Unesco and museums: and now for something completely different

Report of expert meeting on protection and promotion of museums and collections, 11-14 July, Rio.

Museums have no business in the dealings between nations. There is no EU commissioner for it, while Unesco may deal with cultural practices and monuments, but not institutions. Last year Brazil moved that museums and collections should be better protected. The idea was supported by thirty member nations, and a resolution to that end was carried by the General Assembly of Unesco. But the precise idea behind it was not clear. Protect against what, and by what means? An expert meeting was called last July in Rio de Janeiro to shed light on it. With a colleague form Norway, I represented Europa and North America.

Fifty experts and some hundred observers gathered in Rio from across the world, all expenses generously covered by the Brazilian museums institute IBRAM, the advise on better protection and promotion of museums and collections. What are the clear and present dangers to museums and collections that cannot be countered by existing Unesco measures, such the 1954 and 1970 Conventions? These conventions already prescribe preventive behavior and curative actions with regard to cultural goods in case of armed conflict and illicit trade, respectively. Add to this no less than thirteen other conventions, declarations and recommendations, such as last year's Blue Shield statements to safeguard museums in Libya, Syria and Egypt, and you might think the subject sufficiently covered. Not so to the Rio experts' eyes. The point is not only that many of these instruments are not universally accepted or have been effectively turned into national legislation, but for some nations it just does not go far enough. Nigeria, for instance, fights for lawful return of cultural goods that were illegally removed from the country also before the famous entry date of the 1970 Convention. Developing countries do no longer accept as an unchangeable fact that their history resides in colonial museums claiming universal status on the other side of the world. In addition there are situations where museums have to be protected against even their own governments. Thus, Rwanda's National Museum is threatened by destruction because of the real estate value of the ground it sits on. Through international treaties governments can be put under pressure to recognize the importance of museums and to show that, for instance, by allotting a portion of the national budget to them. Representatives from some developed countries fully agreed. When you don't have a Ministry for Culture, as in the US, international obligations can come in handy to pressure the executive power towards more museum-minding behavior.

To me the real news from Rio was that museums are now broadly characterized as an instrument for social change, and that Unesco is requested to acknowledge and support this. While European museum network NEMO president Siebe Weide and several other, mainly European delegates (myself included) pointed to inconsistencies and the risk of wishful thinking, in the final declaration the museums were firmly shown in a new light. They are to be considered as institutions hovering between two ontological poles. On the one hand they can be defined in terms of collections. On the other, they perform developmental functions for societies. To be sure: *all* museums exist in a space defined by these two poles, though some may gravitate towards one more than towards another. The main point in Rio, however, was to promote the latter, process-oriented side, as exemplified in the Museu da Maré, a community museum from, for and about the *favela* in the heart of Rio de Janeiro. Another example is the District Six Museum in Cape Town (SA), a monument to and at the same time a place of continuing negotiation of Apartheid, reconciliation, and the memories thereof.

The expert meeting closed with a advise* to create a new legal Unesco instrument, technically called *Recommendation.* The newly gained insights should be given full weight and be allowed to play a decisive role in current debates on sustainability and social development. The next step is, if and when the Unesco executive council agrees, to research the technical and juridical implications of such a recommendation. That report might be presented to the April 2013 General Assembly.

There was still another message for the experts to take home: the era of self-evident Western material and intellectual supremacy seems to have outrun itself. Brazil is embodying new notions of leadership in the cultural field, and does so with remarkable energy. Enriching traditional, collection-driven conceptions about museums to include more process-based notions is rather more than just showing tolerance for educational activities. It means the end of museums as icons of Western supremacy. And maybe that is not a bad idea.

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* http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002169/216952E.pdf