

Response to Anwar Tlili's paper "Efficiency and social inclusion: implications for the museum profession"

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INTRO

I have been asked to respond to Anwar Tlili's paper, and I propose to do this in four steps. I will follow Anwar's line of arguments closely. I will be dealing in turn with

Step no. 1: Profession and Professionalization

Step no. 2: Social Inclusion

Step no. 3: Managerialism

Step no. 4: Museum Education and Training

Step no. 1: Profession and Professionalization

The museum, it seems, has not been studied a great deal from the angle of profession or professionalization, as has already been observed by Bourdieu some forty years ago. The Paper takes great care to map out the various dimensions of professions and to report the scholarly debate on professionalization. But the evidence with respect to museums seems to be inconclusive. This is due to the fact that there does not seem to be *one* museum profession. Rather the museums could – and should – be viewed as organizations which comprise a number of different professions. Museums are more like universities with their multiplicity of experts in various fields; and they are much less like hospitals with physicians and nurses at the helm. What difference does this shift in emphasis make? It stresses the need to look at a differentiated picture of the museum. Museums come in all shapes and forms – just think of art museums, science museums, and historical museums to name but a few vastly different types. But they all share certain basic functions which cannot be spelled out in any detail here. It has however been tried to put some flesh on these functions by a European Working Group which has assembled a paper on a European Frame of Reference for Museum

Professions (Ruge 2008b). If we look at the Functional Chart of a museum, indeed any museum, we see a lot of occupations making the transit to professions or struggling to do so.

Step no. 2: Social Inclusion

It has been observed over and over again that the mission of the museum has been since its inception to collect and to conserve, to exhibit and to educate. But as museums have become more and more *public* institutions (leaving behind their court origins) policy-makers of all sorts have begun to take an interest in museums. They have tried to influence and even shape them according to their own agenda. Hence, in recent years, social inclusion has become a hot topic for museums. Basically, this seems only fair in a democratic society. After all, "inclusion" – though often framed in more legalistic or constitutional or human rights terms – is what democracy is all about. As a consequence, all barriers impeding access to non-traditional groups should be torn down. And as a further consequence, in this sense museums could be seen as agents of social change, if and when new constituencies are exposed to objects and exhibitions. Museums themselves, however, are also constantly changing - and why should they not adapt to their ever-changing audiences? There does, on the other hand, seem to be a fine line beyond which the going gets rough. The "agent of social change" metaphor could be taken to mean that activist museum workers are trying to impose an agenda on their audience. To put it satirically: "We know what is good for you, even if you yourselves do not." Another interpretation of the "agent of social change" metaphor would make the museum take on the task of pushing – or nudging – a social group where other institutions may have failed. Both strategies may work under exceptional circumstances – Cape Town's District Six Museum being a case in point – but tend to overburden the museum, and are normally a safe way to disaster.

Step no. 3: Managerialism

For quite a number of years many public sector institutions have been reshaped dramatically: taking them from mission-based organizations to service providers built on the private for-profit

business model. The implications are severe. Visitors become customers. As there are no market mechanisms proper external and internal accountability or evaluation mechanisms have to be introduced. Competition between service providers is encouraged. Contract-like relationships between the government and the service providers further redefine the stage. The bidding culture and fund-raising may absorb valuable human resources of the museum and redirect attention away from collections and permanent exhibitions. All this, however, should not make us forget that the taxpayer's quest for accountability is a legitimate one. Furthermore, accountability and evaluation exercises may very well provide a motivational push to a museum and its staff telling them where they stand and how they are doing. The thrust of much of the criticism against this new mode of control is really something else. What is being resented – and very frequently rightly so – is underfunding of museum work and the picking of inadequate performance indicators to monitor that work. As budget constraints have been weighing down museums in many countries over the last two decades or so, when the new performance measures were being introduced, the two often get blurred in the debate. Cunning politicians or administrators may even have introduced performance measures to justify budget cuts.

Step no. 4: Museum Education and Training

The Paper reports on Museum Education and Training in the United Kingdom in great detail. It stresses the loose connection between university training in museum studies and the performance of the graduates in the museum. It identifies skills gaps on the part of the graduates. It criticizes a certain complacency of the museums with respect to internship training and often ill-conceived students' placements. The selection of students is lacking in strategy and the performance evaluation of the universities tends to squeeze out research on practically relevant problems in favour of either theory-oriented or advocacy-prone research.

The situation may be quite different in other countries – it certainly is in Germany and also in France, as far as I am aware – and this should make for a stimulating discussion in such an international crowd as ours.

The distinction between three dimensions of professional knowledge¹⁰³ with respect to museums shine light in a rather interesting way on the difficulties of training for museum work: there is *knowledge about museums* ("disciplinary" or "propositional" knowledge), *knowledge how to do museum work* (practical knowledge or skills) and *knowledge about how to do museum work* ("museological" knowledge) – all three "knowledges" have to be imparted to the students. It therefore seems fair to say that knowledge about museum studies courses and agreement on what constitutes core knowledge in the field are of crucial importance for enhancing the museum profession.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude on three questions and on one strong principle of museum work in the 21st century.

I turn to the questions. They are meant to push the debate into uncharted territory. If we accept that there can be no tax money without accountability and quality control (and certainly no private or sponsorship money either), museums better face up to the challenge.

It is often argued that museums and exhibitions are visited for the fun of it and that they should be compared to the entertainment industry. Hence the first question:

Is the museum part of the entertainment industry?

I will not try to answer the questions here.

Second, there can be no high-quality service of any kind, if sufficient resources are not made available. The dodgy question of what can be considered adequate resources for the work of museums has to be taken on by museums and museum professionals. Let me put it like this:

Is underfunding a problem and what can be done about it?

¹⁰³ The typology is taken from Tlili 2008. There is, unfortunately, no room here to delve deeper into the epistemological aspects of the typology.

Last, but not least, it is up to the museum professionals to suggest ways of communicating, even measuring, the quality and success of their work. For who should come up with convincing performance indicators, if not the museum professionals? Policymakers can hardly be blamed for not using appropriate measures, if such measures are not suggested by the museum professionals. Hence my third question:

What are good performance indicators?

These are difficult questions but worthy of a noble profession. I take the effort to find answers as a litmus test for the passage of museum workers to becoming a profession. The complex set of problems to be dealt with by museum workers makes a specific museum-related or museological training indispensable. Consequently, the Working Group on a European Frame of Reference for Museum Professions¹⁰⁴, mentioned earlier, has insisted on such training for almost all people employed by museums.

Even though the myth of the autonomy of the profession is one of those that cries for debunking – lawyers are not the lawmakers and a lot of control over hospitals is wielded by non-medics -, there rests a grain of truth in the myth, and that is the need for at least participating in the respective decision-making process. The Paper – rightly – stressed the power aspect of professionalization. This means that museum workers and the museum as an institution have to be involved in the setting of goals and performance indicators as well as in the determination of overall financial resources for the museum. This is the strong principle upon which museum work in the 21st century should be built.

Thank you for your attention.

References

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¹⁰⁴ Cf. Ruge 2008a and Ruge 2008b

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