploitation from the sixteenth century to the present. As the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois identified a century ago, modernity developed on the relationship between coloniality and racism (Morris et al., 2021, pp. 169–171); indeed modern institutions – such as museums – were key instruments in enforcing these patterns. It is

now necessary to revisit this model. This case study aims to outline what constitutes a decolonial perspective from the viewpoint of Latin America, and to examine the practical examples – though not always successful – of efforts to critically challenge and reverse these perspectives and rethink the role of modern institutions – such as museums – which were key instruments in enforcing the principles of a colonial system.

Rita Segato, an Argentine anthropologist who has worked extensively across Latin America on themes of coloniality and violence against women, states:

> "Coloniality not only organises the world economically in a proto-global market but also organises our subjectivity, dictating how to think, feel, and be in the world. The coloniality of power, of knowledge, of feeling is the cognitive empire of Eurocentrism, given by the moral superiority of the European, which gives rise to modernity as a claim to universal knowledge." (Segato, 2022, p. 23)

The work of policymakers begins precisely at that point. It requires them to investigate how coloniality was formed and constituted – in other words, how, in those processes of constitution, it erased alternative forms of knowledge. The machinery of modernity, from the sixteenth century to the present, was built by marginalising all existing knowledge – not only that of the great civilisations, but also that of all cultural groups that preceded it. The museum – as did, in many cases, the church and the university – played a fundamental role in founding Western civilization and in the destitution of other civilizations and their existing systems of knowledge. Investigating, then, means uncovering and removing the veil – that is its function in this operation of constitution and erasure.

So how can culture escape this pre-determined pattern? According to Walter Mignolo (2010), it is necessary to restore a terminology that the colonial code dismissed. In the West, for instance, the code of "epistemology" dismissed the notion of "gnoseology", and "aesthetics", the concept of "aesthesis" (Mignolo, 2010). A gnoseological reconstruction of epistemology and aesthesis of aesthetics are therefore among our current preoccupations. In other words, rather than trying to decolonise the museum, we should focus on decolonising the idea we have of what the museum institution is – and on how to undertake decolonial tasks that contribute to restoring knowledge and building future knowledge according to different value frameworks based on solidarity, and on accepting nature as part of, rather than alien to, our own existence.

Is a meteorite a cultural good? According to the Mocoví First Nation people of Argentina, it certainly is. The meteorite that landed in their territory is believed by their contemporary descendants to bring harmony to one of the most discriminated communities (Lehmann-Nitsche, 1924–25). A field of meteorites at *Campo del Cielo* ("Heavenly Field") in the province of Chaco, Argentina – where one of the largest meteorites in the world has fallen – is imbued with such cultural significance that Latin American artists have claimed it should be taken to the 2022 Documenta Biennial in Kassel, Germany, to represent their culture. Its monumental weight may have been one of the impediments, not to mention the opposition of local First Nations peoples to its removal from a sacred space (Meteorito El Chaco, 2012).

The unfair market transactions and spoliations of goods – mainly those classified by museums as having artistic, historical, paleontological, ethnographic, or archaeological significance, despite their strong spiritual role for their owners – have a long history. Meteorites may also be added to that list. They all require some type of predominance

of power by the acquirer or spoiler, whether economic, political, military, or social. Except in the case of voluntary donation of cultural goods as part of a community's social phenomena, as studied by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1925), these forced appropriations disregard the powerful social and ceremonial value attached to those pieces and are labelled in fancy museums according to a colonial aesthetic pattern. The British Museum and the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris hold many examples of such colonial classifications.

To prevent such transactions, some Latin American countries declare these items to be state-owned and require the public registration of cultural goods possessed by citizens, who may only transmit them by inheritance but are prohibited from buying, selling, importing, or exporting them. Recently, as a consequence of extensive looting of fossils destined to be sold at commercial fairs such as the annual fossil market in Tucson, Arizona, USA, the Argentine government filed a claim with the Arizona Court of Justice for the restitution of a lift-van full of scientific and cultural evidence illegally smuggled from paleontological sites mainly in Patagonia, where these fossils form part of the cultural landscape (Fiscales, 2014).

Even if states legislate and campaign on human rights, a question remains: how do the descendants of First Nations communities, or Mestizo cultures, react to the persistence of colonial behaviour, and what are their actual and legitimate demands? Furthermore, how do current citizens of all origins respond to deeply rooted colonial mandates? An interesting case – linked to sacred ceremonial sacrifices performed by the Incas at very high altitudes in the Andes Mountains around the fifteenth century – is now the subject of contemporary discussions, not only among archaeologists and indigenous groups but also among all those concerned with climate change and social emergencies.

The Inca Trail, which was declared a World Heritage Landscape by UNESCO in 2014, highlights specific human actions such as the exceptional burial rituals involving the offering of the lives of Inca youngsters of noble lineage on mountain peaks over 5,000 and up to 6,700 metres high, mostly in the south of their vast empire – which stretched from contemporary Ecuador to Argentina – or Tihuantinsuyu. These rituals were probably performed as a tribute to ensure the continued provision of the water required for their sustainability (Schobinger, 1999). Those mummified corpses, originally considered messengers to the superior forces of nature, wrapped together with material representations of the Inca Empire, have been found by archaeologists in recent decades and brought down to urban museums or universities for further study and exhibitions. The indigenous inhabitants of the region, who did not consent to the removal of the corpses and associated relics, now blame this for the desertification of their land and are demanding that the human remains and objects be returned to their sacred sites (Guillermo Martín & Barraza y Claudia Iturralde, n.d.). There is still much to be learned about those ecosystems and their cosmovision in terms of harmony.

The Kallawaya herbal knowledge of Bolivia consists of the oral transmission of indigenous medical healing that has cured generations of people. This knowledge required safeguarding following its appropriation by medical laboratories and was declared Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2003 (UNESCO, 2008). However, the implementation of these legal and safeguarding provisions in Latin America has yet to reach all of the fifty million indigenous peoples of the continent, who are the holders of knowledge that needs to be reconstituted.

In short, the word 2033 restitution 2033 involves values of respect for diversity, equity, and justice – all components of contemporary culture and democracy – that, when violated, may affect communities within their own national contexts. To paraphrase the museum theorist Robert Janes's analysis of the value of museums (2022), these communities may be victimized by the collapse of global biodiversity, or the power of an economic system dependent on the fallacy of endless growth, consumption, and debt. Additionally, colonial mandates may be so deeply rooted within a particular society that they continue to convey racism and injustice many centuries after foreign political domination appears to have ended. Museums were created as significant components of those hegemonic roles, and there is no such thing as a post-colonial period as if it were only a neutral field of study. There exists a colonial condition, called coloniality – first described by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano – which still today erases knowledge and promotes racism. Museums have the opportunity and responsibility to foster a unique discussion, aided by their polysemic and, in the best cases, polyphonic collections (Quijano, 2000).

The concept of universality of laws in relation to culture and democracy is now in crisis. The initiatives around restitution are not limited to material goods**.** Objects are not "cultural" according to their colonial periodical classification (artistic, historical, or ethnographic), but rather respond to the feelings, uses, and ascriptions awarded by diverse peoples. Restitution must also include its most important element: the restoration of knowledge production that has been unfairly suppressed. Legal dispositions can only be legitimate if they arise from and reflect mature discussion and necessary efforts toward consent among diverse ways of understanding this extraordinary and unequal planet.

Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that there is a distinctively epistemic kind of injustice, in which someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower. There are few public places where this operates more powerfully and destructively than in museums, where almost all communication takes the form of a monologue by museum staff or artists directed at a public generally assumed to lack relevant understanding. In every society, there are also groups that face epistemic injustice, as the following case study investigates through the exploration of children's participation and inclusion in the construction of their heritage.

Museums and inclusion: children, the overlooked heirs

In November 2022, the UK Museums Association based its annual conference on the actions of museums in relation to diversity and inclusion, prompting debates about making collections more accessible to diverse groups of the population including ethnic and religious minority groups, persons with disabilities, and LGBT + people (Museums Association, 2022). At this same conference, where forward-thinking reflections on cultural heritage and identity were discussed, one significant absence from the discourse was children. More than thirty years after the United Nations highlighted the importance of including children in society by adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNESCO, 2008; UNICEF, 1989), children's material culture and cultural participation remain overlooked by museums that claim to be inclusive. Despite ongoing research in childhood studies emphasizing the role of children as citizens (Singly,

2007), and despite child-centred approaches in education across the Global North, children's material environments – central to their lives and embedded in the socialization process – are frequently neglected. While children's voices are acknowledged in current debates on societal and environmental challenges (Einarsdottir, 2014), their role in designing their material culture and shaping their heritage is largely ignored by the museum sector. This reflection reveals a global museum landscape, not just in the UK, that continues to struggle with interpreting and evaluating the contribution of children to society and history (Le Guennec & Rose, 2024).

Within this museological context, the research project *S'habiller pour l'école / Dressed for School*, co-led by the author and disseminated as an exhibition at the French National Museum of Education (Munae, Rouen, June 2023 – March 2024, and online) (Coutant & Le Guennec, 2023; Musée National de l'Éducation, 2023), examined the role of clothing in schools. Schools are regulated environments where children, as learners, directly interact with clothing.

Initially modest in scope, this interdisciplinary research prioritized an investigation into how clothing reveals the complex dynamics between young people and adults – educators, policy-makers, and cultural influencers – in children's lives.[3] Starting from global research on school uniforms and debates about secularism in public schools, the project evolved to explore the broader political and cultural implications of school dress codes in France. The exhibition became a public forum for addressing these themes comprehensively. Its timing was significant: it launched amid the June 2023 governmental ban on the *abaya* in French schools and the political piloting of school uniforms as a tool of educational authority. As such, the exhibition attracted the attention of the media and policymakers, enabling the researchers to contribute meaningfully to public discourse on school dress codes and expand the field of inquiry globally (Coutant & Le Guennec, 2025).[4]

From the earliest stages of the project, it was vital to include children in analyzing their dress codes and clothing environments. Collaboration with the International and Interdisciplinary Network for the Research on Children and Clothing (IN2FROCC) (ACORSO, n.d.) and working under the umbrella of the international organization Designing for Children's Rights, led to the creation of collaborative tools to achieve this goal.

The project included live experiments and surveys designed to capture children's voices and interpretations of their material culture. These efforts produced evaluation tools aimed at understanding the role of dress codes in children's lives and helped develop museum exhibits that reflect their perspectives. For example, *Tell Me* (Designing for Children's Rights, n.d.; Coutant & Le Guennec, 2023, pp. 70–73) focused on clothing as an intercultural medium for children aged six to eight in France, the United Kingdom, and China. In school-based, child-led workshops conducted from 2022 to 2023, children used their clothing and dress codes to communicate creatively with one another, offering a unique window into their understanding of identity, otherness, and material culture.

Another initiative, *Dressed for Home-Schooling*, surveyed the favourite dress codes of French and Scottish children aged six to twelve during the COVID-19 pandemic (Coutant & Le Guennec, 2023, pp. 34–35). The findings revealed significant insights into how children perceived and used clothing to project themselves into different times, places, and characters through play. These projects underscored the creative and

imaginative power of clothing in children's lives. Clothing is not just an incidental part of childhood – it is a daily presence and a key component of children's material culture.

Museums must recognize clothing as both a social medium and an educational tool essential for fostering intergenerational and inclusive dialogue. Clothing's ability to document, contextualize, and convey individual and societal narratives should not remain accessible only to adult visitors. Emotional engagement with heritage through detailed observation of design and materiality should be available to all and foster shared understanding (Norman, 2004). In this light, clothing heritage becomes a catalyst for embedding children's sense of identity, belonging, and history – and museums become forums for this to happen. To redefine the mission of museums, the active inclusion of all voices – especially children – is essential. *Dressed for School* demonstrated the necessity of rethinking the heritage of education and childhood, and reconceiving museums as spaces for research into the material and social behaviours of all users, regardless of age or social position.

The project transformed what might seem like an anecdotal subject into a rich field of inquiry, integrating and challenging adult perceptions of children as merely future adults. It showed how exhibitions act as crucibles where adults, educators, and policymakers learn from children's insights in ways that can help transform society. It also made clear the urgent need for museums to involve children not just as audiences, but as active co-creators of their heritage through innovative, co-designed media.

One of the most critical challenges museums face today is how they should acknowledge wrongs inflicted on marginalized groups within their own society. Historically, despite being holders of significant indigenous knowledge of huge cultural significance, they have often been treated without respect and excluded by institutions of the state, including museums. In recent years, museums in the Republic of Ireland, defined by their locations and collections, have explored how they can address cultural appropriation and promote inclusive engagement with diverse communities, in ways that respect their unique cultural traditions and belief systems. The following case study at the National Museum of Ireland illustrates this organizational change and shift of paradigm on heritage and collections.

Where is the museum? Engaging and caring for our cultural heritage outside of the museum's walls

In the development of its new Strategic Plan, the National Museum of Ireland set out its vision for 2028:

> "The National Museum of Ireland will be a place of sanctuary and surprise. Through greater accessibility to our collections, we will strengthen how our audiences can engage with their cultural heritage. We will offer unexpected and diverse public programmes and develop opportunities for increased research and collaboration." (National Museum of Ireland, 2023).

At the core of this strategy is a focus on changing the engagement process of the institution with the cultural heritage of communities that are significantly underrepresented within the national collection. For the purpose of this case study the focus is on the National Museum of Ireland's work with the Traveller community in Ireland. Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries. In 2017, as noted on the Irish Travellers Movement website (Irish Travellers Movement (ITM), 2019),

they were formally identified as an ethnic group by the Irish Government, following decades of prejudice and ill-treatment by the Irish State that sought to eradicate their way of life, culture, and identity.

In 2018, the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life[5] opened one of the first dedicated exhibitions in the Museum's history to explore Traveller culture and heritage (National Museum of Ireland, 2024). *A Travellers' Journey* was co-curated in partnership with a number of members of the Travellers community and was officially opened by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, in July 2018. While modest in size, the exhibition had a significant impact and provided a key pivot point for the development of a number of further partnerships by the lead curator, Rosa Meehan. These initiatives ultimately led the Museum on a journey to develop a new role in the organization that recognized that not all collections should be in the Museum and that the work of curators is often beyond their buildings and in communities – work that is about co-curation and shared knowledge.

Prior to the exhibition, the Museum's collection of objects from the Traveller Community was sparse and primarily focused on tin objects and paper flowers, or on items that broadly reflected trade or engagement with settled people in Ireland. The collection did not reflect the rich and ever-changing cultural heritage of Travellers – their history, stories, folklore, and spirituality – in any meaningful way. Following a successful application to the Irish government's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion, and Youth, the National Museum of Ireland hired its first Traveller Community Development Officer. This was part of a three-year project aimed at scoping and exploring the possibilities, mechanisms, and supports needed to develop a holistic and embedded approach to the Museum's engagement with Traveller culture and heritage. In March 2021, Oein De Bhairduin was appointed to the role. As a member of the Traveller Community, he began a wide process of engagement and exploration into how a national museum might better represent their cultural heritage – while also acknowledging that, for many, the placement of their most precious and culturally significant objects in a large State institution felt antithetical to the very idea of demonstrating their value and worth.

There are currently over twenty-three different projects in train with a number of Traveller families and communities across Ireland. Some of these may ultimately lead to collections in the Museum, while others may not, resulting in collections remaining in the communities but with documentation (oral histories, archive materials) entering the Museum. It is work in progress; however, it has fundamentally changed the Museum's structure and processes. In 2024, the Museum recruited its first Inclusive Histories Curator – Traveller Culture – again a new role to recognize that the work of curators often extends beyond its buildings and into communities, opening up and exploring new mechanisms of collecting, and new forms of joint acquisition and engagement.

This approach to curation differs from the traditional systems and processes of a museum and bring questions of ownership and mobility into focus. However, while the work is closely aligned with the Museum's Learning and Public Programmes teams, it remains a curatorial role. The distinction is important in recognizing that this work must be done in a radically different way. The National Museum of Ireland expects to develop further Inclusive Histories Curator roles, working with communities underrepresented in the collections and developing new models of engagement and co-curation. In

doing so, the institution has begun to change many of its policies and professional guidance within the museums – from acquisitions and disposal policies to how oral histories are collected. New ways of working and collecting are emerging across the Museum's divisions, rooted in co-curation and shared knowledge. This is the beginning of much-needed change, with a long way yet to go. Crucially, alongside changes in structures and systems, there is a cultural shift occurring that will embed this work in the fabric of the National Museum of Ireland.

Museums, governance and corruption in a post-colonial context

Achievement of change requires the management of multiple internal and external forces that constantly ebb and flow around cultural organisations. These often also have at least two axes – place and social value – that can make them highly attractive to people who seek to further their own personal interests, and put institutions themselves at risk. In this context, the journey to democratic practice is neither the current norm, nor straightforward to achieve. Jon Price has identified some common ethical challenges faced by arts and cultural organizations, and analyzed how institutions may respond to them, making a useful distinction between principled leadership on the one hand, and self-interested protection of the personal reputations of leaders and the institution on the other. (Price, 2023)

Over the last few years alone, governance abuses have been revealed at many national cultural and sports organisations in the UK – including, to name but a few, the British Museum, S4C (the Welsh language television channel), Yorkshire Cricket Club and the Wales Rugby Union (Higgins & Batty, 2024; Topping, 2024; Yorkshire racism scandal: ECB recommends £500.000 fine and points deductions [Editorial], 2023; Welsh Rugby Union 'truly sorry' after damning independent review, 2023). Are those governance crises that become public knowledge, the consequence of unique, local circumstances alone? In 2019, citing as examples institutions in London such as the BBC and the Tate Gallery, Anne-Marie Quigg wrote of the cultural sector that "It's not uncommon for destructive behaviours such as bullying and sexual harassment to manifest themselves at times of crisis" and that "an entire sector can become contaminated by abuse." (Quigg, 2019, pp. 49–56)

Few museums perceive it to be part of their public responsibility to support the achievement of social justice. There could be reasons for this: first, a collective lack of ethical courage in the sector; second, devotion to the intellectually indefensible concept of "neutrality"; and, third, longstanding entanglement in networks of malgovernance, and even corruption.

One widely used definition of corruption is that developed by the Centre of the Study of Corruption at the University of Sussex in England:

> "The abuse of entrusted power for private gain which harms the public interest, typically breaching laws, regulations, and/or integrity standards." (Barrington et al., 2023, pp. 88–89)

This combines both public office and public interest approaches and suggests that malgovernance and corruption may significantly overlap.

Political interference may take many forms. For example, in 2020, the UK Government's then culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, threatened to cut Government funding to

museums and galleries in England that removed statues associated with British colonialism. He also blocked a number of reappointments at English national museums, making clear he wanted to replace them with like-minded allies (*The Independent*, 2020). Clearly, these were improper uses of his constitutional powers.

Political abuse of cultural institutions can be a far more deadly business, something that was brilliantly and heart-wrenchingly portrayed by the Russian dissident, Yuri Dombrovsky, in his novel *The Keeper of Antiquities*, which was first published in 1964 in the Soviet Union within the restrictions of state censorship. The book, set in a national museum in Kazakhstan in 1937, is based on his own experience of two decades of exile from Moscow to Kazakhstan first to work in a museum, and his subsequent long imprisonment in a gulag. The fictional Keeper's job begins as comedy but darkens as the Stalinist terror reaches Kazakhstan, and the Museum's Deputy Director is accused of treason. The Keeper is interrogated by a Soviet Deputy Commissar, before then being released:

> "Suddenly he [the Deputy Commissioner] laughed. 'All right, go back and do your job. Only think over what I've said. Try and link your antiquities more closely with the present day,' he boomed cheerfully. 'There was a poet, you know, called Bezymensky. He put it very well: 'To be equal to the challenge of our great age you must be able to discern the world revolution in everything, no matter how trivial', or something like that. Go and find the world revolution in everything you lay your hands on. Every exhibit should point to that and that alone.'" (Dombrovsky, 1991, p. 181)

Museums in the UK have no such mortal threats to prevent them from critically re-evaluating British Empire and colonialism. The shameful behaviour of most public bodies in the UK in refusing to acknowledge, for example, British colonization of Ireland is, in the measured words of the Irish President Michael D Higgins, an act of "feigned amnesia" (Higgins, 2021).

Over the last decade, after years of silence and evasion by museums, some institutions of public memory in the UK (particularly in Wales and Scotland) have taken action. In a recent example Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales invited the Sub-Saharan Africa Panel (SSAP), which was formed in 2009 by a number of Africa diaspora groups in Wales, to lead the process of public redisplay of a portrait of the first, and exceptionally brutal, British colonial Governor of Trinidad, Lieutenant-General Thomas Picton. Fadhili Maghiya, C.E.O. of SSAP, issued a public invitation to artists to submit proposals. There were two winners – one was Gesiye, a tattoo artist from Trinidad, and the other was Laku Neg, an artists' collective of four women, three of whom are of Trinidadian heritage. Their responses, together with the portrait itself, filled three galleries. These profoundly moving and deeply humane exhibitions, which opened in 2022, were seen as a landmark by many Museum visitors, an exemplar of how artists can inspire empathetic engagement with an historical work of art, while achieving an honest and open re-evaluation by the artists of Picton's vicious actions (Amgueddfa Cymru, n.d.; Anderson, 2021; National Museum of Wales, 2022a). The Picton exhibitions were among the most significant that the Museum has staged in living memory. They demonstrated that museums can achieve far higher professional standards when they democratize responsibilities and transfer power to a wide range of civic partners, and support rather than direct their work, can achieve far higher professional standards.

Conclusions

Museums, often highly unrepresentative of their local communities, face significant challenges of democratic legitimacy. The emergence and growth of new mass global protest movements make it urgent for museums to rethink culture from first principles. The recent debates at the International Council of Museums (I.C.O.M.) indicate that there is a critical mass of cultural practitioners worldwide who want to create new, more effective models that are sensitive to the diversity of forms of democracy in their societies, and to the complexity of their political contexts. For many of these museum practitioners, nothing less than radical change towards a more ethical and sustainable future will suffice.

One such initiative was the *Manifiesto El Museo Reimaginado* developed by participants in the *Museums Reimagined* conference in Buenos Aires in November 2015, organized by the Argentinian cultural agency TyPA in partnership with the Association of American Museums (AAM) [Figure 1]. Another is the *Porto Santo Charter: Culture and the Promotion of Democracy, Towards a European Cultural Citizenship*, developed by Culture Action Europe under the leadership of Paulo Pires do Vale and Sara Brighenti of the Portuguese Government (Council of the European Union Initiative, 2021).

Underpinning these examples are some fundamental questions. How can museums become central to civic democratic renewal, with integrity and inclusivity at core, in ways that are directly relevant to their own local and international contexts? Does every individual, including every child, have cultural rights – and if so, what are they, and are they universal? How do cultural rights relate to other rights, perceptions of which vary widely from society to society, and from community to community? Is the building of public participation through cultural democracy in its many forms an achievable – and a universal – entitlement of citizens in every society, to which all cultural organizations should actively contribute? These questions raise challenging reflections on other claims of universality for human life and culture, and for the whole natural world.

The authors of this article – informed by their professional practice – propose five key principles that could contribute to the reinvention of cultural institutions. Their achievement requires vigilance against mal-governance, that will otherwise prevent democratic change:

- First, social justice and civic change are the central purpose of all cultural organizations;
- Second, cultural rights and cultural democracy, based on the rich diversity of civic, indigenous and environmental thought across the rest of the world, are foundational;
- Third, humans and beyond humans are the primary holders of lived and felt experience in society and the environment, and the creators of collective knowledge and cultural expertise;
- Fourth, place and society are our primary locations, not the buildings and collections that have been dominant in the colonial era; and
- Fifth, the role of specialist practitioners is to serve and enable society, and not to lead.

The primary focus of cultural change and development should then be society itself. This can only happen if practitioners, policy makers and researchers in cultural

Figure 1. TyPA (Argentina) Manifiesto El Museo Reimaginado, https://www.typa.org.ar/archivos/descargas/Manifesto__ENG_.pdf.

institutions, working in close collaboration with their communities, become cultural activists, taking direct responsibility for supporting the development of new democratic methodologies that reflect local realities. Therefore, these institutions are not an end, but just one of a number of essential means to achieve social justice through cultural participation in society. To be most effective, practitioners, researchers and communities should share their experiences with others worldwide who have made a commitment to cultural democracy, as part of a distributed democratic movement that is defined by these common values.

This article is then an urgent proposal for further practice, research, exchange and critical debate on democracy in museums, and on democracy itself.

Notes

1. This paper refers to the panel discussion presented by the authors "Museums as the catalysts of a cultural revolution", "cultural rights: a global dialogue", Santiago de Chile, November 2023.
2. International Council of Museums (I.C.O.M.), Triennal Meeting, Kyoto, 2019 September 9th.
3. Surface of the exhibition: 300m2, 150 displays, 23rd June 2023-31st March 2024, 15000 visitors (on site), curators: Nicolas Coutant (Musée National de l'Education, Munae), Aude Le Guennec (The Glasgow School of Art), steering committee: Julie Delalande (University of Caen, France), Anne Monjaret (CNRS, EHESS), Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien (EHESS), Omar Zanna (University of Le Mans, France), with the contribution of Clare Rose (UK), Virginie Vinel (University of Franche-Comté, France).
4. The exhibition *Dressed for School* and related research projects has led to the organisation of the International Symposium *School uniforms, dress codes and public responses: from museums to policy makers*, by the Glasgow School of Art, the Musee National de l'Education - Munae, Acorso and the University of Aberdeen, held at the University of Aberdeen on 20th November 2024.
5. The exhibition was presented at Turlough Park House, Co. Mayo.

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