

Going global, staying national: museums, heritage and tensions of scale

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What role do museums play in the globalisation of culture? This question hinges on an interesting implication which I intend to discuss in the following: that ‘culture’ is (increasingly) ‘globalised’. Assessing this assumption critically, I argue that museums and other heritage institutions are more adequately described as ‘caught up’ between national and global agendas. While global awareness is often voiced and strived for by heritage institutions and managers, I argue that such cosmopolitan perspectives often vie and overlap with nationalist agendas, and even sometimes in themselves imply a certain ‘banal’ strand of nationalism (Billig 1995). As an example of these tensions, and utilising material from my doctoral ethnography of heritage practices at a Danish battlefield site, I discuss how explicit attempts at toning down or even erasing formerly dominant ethno-nationalist readings of the site, though framed in outspoken cosmopolitan discourse, paradoxically hold certain claims to national (Danish) superiority.

On a theoretical level, my aim is to unsettle the either/or distinction often implied between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In their plea for a ‘cosmopolitan research agenda for the social sciences’, Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider for instance state that ‘cosmopolitanism does not only negate nationalism but also presupposes it’ (2006: 20). And they assert that ‘the light of the great cultural problems has moved on from a nation-state definition of society and politics to a cosmopolitan outlook’ (ibid.: 2). While sympathetic, such a discourse of the ‘negation’ of the nation, and of how we have somehow ‘moved on’ from one (narrow, national) epoch to the next (enlightened, cosmopolitan) risks glossing over real-life challenges and contestations on the ground.

Museums and heritage between the nation and the global sphere

Traditionally, the concept of heritage has been closely tied to the nation-state, to such a degree that ‘our’ heritage has most often implied our *national* heritage (Lowenthal 1998), in a ‘banal’ fashion, in Michael Billig’s (1995) terminology. Increasingly, however, heritage and memory are being tied to supra-national claims and understandings (Bianchi & Boniface 2002; Greenspan 2005; Levy & Sznaider 2002). Thus, we witness a ‘global’ turn: heritage issues have gained increasing attention in a world of globalisation, and certain aspects of heritage have come to be seen as transnational, cosmopolitan or ‘world heritage’.

However, the idea that selected pieces of heritage or particular patterns of memory are global or cosmopolitan is often entwined with national aspirations and agendas. One example is the recent claim, levelled in 2002 by the directors of 19 major western museums, that they are not (any more) to be considered 'national' museums but are instead *universal* museums (see Lewis (ed.) 2004). This profoundly cosmopolitan assertion must be seen in the light of the long range of repatriation claims which these mega museums (British Museum, the Louvre, and others) face from third-world countries and groups, many of which are of course former colonies. Thus, the global claims take place on a backdrop of particular and hotly contested national and ethnic agendas. And tellingly, none of the alleged universal museums are situated out of Europe and North America.

This is an example of the tensions between national and international scales in the negotiation, presentation and interpretation of heritage. It alerts us to the fact that while many museums and heritage sites are of course in one sense 'global', being involved in cross-border transactions and addressing multicultural audiences, we should be wary of assuming a concomitant decline of national interests and agendas. In a recent parallel argument, Tony Bennett (2006) has cautioned against the alleged 'global transformations' in the museum sector. According to him, it remains the case 'that public museums are largely, and probably entirely, the administrative creations of national, municipal, or local governments or private organizations' (ibid.: 47). He even states that 'there are a number of ways in which museums are now arguably *less* globalized than their nineteenth-century counterparts' (ibid.: 48, italics in original).

In basic agreement with these cautions from Bennett, I hold that the 'global' claims must be subjected to critical analysis. Why are certain kinds of heritage proposed as global or transnational? What counts as global culture or heritage in different contexts and to different agents? Do the alleged globalisation of heritage and the cosmopolitanisation of memory truly signal a movement beyond national borders and identities, as proposed, for instance, by the 'universal museum' signatories, or should we rather analyse these tendencies as indicative of a new pattern of interdependent nationalisms?

Being global the Danish way

The battlefield of Dybbøl, just north of the Danish/German border, is what Tim Edensor (1997: 178) terms a 'memoryscape', comprising what he calls 'the organisation of specific objects in space, resulting from often successive projects which attempt to materialise memory by assembling iconographic form'. The scene of the Danish army's 1864 decisive defeat at the hands of the Prussians, Dybbøl has traditionally been heralded as a stout bastion of Danishness, associated with particular qualities of bravery, honour and sacrifice in the name of the nation. Over the past decade, however, such widespread heroic and

romantic national understandings of this battlefield have increasingly been challenged by reconciliatory perspectives. This recent ‘global’ turn is evident in the so-called Dybbøl Battlefield Centre, an experience-based heritage centre located right on the old battlefield. Born, in 1992, from profoundly romantic or ‘ethnic’ national ideologies, the centre as a material landmark is shot through with heroism, sacrifice and Danish *Volksgeist*. According to its architects, writing in 1989, the centre was originally conceived of as ‘a monument in the landscape – a romantic monument to Danishness – set exactly at Dybbøl as a proof that Denmark was worthy of survival as a nation’ (Freddie and Lohse, cited in Adriansen 1992: 281, my translation).

And yet today, less than two decades later, staff members struggle to consciously avoid overt references to issues of nationality. In the wake of structural changes in which the centre has been put under the wings of a larger public museum, centre staff today are trying to shake off, or even erase, the centre’s initial romantic national stance and to oppose the one-sided Danishness of many of the centre’s material installations and exhibits. This strived-for erasure of the centre’s romanticist legacy is performed in particular in the many oral ‘storytelling’ sessions conducted here on a daily basis. While the stories of course regard the 1864 war, the themes and issues that are selected and highlighted today concern not so much this particular war as ‘the nature of war’ in general, indeed *any* war. Careful not to portray the conflict as an ‘us vs. them’ opposition, and warfare as a heroic business, the storytellers avoid stressing the divide between Danes and Prussians. The war stories narrated at the centre are no longer dominated by stories of outstanding (Danish) individuals and courageous deeds; instead, we hear stories, for instance, of illness and bad hygiene, of sergeants trying to drown their own fears in alcohol, and of private agreements and secret ceasefires between Danes and Prussians in the 1864 field.

The centre’s attempted reconfiguration of ethno-nationalist perspectives is mirrored in the annual commemoration ceremony conducted at Dybbøl. Every year since 1920 – when Northern Schleswig had been voted back on Danish hands, following the German defeat in WW1 – Danish military has commemorated the fallen from 1864 by laying down wreaths and parading in front of the central memorial grove in the Dybbøl hills on April 18, the date of the battle. From 2002 onwards, however, a unit of German soldiers has been invited along to join their Danish colleagues in praise of the 1864 war dead. The decision to invite along the Germans was taken by the commandant of the local barracks, by reference to international reconciliatory movements at many other European battlegrounds. However, his decision triggered a storm of protests in local and even national Danish media. National-minded citizens were enraged at the prospect of ‘once again hearing the sound of German boots marching on Danish soil’, as one letter to the editor had it (cited in Larsen 2005, my translation). Responding to the roar of criticism levelled at his decision, the Danish commandant decided to introduce a number of ‘reservations’ on the German

participation – seven in total – which are still upheld today. Thus, the German soldiers are to attend the commemoration ceremony unarmed; they are not allowed to flag their colours; they are banned from marching on Danish soil; no German speeches or military tunes are performed; etc. All, of course, in sharp contrast to the Danish soldiers parading on the ground next to their German ‘guests’. The ceremony, supposedly an act of reconciliation, thus appears oddly unbalanced, the Germans robbed of all military symbolism except for their uniforms, and the Danes – who, as it will be remembered, in fact lost the battle in 1864 – symbolically parading as the conflict’s true victors.

Conclusions: the museum as a cultural broker

In this short paper I cannot hope to unfold a detailed analysis of the ambiguity of the cosmopolitan and national agendas underlying the Dybbøl ceremonies or the changes at the battlefield centre. The general, if hesitant and contested, movement towards reconciliation and inclusion of former enemies should, however, be clear. What is to be defended or celebrated is no longer the territory or boundaries of the nation but rather a set of values and boundaries which assumingly characterise and unite former adversaries on the new global battlefield.

But the nation is *not* gone, as already indicated by the seven reservations on the German inclusion. More fundamentally, the very same peacekeeping and reconciliatory qualities which are inferred as universal are routinely *also* seen as quintessentially *Danish*. I refer to this as ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’. A brief example must suffice: Among the future heritage scenarios at Dybbøl is a so-called Red Cross museum. The fact that the two first Red Cross delegates in world history – a Swiss and a Dutchman – were present on the 1864 battlefield is marked today only by a modest memorial stone outside the battlefield centre. In these years, however, plans are on the drawing board for a proper Red Cross museum, which if realised is not only to tell the story about the two pioneers, but also about civil consequences of war, exiled and refugees on a global scale. At least this is the vision of one of the project’s planners, a marketing manager from one of the region’s large companies whom I interviewed on the matter. He explained to me how such a museum would mark Dybbøl as what he termed a ‘cradle of peace work’ and Denmark as ‘one of the world’s leading proponents of humanitarianism’. Dybbøl and Denmark, in such a discourse, are emphasised as ‘peacekeeping’ brands suitable for export. The cosmopolitan nationalism is thus closely tied to the defence of human rights inferred as universal. But at the same time – and this is why it makes sense to define it, still, as a variant of nationalism – such ‘universal’ logics are celebrated as uniquely Danish; as traits rooted in ‘Danish values’.

Where does this leave the question of the museum's contemporary role? I have pointed to the complex interweaving of cosmopolitan and national scales and claims in today's heritage sector. Assuming that museums or even 'the world' are unanimously 'globalised' risks leading to a gloss-over of real-life tensions and identification patterns. What is called for by museum managers, curators and decisionmakers is an acceptance of this complexity and of their own roles as 'cultural brokers'. This includes a radical rethinking in many quarters about the life and the qualities of collections and knowledge, and requires an enhanced awareness of such complex interweaving identity claims which I have stressed. With Sharon Macdonald, I believe that 'museums – because of their longstanding and central roles in the articulation of identity – are significant sites in which to examine such claims' (2003: 1). Of course, the museum institution's legacy of objectification and fossilisation in the service of national (and colonial) projects severely complicates such a new outlook. Still, I believe that unsettling ingrained notions of what a museum (and a heritage) is – by embracing ambivalence and affording exchange of claims and counterclaims – is the only way forward. Museums must insist on being uniquely positioned to take on the role of cultural brokers.

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