

*This chapter explores the potential of museums as sites for critical 'public pedagogy'. It foregrounds the role of adult educators as co-interrogators with adult learners of what is generally perceived as politically innocent and neutral knowledge.*

## **Museums: Adult Education as Cultural Politics**

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The sites of adult education practice are multiple and museums feature regularly among these sites (Chadwick and Stannett, 1995, 2000). In this paper,<sup>i</sup> we will regard the museum as a site of cultural politics and public pedagogy. As a site of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux, 2001) the museum plays its role in the politics of knowledge and representation. It represents a selection from the cultures of society. This situation is similar to that concerning the curriculum. Both the contents and form of the museum, and the curriculum, are repositories of what counts as 'official knowledge' (Apple, 1993) and what does not. They select, legitimize, marginalize and are open to contestation and resistance. Critical educators who are ethically committed to excavating sites of educational practice and to interrogating official knowledges and practices are likely to ask the following questions regarding the politics of the curriculum and the museum: Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated? What culture shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized? What voices shall be heard and which will be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis? (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p.4).

### **Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Museums**

On the basis of these questions and recognition of the politics of museums and their displays, staid or interactive, the adult educator can utilize museums as an important space for critical pedagogy. McLaren (1997) refers to critical pedagogy as an attempt to "reengage a social world that operates under the assumption of its collective autonomy and so remains resistant to human intervention" (p.13). The task ahead of the critical adult educator is to focus on the centrality of politics and power within the museum's display.

Bearing in mind the earlier questions attributed to Jordan and Weedon (1995), the critical viewer or museum educator, raises issues that focus on the social, political and cultural dimensions of museology. One starts by focusing on the museum's 'cultural arbitrary,' to adopt the term used by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1990, p. XX11-188) to signify the choices and cultural preferences made. One would refrain from viewing museums as repositories of neutral knowledge. Instead, museum objects are viewed as vehicles enabling visitors to understand how museum experiences are "produced, legitimated, and organized" (McLaren, 1997, p.21).

In previous writings, we drew on the Eurocentric and class bias of museums (Borg and Mayo, 2006). We referred, in this regard, to impressions obtained from our 1999 visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (MOMA) and the American Crafts Museum, which are situated just opposite each other. At the MOMA we came across the whole gamut of what conventionally constitutes modern art. There were paintings and excellent specimens of sculpture and architecture. In addition there were landmarks in film history, including a section on Alfred Hitchcock. The concept of 'art' is stretched to include designs of cars, modern furniture and office equipment. We would associate these with the corporate world. Meanwhile, different craft displays (we were exposed to the work of the Women of Color Quilters

Network), the staple fare of subsistence economies, were on view in the museum across the road. The proximity of the two museums, in this case, facilitates the process whereby the critical adult educator questions whether such forms of cultural production should be separated or not. Light would thus be shed on an important feature of the 'culture wars' that have been forged in the struggle for democratic renewal in the country and elsewhere. Viewers face two contrasting worlds, the worlds of female and afro-American dominated subsistence economies and possibly cooperatives on the one hand and the predominantly white, patriarchal corporate world on the other (Borg and Mayo, 2000b, p.86).

This kind of debate can however rage in other places. In any museum, questions can always be raised about what gets included and what is left out and about who is represented in the mainstream institution and who is confined to a *Salon des Refusés* (Exhibition of Rejects). Other museums are less exclusionary in their displays and raise these questions, arousing a sense of irony. Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum raises such questions. It can do this because it is not an exclusively art museum or social history museum but is a combination of both and many other things. For example, paintings representing a people as victims of oppression are juxtaposed against an artifact attesting to this same people's implication or direct involvement in the oppression of others. Conflict, contradictory consciousness and such issues as social class *ennui*, reflected in family gender relations, are exposed. This type of museum would be a boon for critical educators. Its trans-disciplinary nature assists in the process of a critical pedagogy. We would argue, however, that even conventional, 'Victorian' and staid museums can lend themselves to this, requiring greater effort and sensitivity on the onlooker's part.

Critical pedagogy ideas as well as those deriving from other sources, such as feminist literature and practice and notably cultural studies, become

important for such questions to be raised and debates to be kindled . As Mayo (2004, 2009) argues, it can provide the tools for a problem posing pedagogical approach. The Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, not one for the purists and conventionalists, and yet much visited by adults and children alike, poses problems, very much in the Freirean sense; Paulo Freire, 1970) is a principal source of inspiration in critical pedagogy.

### **Renegotiating Relations of Hegemony**

The Museum offers us opportunities not only for 'ideology critique,' in the sense expounded by members of the Frankfurt School (Institute for Social Research), but also for struggling collectively and lobbying for the conversion of such sites of public pedagogy into really democratic, that is, inclusive and genuinely accessible public spaces that appeal to the visitor's sense of criticality. In short, part of the quest for museum renewal lies in the struggle to renegotiate relations of hegemony. It is here that the cultural studies approach is instructive, especially that approach influenced, in Britain, especially at the now defunct Birmingham School for Contemporary Cultural Studies, by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. Museums, like other institutions of 'civil society' where ideology is generated, are selective in a manner that is not politically innocent. They can be conceived of as sites of struggle, of cultural contestation and renewal (Borg, Cauchi and Mayo, 2003). Institutions are not monolithic and this certainly applies to museums. While they can cement cultural hegemony, they can contain some of the spaces necessary for renegotiating these hegemonic relations. While they often render the mundane monumental, they de-contextualize artifacts, making them alien to people who would often enjoy them in their original surroundings. For example, a painting in a Roman Catholic Church can be an object of devotion and a source of communal pride among the common folk of the locality but can appear alien to them in an art gallery setting. How does

one re-contextualize the socio-economic surrounding? This can be the task of the curator and museum team as well as the critical adult educator who utilizes the museum as an educational space.

### **Museums in a Postcolonial Context**

In our previously published papers, we have come up with suggestions how to address this and related questions and challenges. One of our studies, carried out with Bernard Cauchi (Borg, Mayo, Cauchi, 2004; Borg and Mayo, 2006), focuses on our native Malta's National Maritime Museum at Birgu (from the Italian Borgo, meaning burgh or town), in the Cottonera region. This region attests to Malta's long maritime history.

We provided a detailed account of the Museum's permanent display at the time (July 2003). In addition, we proposed ideas how to convert the museum into a more 'popular-public' space, a concept that is associated with Freire (Mayo, 2004, 2009). We explored possibilities for the Museum to incorporate the history, voices and standpoints of the subaltern, given that there is much that is related, in the memorabilia, to past ruling forces in Maltese society: the Order of St John (the Knights of Malta) and the British regiment. We argued for representations of events connected with the lifeworlds of common Maltese people, intimately connected with the sea. For example, we regard activities connected with the 8<sup>th</sup> September and 31 March regattas (important national feast days in the country), which capture the imagination in the harbor area of the island, as key to a more inclusive representation of seafaring life, and which connects with the working class from these areas. We also call for a representation of a more inclusive working class politics in this regard, a politics rid of its traditional patriarchal and ethnic biases. We argue that oral popular history, and the modern technology required to capture and transmit it, would be of good use to help convey the authentic voice of seamen who belong to the museum's

surrounding community. This history should also record the voices of women from this area recounting their contributions as well as resistances. We centre on the three closely related historical cities, and one of their suburbs, that for many years provided labour power for and in connection with the British military base and the US Sixth Fleet. They also provided some of the necessary craftwork, such as boat construction, for this economy. The surrounding community therefore provides a wealth of experiences concerning socio-economic basis of maritime life. And this might well apply to the little island (Malta) in general since, for many years under British rule, its economy revolved around the requirements of an important British naval outpost - a 'fortress economy'. Indeed maritime life was part and parcel of life on the island also under preceding rulers. There were Maltese, originally from the museum area, who even made a name for themselves, in this regard, in far-flung places such as Argentina. Juan Bautista Azopardo (Senglea/Isla, Malta, 20 February 1772 - Buenos Aires, Argentina, 23 October 1847), is well known in Argentina. He is recognised as one the two founders of "La Primera Escuadrilla Argentina". An important naval arsenal (Arsenal Naval Azopardo) and a street are named after him in Buenos Aires. A portrait and bust, donated by the Argentinean government, can be found in the maritime museum and a surrounding locality respectively.

We also see possibilities in a specific section of the museum, one concerning a major source of livelihood in the country and the museum's surrounding region in particular—the Dockyard. It subsequently became the Malta Drydocks from which its last employees (it once employed around 5000 workers in a country with a population of around 400, 000) have just been laid off as a result of its recent privatisation. Its employees were, for several years, the nearest thing the country had to an industrial working class. This enterprise is immersed in the history of Maltese class struggle and Maltese labour politics. And yet much of this history was concealed or

sanitized in this display where voice, the voice of the subaltern, is once again absent. On the contrary, we argue that expert knowledge is privileged over other community based ways of knowing, the latter being given lip service. There is hardly any reference to class struggle, class organization, militancy, the harsh reality of dockyard life, accidents and ensuing deaths and disabilities resulting from great occupational hazards, poor health resulting from years of exhaust inhaling, grit blasting and other dangerous emissions, political struggles (the Drydocks constituted an important power base for the Malta Labour Party and an important site for Maltese socialist politics), the anxiety generated by intermittent precarious work, the experiment in self-management, government subsidies and the EU, privatisation and its discontents. Also absent are the voices of women who have shared in this socio-economic milieu, in its politics and in the anxieties of precarious work, and women who have often been the victims of this 'fortress economy' in many more ways than one (widowhood resulting from male occupational disasters, washing of vomit-splattered and alcohol-stained military uniforms for a pittance, prostitution etc.).

Aspects of this social and economic history, and the foregrounding of genuine faces and voices, would render the display more exciting for people from the area and elsewhere. It would serve as a repository of popular public memory. The section on the Dockyard School, a very important source of vocational education in the country, can be expanded to indicate the ways vocational education and early Maltese engineering were inextricably combined with the maritime effort, and underline the patriarchal bias of much of what passed as vocational and technical education.

The foregoing are just a few examples from our research. This is not to detract from the sterling work provided by the museum staff. Members of this exiguous staff, who, as with all small entities lacking all the specialisations they require, assume multifunctional roles (Hooper-Greenhill,

1995, p. 51), are to be commended for helping develop this museum into one that, to our mind, is on a par with several maritime museums found in Europe. We would refer, as examples, to the National Maritime Museum in Antwerp, one of Europe's most famous Maritime cities, or the Torre del Oro on the bank of Seville's Rio de Guadalquivir. It is a dynamic staff active in what strikes us as being a dynamic museum. And it is to this dynamism that we sought to make our contribution as educators/researchers committed to a critical pedagogy.

### **Museum Artifacts as 'Codifications'**

As critical pedagogues, we tend to view the various items on display in museums as 'codifications' (in Freire's sense of the term). These codifications can generate themes that can stimulate discussions of wider issues concerning different aspects of reality. Focusing on a folklore museum situated on Gozo, the second most inhabited island of the Maltese archipelago, we argued elsewhere that museums of this kind should allow the critical educator to venture beyond simply a "nostalgic trip to a much simpler world." (Borg and Mayo, 2000b, p.86). Museums of this type provide spaces where one can raise questions about a range of socio-economic issues connected with life surrounding primary production. Traditional fishing implements on display can lead to such issues as the demise of fishing communities, technology's deleterious effect on fishermen's skills and their utilisation (deskilling), fishing confrontations throughout the surrounding Mediterranean basin, maritime degradation, overfishing and the abuse of the environment and fauna when fishing, the depletion of fishing stocks, fishing farms and their impact on the environment, economy and social life, the limits and possibilities of fishing cooperatives, the role of women in agricultural communities and their direct participation in subsistence farming, the impact of the EU's fishing and common agricultural policy (Borg and Mayo, 2000b, p.86).



These exhibits can serve as instruments to arouse epistemological curiosity, as Paulo Freire would argue, and as objects of co-investigation between the educator and the group with which he or she is working. The process would therefore be one that is not static but dynamic, in the classical Freirean and critical pedagogical sense. Certainly, taking our cue from the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, such questions can be better raised if the museum were organised in such a way that the exhibits are juxtaposed against newspaper cuttings, video documentaries and other visual and audio aids attesting to some of the social and larger ecological issues raised above.

### **Foregrounding the Subordinate**

The bias throughout the above discussion concerning museum education is towards popular and often subordinated forms of knowledge. This is in keeping with much of Freire's writing that is available in English, and, to a certain extent, many writings in the area of critical pedagogy. Our joint work has also focused on so-called sites of 'highbrow' culture, for want of a better term. We wrote about the 17<sup>th</sup> century Baroque church that is St. John's co-Cathedral in Malta's capital city, Valletta, maintaining (Borg and Mayo, 2000a) that it offers ideal spaces for a critical reading of a country's much-heralded artistic heritage. Often reflected in this patrimony is an unmistakably patriarchal (militaristic, confraternal, male-aggrandizing), Eurocentric and racist politics of representation, which albeit calling for a historicist interpretation of events, can still prey on popular sensibilities. We refer, for instance, to the representation of the Saracen 'other' in sculptures and carvings. Alterity is here rendered 'exotic,' often in a highly exaggerated manner, becoming an integral part of the ostentatious Baroque setting.

One can also raise questions about the sinister side of some of the relics, polyptychs (multiple-panelled paintings) and other items on view in such churches, items often adorned in gold and silver. With the work of Eduardo Galeano (2009) in mind, one can raise questions regarding the provenance of the gold and silver, the role of slavery in this context and the subjugation and extermination of the thousands of indigenous people and imported slaves in the process of extracting such resources from the mines of Potosí in present day Bolivia and other parts of Latin America and elsewhere. This led to their entombment (mentioned also by Marx in *Capital* Vol. 3) and other types of extermination and disabilities resulting from, among other things, the use of mercury; there are allegations of women killing their own children to spare them such an ordeal. (Galeano, 2009)

Seville housed a strong-room (in the *Casa de Contratación*) for much of the gold and silver that came from Latin America into Spain through the ports of Cadiz and much of which was shipped to the Northern countries whose banks had a hold over Spain because of debts incurred, thus contributing to the rest of Europe's economic development: 'The Spaniards owned the cow, but others drank the milk' (Galeano, 2009, p. 23). And Seville's Cathedral houses a tomb said to contain the remains of Cristobal Colón (Christopher Columbus). He is the navigator who best symbolises the start of what many regard as 500 years of genocide in the Americas. A critical pedagogical approach to museums of this kind (many churches in Europe are not only religious places but also museums) necessitates a critical confrontation with the 'highbrow,' and the raising of unsettling but important historical questions that have been ignored or erased from collective memories.

Critiques of this nature have been prevalent in Latin America since the 20th century with Anarchists, Socialists, Marxists, feminists, Anti-racists and spokespersons for the Indigenous movements making important contributions here. Drawing on these critiques, critical pedagogy differs from more

conventional museum education experiences since it focuses not only on 'things of beauty' but also on the history of tragic violence, real or symbolic, that lurks beneath.

Our foregrounding of the popular should not be construed as an exclusion of the 'highbrow.' And yet a key source of inspiration for this work, Antonio Gramsci, is instructive in the way he confronts this form of cultural production (Mayo, 1999, pp.142, 180). Perhaps confining himself too much to the written word, Gramsci sought to explore relations between the 'highbrow' and the popular never presenting them as binary opposites. He explored how one drew from or emerged from the other, as in the case of Dostoyevsky's novels which, he felt, drew on the serial novel.

### **Critical Literacy in Museums**

Critical appropriation, in the case of museums and other places of historical and cultural interest, would entail the following: one should explore the spaces such museums offer, by means of their set up and the items on display, to engage in a critical reading of the world, in Freire's and other critical pedagogue's sense of the term. Critical museum literacy would include readings of the specific constructions of 'reality' found within museums and their displays. We would argue that certain museums such as ethnographic/anthropological, maritime, farmstead and folklore museums lend themselves better than others in this regard. One should also add environmental museums (a concern which for years was lacking from the critical pedagogical field and has been fore-grounded in this literature by O'Sullivan, 1999 and Kahn 2006). These museums can be more representative in the forms of cultural production they display and the issues that they raise. They have the potential to capture the imagination of subaltern group members. Some museums are also more inclusive in terms of physical accessibility while others are less so or are not accessible at all, proving

to be inhospitable and disabling environments to many (see Borg and Mayo, 2000b).

All told, however, we feel that the stiffest challenge is posed by those museums, for example art galleries, that have traditionally been the repositories of high status knowledge. The critical adult educator can, through the questions raised, in a problem posing approach, render this challenge surmountable. Perhaps modern art galleries provide a stiffer challenge here than those specialising in 'old masters' whose names conceal the presence of women working inside convents, studios etc. and who remain anonymous, save for an Artemisia Gentileschi, a Rosalba Carriera, an Elisabeth Vignée Le Brun or, much later, a Mary Cassatt - one aspect of the many patriarchal biases of such museums and the 'official HIStory of Western Art' (see Commission for the Advancement of Women, 1995)

The challenge for the critical museum educator and those with whom she or he works remains that of unmasking the cultural politics of the museum artifacts and to render such knowledge accessible to subaltern groups without rendering it an object of domination.

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