Sociomuseology, Social Museology
and the Sociology of Museums

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Sociomuseologia, museologia social e a sociologia dos Museus

This paper seeks to clarify the distinctions between Sociomuseology, Social Museology and the Sociology of Museums. While these concepts are interconnected, they hold distinct meanings in both theory and practice.

By engaging with these themes, this paper contributes to an ongoing debate on the conceptual boundaries and intersections of Sociomuseology, Social Museology, and the Sociology of Museums, urging a more nuanced understanding of their respective roles in contemporary museology.

The Department of Cultural Heritage and Museology at Fudan University, Shanghai, recently published an article by Professor Zhou Jingjing titled *"Integrity and Innovation: Reflections on Sociomuseology (Social Museology) and Its Applicability in China."*[2] This article is significant in considering the role of museums and museology within Chinese society and, by extension, contemporary global society. Given the evolution of museological thought in China[3]—especially following the creation of ecomuseums and the establishment of the Liuzhi Principles—it is natural to reassess the future of Normative (Classical) Museology, as well as the evolving role of Social Museology on a global scale.

This article also engages with certain core ideas, at times reinforcing key arguments and at other times offering complementary perspectives that call for greater conceptual flexibility. It highlights three primary questions, which are relevant beyond the Chinese context:

a) Museology as a subject of sociological approach
b) The position of Social Museology and Sociomuseology within contemporary museology
c) Issues of professionalization and specialization in museology

Museology as a Subject of Sociological approach

The first aspect concerns the Sociology of Museology, which has emerged as a significant subfield within Museum Studies. Thinkers from various intellectual traditions have contributed—either explicitly or implicitly—to its development. From Karl Marx to contemporary scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, their collective work has enriched our understanding of museums, their audiences, and the function of Memory and Active Memory as foundational principles in museology. Museums serve as spaces for both the reinforcement of hegemonic narratives and the emergence of counter-narratives.

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[2] (2024). Zhou Jingjing. Integrity and Innovation: Reflections on Sociomuseology（Social Museology）and Its Applicability in China. Southeast Culture (02), 129-138. doi: CNKI:SUN:DNWH.0.2024-02-012.
[3] See for example (2011) Peter Davis, Ecomuseums, a sense of place, Bloomsbury Publishing

Sociology offers valuable insights into the role and function of museums and museological processes in modern society. However, other disciplines—including Anthropology, Psychology, Economics, Marketing, Public Studies, and Communication—also contribute to the study of museums, often bringing new and specialized perspectives to the field.

It is easy to recognize that in the last 50 years, these approaches have become an important field of reflection in the Social Sciences, highlighting, however, the fact that much of this reflection has been carried out seeking to articulate various areas of social sciences in an interdisciplinary framework. In the same way that a Sociology of Work, Education or Population is recognized, we can also assume a Sociology of Museums or Museality. This Sociology is, however, essentially English language as Zhou Jingjing presents in another article published in 2023[4].

However, when discussing the Sociology of Museums, it is essential to acknowledge that many scholars continue to frame their analyses within the parameters of Normative Museology. This framework typically conceptualizes museums as institutions composed of three core elements: **buildings, collections, and the public**[5]. This perspective, for example, resonates with Theodor Adorno's critique of museums as spaces that both preserve and institutionalize culture.

> the German word, 'museal', has unpleasant connotations. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship, and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than a phonetic association. Museums are like family tombs of works of art. They witness the neutralization of culture.[6]

The same is true for Michel Foucault, who after May 1968 developed his thoughts on Museums, taking exclusively normative Museums as a reference, ignoring that in his own country, as well as in Belgium, Canada, Mexico and many other countries , Ecomuseums were already recognized as a dynamic expression of the "New museology", representing a thriving movement of life, decentralization, development and appreciation of local cultures.

> (…) the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century. [7]

The Sociology of Museology has followed two easily identifiable paths. In the first case, reflection stems from established areas of the Social Sciences toward normative Museology (Marx, Weber, Adorno, Durkheim). In other cases, it moves from Museology toward the Social Sciences (Per Uno Agren, Zbynek Stránsky, Anna Gregorová, Peter van Mensch, Marta Arjona, Sharon Macdonald, Vinos Sofka, Geoffrey Lewis, and others).

These two paths have proven to be of great importance, and we must acknowledge that they currently constitute a robust and dynamic field of knowledge, which has finally granted Museology recognition as a disciplinary area. We are far from the view of Museology as merely a set of techniques for organizing collections and museums.

Excluded from this discussion is the study of curatorial activities in museums, one that focus on collection curation, including the safeguarding and security of collections, museum documentation, conservation and restoration processes, architecture of buildings and furniture, and exhibition design. While these areas of activity may now incorporate new technologies and computational resources, they are

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[4] (2023) Zhou Jingjing, Chen Meici, Review of interdisciplinary research on "Museums and Sociology", Journal of Archaeology and Museology 4, ISSN : 2096-5710

[5] This trilogy is generally recognized in social museology as Territory + Heritage + Population

[6] Theodor W Adorno, Prisms, Valéry Proust Museum, Series: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought, The MIT Press; Reprint edition (March 29, 1983) p. 173

[7] Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias, Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité, October, 1984 p 46-49

essentially treated as specialized techniques crucial for museum operations. However, they have lost the hegemonic position they once held as the core of "Museological Theory."

It is important to note that the article's title, *Reflections on Sociomuseology (Social Museology)*, might lead readers to assume that the term *Social Museology* is synonymous with *Sociomuseology*, and vice versa. This is an unfounded simplification, as the two terms refer to distinct concepts:

1. Social Museology primarily concerns dialogical, community-based museological practices in their various forms, shaped by the context and objectives under which they were created—social museums, community museums, ecomuseums, "favela" museums, local museums, territorial museums, and itinerary museums, among others.

Since the Québec Declaration of 1984, which referenced the 1972 Santiago Round Table Declaration (ICOM/UNESCO), the dimensions of *Dialogue* and *Community* have been recognized as defining elements in the transformation of museology, then broadly termed "New Museology."

These two concepts, *Dialogue* and *Community*, represent a break from a hierarchically structured, non-participatory museum management model, traditionally led by directors and experts, and centered on the institution itself. Instead, the concept of *Community* calls for the organic participation of the communities in which each museum or museological process is embedded.

As stated in the 2013 MINOM[8] Declaration of Rio de Janeiro, these museums and processes embrace the necessity to:

- Break power hierarchies, allowing new actors to emerge as protagonists of their own memories;
- Understand community museums as political, poetic, and pedagogical processes in constant development, tied to specific worldviews;
- Recognize that all these museums and museum processes adopt their own "ways" of musealizing, appropriate and make use of knowledge to better serve each new project.

2. Sociomuseology refers to a distinct **School of Thought**, one that seeks to clarify the common principles and values present in community-based Museums and Museological Processes, which explicitly operate in a **dialogical** manner. As Hugues de Varine pointed out regarding Sociomuseology[9]:

> We are dealing with a confirmed and recognized academic discipline, with its three dimensions of research and experimentation, teaching, and publication—independent yet in solidarity with the historical current of museology and its institutions.[10]

The term *Sociomuseology* was coined by Fernando Santos Neves in 1993 with the creation of the journal *Cadernos de Sociomuseologia*[11]—more than 30 years ago. Since then, there has been a continuous increase in publications, research projects, doctoral theses, master's dissertations, museums and museological processes, Sociomuseology networks, specialized or complementary training programs at different levels of education, and national and international conferences and symposiums.[12]

As a School of Thought, Sociomuseology embraces:

- A consistent historical trajectory;
- A consolidated practical dimension;
- A progressively stronger theoretical foundation;

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[8] The International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM), affiliated with ICOM, was created in Lisbon in 1985 following the International Ecomuseums Workshop - New Museology, held in Quebec the previous year.

[9] This term (Sociomuseology) was coined by Fernando Santos Neves in 1991 when we created the Journal *Cadernos de Sociomuseologia*.

[10] Varine, Hugues (2021) Foreword to the book: Primo, Judite. & Moutinho, Mario. Theory and Practice of Sociomuseology. Lisbon, Edições Universitárias Lusófonas. p.15.

[11] https://museologia.ulusofona.pt/publicacoes/cadernos-de-sociomuseologia

[12] In the website of the International Committee for Social Museology (SOMUS/ICOM) some of these initiatives are mentioned, namely in Portuguese, French, Spanish and English. Many of the references cited are published in Portuguese, directly accessible to Portuguese and Spanish readers in a universe of 780 million. It is a shame that most English-speaking authors do not have access to the vast production in Spanish or Portuguese. This would perhaps facilitate its opening to the Ibero-American space and its immense museological wealth of reflection and innovative practices.

- A social need to understand field practices;
- A space for education and scientific research within the Social Sciences, walking alongside and engaging with them in their respective fields of intervention.

Finally, it is also important to clarify that the organic link between Sociomuseology as a School of Thought and the different forms of Social Museology does not presuppose any hierarchy:

> Thinking a Sociomuseology distinct from the different forms of Museology with social responsibility or imagining distinctions resulting from a hasty geographical reading, seems to be a hoax that creates separation where none exists. In a world marked by new forms of coloniality, both blatant and subtle, the separation between theory and practice, in which Sociomuseology would have the status of thought and Dialogical Museology the status of "manual labor", also has no support. Theory and practice are two sides of the same sheet of paper. What organically or dialectically unites the "doing and thinking" of Dialogical Museology is the ability to critically think about Museology and the place that each person occupies in the reinterpretation of the world, in understanding local and global challenges and overcoming them. (MOUTINHO, 2007, p. 1).

Both terms have their own legitimacy, but they should not be considered interchangeable.

The place of Social Museology and Sociomuseology in the context of contemporary museology

In his article, Zhou Jingjing clearly presents social Museology, dealing successively with its origin in the new Museology, UNESCO reference documents, declarations produced in the framework of international conferences, namely the Declaration of the Santiago Round Table, recognized as a reference document for understanding the transformations of meaning and significance of contemporary museology

It also rightly highlights the importance of understanding a Museology focused on objects as carriers of meaning and Museology focused on people and how this has been forming as a thriving movement worldwide.

> By the end of the 20th century, museologists had two distinct methodological choices: object-oriented and community oriented. In this context, social museology and other related branches emerged to adapt to complex social situations (…)
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> However, as museums continue to open up to the external environment, they have established an unexpected organic relationship with the social environment that gives them life. The birth of social museology is to deal with the new problems highlighted in this practice, so it is not only a new academic branch, but also an academic existence engraved with the imprint of the times. (…) At the same time, the stimulating interaction between schools and the continuation of the ideas of different schools are the important driving forces for the development of museology. This article attempts to eliminate the confusion and prejudice of the new school with a rational and open attitude, and objectively recognize and evaluate social museology and related branches, just as to promote their practical benefits[13].

These concerns, however, stem from the fact that "true" Museology is fundamentally based on the collection of objects. The author believes that

> the collection and use of museum objects are the essential characteristics of museums.[14] The real focus of contemporary attention on "people" is actually about "how to make people use objects effectively," so museology needs to explore how to effectively achieve the publicization of the information contained in museum objects.[15]

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[13] Zhou Jingjing, 129-130
[14] our Italic
[15] Zhou Jingjing, 135

If such an approach was possible when referring to Normative Museology, it no longer seems acceptable in the present time, where "objects" and "collections" have been adopting new definitions, even leading to a re-evaluation of their place within Museology and Museums.

As the author herself notes, UNESCO wisely issued a Recommendation in 2015[16], affirming that museums must assume their social responsibility in favour of social inclusion. The organization recommended that governments support and promote these objectives in their museums, either through traditional means or by employing new tools and methods, where objects may or may not hold a dominant role in museum practices.

We are witnessing a process in which nothing is lost, but where it becomes possible to resort to other means and, consequently, other methodologies.

The recent creation of the **International Committee for Social Museology SOMUS-ICOM** within the International Council of Museums (ICOM)—supported by museologists, activists, teachers, researchers, and community leaders from 30 countries across four continents, as well as by seven national ICOM committees—demonstrates that Social Museology is alive and active worldwide, not only in Portuguese-speaking countries, as the text might sometimes suggest.

Let us remember that the rationale behind the creation of this Committee is based on three essential aspects: Necessity, Justice, and Determination:

1. Necessity: The need to fully integrate, within ICOM, dialogic community-based museums and processes, as equal partners in global Museology.
2. Justice: Justice, because it is an ethical imperative to recognize the work and dedication of people and communities who, in many places around the world, often put their freedom and lives at risk.
3. Determination: Determination, because we believe we can extend the idea and power of social museums to territories that do not yet benefit from this tool, which serves Citizenship and Human Dignity.

Regarding the suitability of social museology to the Chinese reality, also addressed by the author, we will not comment, as we do not have sufficient knowledge about the reality of museology in China.

However, from a theoretical point of view, the suitability of social museology to the Chinese reality, cannot be excluded outright.

It is true that in the West, as a result of its recent and past history, the current economic development model, open and clandestine wars and others that are announced, many of the issues that arise are related to social exclusion, systemic racism and the growing impoverishment of a large part of the population.

Social Museology thus appears as a possible response to these challenges based on dialogical community processes that can contribute to their resolution as intended by the aforementioned UNESCO recommendation of 2015.

Neither a prescription nor an obligation, but simply a new manifestation of the class struggle, which needs to be understood, including to overcome its own inevitable contradictions.

Questions related to professionalization and specialization in the field of Museology.

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[16] (…) Member States are encouraged to support the social role of museums that was highlighted by the 1972 Declaration of Santiago de Chile. Museums are increasingly viewed in all countries as playing a key role in society and as a factor in social integration and cohesion. In this sense, they can help communities to face profound changes in society, including those leading to a rise in inequality and the breakdown of social ties. Museums are vital public spaces that should address all of society and can therefore play an important role in the development of social ties and cohesion, building citizenship, and reflecting on collective identities. Museums should be places that are open to all and committed to physical and cultural access to all, including disadvantaged groups. They can constitute spaces for reflection and debate on historical, social, cultural and scientific issues. should also foster respect for human rights and gender equality. Member States should encourage museums to fulfil all of these roles. (…) Museums Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society, adopted by the General Conference at its 38th Session, Paris, 17 November 2015. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246331

Zhou Jingjing article raises the issue of the possible breakdown of professionalism in the field of normative Museology, which could result from a shift in priorities in the relationship between museums and their collections and the general population, considering that "specialization may stagnate or even regress " This concern is explicit in the following passage from the article

> For example, Sancho Querol Lorena pointed out that social museology advocates sustainable development through museums, community participation in the definition, and management of cultural heritage and species also requires community participation. This trend seems to encourage museums to have strong pro-social capabilities, but in fact it may cause my country's museums to move further away from specialization.[17]

We do not see how community participation can, by itself, cause such an effect, since for Social Museology, this participation is a guarantee of more rigor, more knowledge and more involvement. In our understanding, normative museums only have something to gain when they include community participation, which can fill the gaps (which always exist) in academic training.

In our understanding, the development of professional skills in the various fields of normative Museology and the disciplines associated with it, History, Archaeology, Natural Sciences, at the same time as specialized training in the fields of conservation, restoration, curation, management, marketing, communication and many others are essential and must be subject to permanent updating.

Educational institutions at different levels have been able to offer training that responds to these demands. Many universities and schools are an essential international reference, sought after by students and professionals, both for basic training and postgraduate studies.

The question that can be raised is to what extent training aimed at professionals who deal with the physical collections of their museums also responds to the professional needs to deal with collections composed of the social challenges that communities face.

In this sense, the most important thing is to ensure that specialized training for normative Museology is as complete as possible. But at the same time, we must recognize that specialized and professional training for the practice of social museology must also be assumed by educational institutions.

Here too, educational institutions are dependent of the social and political contexts of each country or region, and in particular in the West, submissive to the dominant ideology and coloniality of power, being and knowledge as stated by Anibal Quijano.[18]

What seems essential to us is that education institutions recognize, without ambiguity, a new area of training for Social Museology and offer programs that qualify professionals for good dialogic management of community-based Museums, aiming at the exercise of citizenship, public science and cognitive justice.

Both training courses are essential for the performance of museums, whether they are normative or an expression of social Museology.

Finally, it is important to recognize a new reality, which makes the place and function of Museums even more complex in contemporary times. Over the past 10 years, a growing number of normative museums have started to include in their activity plans, actions aimed, for example, at social inclusion, anti-racist struggle, identity reinforcement or migrant integration.

On the other hand, museums and museological processes operating within the framework of social museology actively build collections—whether large or small—that serve to enhance and support their ongoing efforts in meaningful ways.

However, it is necessary to recognize that these practices do not imply changes in the operational structures nor in the modification of their founding objectives. Thus, normative museums maintain a hierarchical management structure, oriented toward the traditional functions of museums— collecting, preserving, and exhibiting their collections—while Social Museums continue to prioritize community-based dialogical practices.

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[17] Zhou Jingjing, 136

[18] Quijano, Anibal, Colonialidade do poder, Eurocentrismo e América Latina, in A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais. Perspectivas latinoamericanas, *(Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America, in The coloniality of knowledge: Eurocentrism and social sciences. Latin American perspectives)* Buenos Aires, Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales CLACSO,2005, 117-142.

These are, therefore, institutions whose activities involve at least two distinct concepts, each requiring different training approaches.

This is certainly a new challenge for educational institutions, particularly universities, which are generally associated with areas focused on scientific research. The challenge lies in creating new undergraduate and postgraduate programs capable of addressing these emerging realities while respecting the diversity of projects. Naturally, respect for the right to difference must serve as a guiding principle, excluding consequently unethical positions.

Contemporary museology is multifaceted, with objectives that can be shared, provided that hegemonic positions are rejected. We must recognize the right to difference among realities shaped by distinct contexts, as indicated in the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation and the new museum definition approved by ICOM in 2022.

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