Culture

Report From the Field: The Democratization of Anthropology and Museums

Michael M. Ames

See table of contents

Explore this journal

Cite this review

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Michael M. Ames
Museum of Anthropology
The University of British Columbia

Administrative responsibilities at the Museum of Anthropology, where I have been working at directing since 1974, have not allowed time for long field trips to South Asia, where I previously studied. I needed a field station closer to home, a more conveniently located culture area. Why not, I thought, study anthropology and museums? Given my own dual location, embedded in both a museum and a university department of anthropology, what could be homier? Here, then, is a report from my exotic new field.[1]

I began my new research program with a simple question: what would anthropology and museums look like if I looked at them as if they were Indians? That is to say, if I looked at the profession of anthropology and the system of museums as anthropologists look at native Indians and their communities. This could be described as "doing anthropology in our own backyards", an anthropology of anthropology and museums (Ames, 1979).

Field work is not too difficult to do. I know a lot of anthropologists and museum workers; I can speak their languages, more or less, except for the more technical jargon; and some are even my friends. (My daughter tells me, however, that knowing what she now knows she wouldn't want to marry an anthropologist.)

There is not yet much to report. I have been looking at how anthropologists assist in defining who an Indian is and what it is an Indian does, how we might think about the so-called Indian arts, the symbolic or meta-messages of museum exhibitions, relations between anthropology and museums, and the democratization of museums (Ames, 1986).

These enquiries wandered off in different directions, yet all seemed to circle back to a common theme: what has been the impact of democracy on cultural institutions, like museums, and on academic professions, such as anthropology?

This question can be linked to a broader issue. Museums and anthropology are among the principal ways in which a society regards or contemplates itself—as all societies must do if they are to have any kind of ideological unity—so an examination of these institutions should tell us something about the production of self-images of a society and how they might be changing.

Democratization is one of the aspects of the process of development or "modernization", thus it is a process that is occurring in all societies around the world, to some degree at least. Max Weber referred to an evolutionary trend towards increasing rationalization. I would suggest that there is a corresponding movement, equally pervasive and directional, towards increasing democratiza-

tion, what the *New Yorker* (July 30, 1984) once referred to as "creeping democracy", "an insidiously infectious...benevolent trend." The principle of democracy, that one has the right to determine one's own working and living conditions and to participate equally in decisions affecting one's own destiny and identity, is one of the most powerful and corrosive ideologies ever constructed, corrosive in the sense that it can so easily penetrate the most stubborn defenses, dissolving other ideologies in its path.

What consequences does this process of "creeping democracy" have for cultural agencies like anthropology and museums, as it creeps over us?

Democratization and Museums

The process of democratization has had a tremendous impact on museums, transforming them within the span of several hundred years from private pleasure palaces of the gentry to public houses of mass education. As the public role of museums increased, they came more and more to represent the values and images of the wider society. This has lead to a number of interesting developments, with profound implications for those who work in museums and for the management and use of the collections under their supervision.

There is no space to describe the course of these developments, but I would like to report on two museum conferences I recently attended to illustrate the working out in the museum community of this democratic impulse and some of the consequences.

In May and June of last year the National Museums of Canada convened three successive conferences, each with about 40 participants, entitled, rather grandly, as "Consultations '85", to consider the present and future of the Canadian museum community. Directors, curators, trustees, civil servants, journalists, business leaders, and union representatives were invited to participate.

The conference topics were suitably national in relevance, general in scope, and bilingual in presentation, as would befit gatherings of such eminent people, who were introduced to one another by the conference organizers as "the vital stakeholders in the museum sector's future". How can we, we were asked and asked ourselves, develop a common understanding of the heritage mosaic and museum system in constituency terms? What are the opportunities and constraints, the key trends, the economic indicators, and the social demographics? What kind of strategic planning will

attain best museum scenarios, and what are the implications of these plans for key constituents? How do we actualize individual and community potentials?

These were all heady topics, and the stakeholders at each of the three conferences spent three intense days locked in extended and serious debate, breaking only for quiet meals and brief exercise periods. Each conference was brought to a conclusion by a business meeting.

The second conference I attended was the B.C. Museum Association's 29th annual meeting held in the small Okanagan town of Vernon, October 2-4, where I joined with about 90 other people to consider the present and future times of British Columbia museums. This conference chose "Communications" as its theme.

Compared with the National Museums "Consultations", the BCMA agenda was simpler, the vocabulary more basic, and the issues more local—one museum director, who began her museum with an annual budget of $3.85, proudly invited us to visit her new museum; a second reported on how his committee was building their museum by their own hands, and would welcome any help or advice; a third asked how she should deal with the personal conflicts between a strong-willed employee of her community museum—the only employee, in fact—and an equally strong willed trustee, one of only three; the director of the province's largest museum talked about how at his place they are trying to rejuvenate their spirit by reorganizing themselves; and then the president of the association, herself from a town smaller than Vernon, handed out apples to everyone as a gesture of friendship. During the concluding banquet delegates, driven like those attending the National Museums conferences by their individual passions and bonded together by the nobility of their intentions, celebrated the conclusion of their meeting by throwing paper airplanes and bread rolls at one another.

On the one hand, there was the sophisticated performance of a national conference, concerned with the broad issues and the major institutions of society; and, on the other hand, there was the small town conference of little museums and amateur workers, concerned with local problems and simple pleasures. The language and style of these conferences were clearly different from one another. The same two problems surfaced at both places, however, and dominated much of the discussion. First was the professed need to become more skillful in what we do, and second was the expressed desire to serve the public better. How could we, we repeatedly asked ourselves, become

more professional, on the one hand, and more popular, on the other.

There was first, then, a probing examination of the museum community itself, its internal constitution, its strength and its needs, leading to the realization that, as a community of professions who "profess" museum work[2], both amateur professors and paid ones, we are ourselves responsible for how well we perform. We therefore acknowledged, at both conferences, that we still need to mature in our understanding, to grow in our knowledge, and to develop in our capacities to perform.

Considerable time was spent at both conferences discussing professional needs—topics which, by the way, seldom seem to be considered when university anthropologists gather together—such as how to improve the governance of our institutions, how to make training more accessible to ourselves, how to become more effective grant writers and fund raisers, how to articulate more clearly the public images of our institutions, and how to promote our institutions more effectively. Note that the focus was on improving institutional as well as the individual's professional standing. Individual and collective interests were more closely linked together than one would expect to find in a university setting.

On the other hand, there was the second problem: how could we improve our service to the public? Discussion of public service ran alongside those of professionalization, seemingly for the most part in harmony, as if they were complementary thrusts in a common direction. And indeed they are complementary to some degree, and the concern for improved public service is certainly one of the incentives to improve our professional capacities. But underlying these two ideas lurks the potential for contradiction, waiting like a time bomb with an unstable fuse. At what point does the growth of professionalism promote self-interests over institutional and public ones?

It was easy for both conferences to proudly affirm, though in different words, declarations of individual rights to culture. At the National Museums conference we declared that the individual has the right to determine, develop and profess his or her own heritage. At the BCMA we agreed that we should give the people more of what they want. Thus, at both conferences we explored ways of making museums more accessible, more relevant to diverse populations, more technologically modern in presentation, and more entertaining.

Large museums first discovered the general public as a population to attract in the early 1960s, and there was a lot of discussion in the following years about whether and how to make museums—to borrow a 1980s term—more "user friendly." Even as recently as 10 years ago, the museum professions were undecided about how popular their institutions should become and how much their knowledge would appeal to the masses (Curtis, 1978: 202). The debate now seems to be resolved. The thrust of the 1985 conferences, with their noble declarations of the individual's rights to personal heritage, was to push museums even further along the road to popular appeal, to being—to borrow another phrase from modern times—more "user driven."

On the other hand, as those working in museums continue to professionalize themselves they begin to formulate more sophisticated notions of how they can best serve the public interest. Claiming the democratic right of self-control over the institutions they manage, they claim, as well, the specialized knowledge of how best to serve the people. They thus would like to see their institutions move towards being more "driver driven" than "user driven."

There was a continuing dialogue, at both conferences, concerning the relations between the professional interests of those who manage and work within heritage institutions, and the public interests those institutions claim to serve. The tensions between these two sets of interests were usually muted by the enthusiasm of the participants, thus the inherent contradictions only made fleeting appearances in our debates. They are likely to become more prominent in the less artificial circumstances of everyday life and work, however.

Democratization of Anthropology

What is the situation in the profession of anthropology, as it is professed in universities? The situation is different, of course. Academics are more insulated from public pressures, there is less demand on them to perform on a regular basis in such a variety of ways, and they seldom have to account for themselves as collective units. Nevertheless, there are several developments worth noting.

The first is the claim by leading Canadian anthropologists that anthropology is facing a crisis (cf., the London conference papers published under the title Consciousness and Inquiry (Manning, 1983)). Anthropology, we are told, is losing public interest and respect—it is, after all, rather difficult to compete with the Tribal Eye and David Suzuki all in one week. Governments do not listen to us; there are diminishing employment opportunities for our students; growing and increasingly rancorous

debate within the discipline over theories, methods and Margaret Mead; the other social sciences are increasingly encroaching upon our methods and, more insultingly, upon "our" societies; and—most embarrassing of all—there appears to be a growing rejection of anthropology by the very people we traditionally studied and claimed to represent to the world at large. When even the Indians no longer want us around, then we *are* in serious trouble!

The second development is one that may threaten the very foundation of how we go about our academic work: people are questioning the traditional privileges of scholarly research. It was once thought that the pursuit of knowledge was a good unto itself, and therefore the principle of freedom of inquiry was almost a law unto itself (Nason, 1981). The search for knowledge knew no territorial boundaries. We could go anywhere, study anything, and bring our data and our specimens back to our own laboratories and offices without restrictions.

Then, during the 1970s, universities discovered the ethics of research involving human subjects, and required us to pursue knowledge within certain moral constraints and with the advance permission of our informants. The "public interest", as we can see, has begun to exercise more control over what we do. The universities face other public pressures as well. Are these pressures increasing?

Do the recent developments in the museum community, whose workers are now openly and whole-heartedly entering into a dialogue between professional interests and public responsibilities, foreshadow what is destined to occur in universities? I don't know, though I doubt that universities and the professions sheltered within them can continue to avoid the pressures to become more responsive to public needs and interests. Academic anthropologists might, therefore, learn something by examining what is going on in and around our museums.

NOTES

1. Presented to the Department of Anthropology, University of Calgary, October 9th, 1985.

2. By museum *professions* I refer to the range of trades and disciplines, both volunteer and paid, concerned with the management of public museums: curators of history, anthropology and art; conservators; educators and interpreters; designers; administrators; technicians, etc.

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