

Populistic Exhibitions or Dedicated to a New Elite of Consumers?

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Søren Sindbæk has written a thorough and thought-provoking review of the Viking Age exhibitions at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm and the National Museum in Copenhagen. Of course, a review like this is a personal interpretation. Still, I think that Sindbæk has outlined some important challenges for those involved in the creation of large cultural-historical museum exhibitions in our time. For me, his keynote is particularly interesting, as the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo is currently planning exhibitions for the new Museum of the Viking Age in Oslo. How to deal with the challenges Sindbæk identifies in Copenhagen and Stockholm?

Sindbæk (2022) sums up his critical review under two banners – consumerism and populism – two concepts that are not held in high regard in academia. I will primarily add some comments to those two subjects from my point of view.

Over the last few decades, archaeology and the cultural heritage sector have been heavily influenced by globalism, identity thinking (in particular, individualism) and capitalism/market ideology. The interplay and inertia of these forces are of course multi-faceted and complex, but they have all weakened the strong connection between nationalism and heritage/archaeology that was once very evident in Scandinavia. Nationalism therefore stands out as a troublesome relic that cannot be taken for granted anymore, nei-

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ther in political nor in academic discourse. This situation is to a considerable degree connected to the general transformation of academia over the last 30 years. New Public Management (NPM) has not only transformed the museums. The universities and research sector in general have been recast in the mould of instrumentalization, market principles and globalism, mutually enhancing each other. Free flow of knowledge, people and money in combination with enhanced competition interlinked with differentiation and individualization are very compatible with this new social order. So is consumerism and commodification of knowledge. Very few scholars in the Western world have been spared from this fundamental transformation.

Marx (1852) famously stated that ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; [...] but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’. This quote is certainly relevant when constructing museum exhibitions. True, the grand exhibitions of the National Museum and Swedish History Museum are products of their time (and recent past). However, Marx’s concern also addresses the position of the critics. Naïve nationalism certainly does appear as awkward in the globalized world of the 2020s. However, values under attack are also children of our time. To defend the ‘elite’ and individual against populism, as Sindbæk discusses, is also a function of the mould of NPM, or at least the latter enhances their logic and form: competition creates the modern elite and competitive markets favour individualization. Indeed, criticism is also made under the circumstances already given.

This raises two questions: how should critiques be undertaken and how should we design our museum exhibitions (or how to think and how to act)?

Let us start with the action. Sindbæk (2022) emphasizes the visitor expectations as consumers, used to great service and quality in their consumption of experiences. How can museums meet such expectations – or, to put it bluntly – how to compete with Disney? They have only three choices: not to compete, to rely on icons or to embrace myths/brands. (Some may miss *attack* on the list of options. Of course, the museums could use their position to attack and criticize the experience economy, but taking into consideration the extremely uneven distribution of power and influence between a national museum in Sweden or Denmark and, for the sake of the argument, Disney, such an enterprise would, in effect, be to abstain from competition.) The first choice is extremely risky given the current political expectations towards the sector, and because it would mean overlooking the fact that a competitive museum market already exists, with art museums as the *primus motors*. The icon strategy is, of course, very safe as long as you have such icons. However, true archaeological marvels are few, and where the Viking Age is concerned, the Viking ships in Oslo create an impossible standard for the rest of the museum sector. Consequently, the myth/

brand option appears to be the most attractive for most museums. Having made this choice, many other decisions are already taken: the myth/brand must be generally recognizable, which reduces the options considerably. Popular culture tends to reduce history to polished boxes or pegs, like the Greeks, the Romans, the Vikings, WW2 and so on. In order to secure interest, the myth/brand must hang on one of these pegs. Visitors expect the same standard of experience as they consume in televisual media *and* in the commercial drivers of the museum field, that is, the art museums (which interact closely with the commercial presentation of products in general, since art museums are tightly integrated with the market of art and luxury). This situation provides considerable investments that have to be acquired through private sponsors or using funds with ‘strings attached’, that is, with rules and policies that have to be accommodated when implementing the exhibition. Finally, when making such huge investments, it is both an economic and socially quite sound expectation that the exhibition should be popular and have many visitors. The exhibition thus needs to have a wide appeal. To this point, it is not very difficult to follow the logic of the museum’s management.

Sindbæk (2022:20), however, emphasizes the populistic shape and content of the exhibitions:

[...] both museums seem to step down from an academic, elite position and come forward to the general populace. [...] Here the Viking Age is celebrated in no uncertain terms [...] This, to be sure, is the Viking Age as the general public will know it, free from any revisionism, critique or other ‘elite’ discourse. The most appropriate term for this perspective is populism.

I am not as critical of this descent from the ivory tower as Sindbæk seems to be. First, there is no imperative that a popular exhibition has to be uncritical. Still, there is a need to cultivate the message and design for a non-academic audience. There is also a need to accept that the knowledge of the visitors may be on a more basic level than that of the scholar. An exhibition does not have to be populistic for those reasons.

Still, Sindbæk is right to problematize the target group of any (scholarly) product. However, I am not sure that his critical analysis is entirely fair. Of course, it is tempting to characterize a polished exhibition as populistic because all the edges and discursive elements are smoothed over. This work is not done to please or reflect a popular opinion as such. It is made to please an elite – but a different elite than the one for whom Scandinavian cultural historical exhibitions were originally made. This ‘new’ elite is the global (upper) middle class with resources to purchase experiences and culture. Commercially speaking, this is the ideal visitor, with money and enough education to be curious about human history. The ‘old’ elite’s capi-

tal, composed of disinterested cultural and educational assets, is replaced or challenged by the economic capital of the new global middle class. It is understandable that scholarly criticism is raised against the devaluation of the traditional academic capital in favour of money (which always tends to be the stronger form of capital). This, however, is a different issue from populism and, to be frank, a very predictable outcome of the commercialization of the cultural and educational sector, managed for more than 30 years as a market.

I am not hostile to criticism of the commercialization-process and the NPM of the public sector. On the contrary, I think this is a very important task for any academic discipline. Still, I think it is fair to question where this essential work should start and by what means. One lesson not to be forgotten from Pierre Bourdieu (1979, see also Bourdieu & Darbel 1966) is that the field of cultural production must be analysed in its functional totality, where the reproductive mechanisms of the field in question need to be included in the analysis. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the part of the field of cultural production with the most intimate interaction with the commercial markets, also seems to be commercialized. The crucial question, though, is what reproductive mechanisms feed and sustain this interaction? I think the answer to this question would lead the investigator quickly towards the core of academic production itself: the way we socially organize our research and education as a particular market.

Take for instance the Harald Bluetooth fascination that compelled the National Museum to make a showcase about him, though there is actually very little of relevance to display. Now, this appeal is hardly a specific desire of the National Museum, but was created through an overwhelmingly rich scholarly literature about the importance of Harald and the Jelling monuments in Jutland. Already in 1931 Lis Jacobsen concluded that, to date, no other monuments in Scandinavia had received the same academic attention as the Jelling complex, and interest has grown considerably since then. The Harald showcase in Copenhagen cannot be understood independently from this scholarly interest. In Harald, an archaeological history of origin merges with the Danish myth about the formation of the nation. What a commodity! Few scholarly attempts have challenged this origin myth. One might reasonably ask whether a popularized exhibition in the National Museum in Copenhagen would be the right place to launch an alternative view, or if a revision should start in the workshops of research.

As for most areas of research in cultural history, the Viking Age is competitive – crediting innovative and diverse interpretations of the past. As far as I can see, these interpretations are not randomly chosen, but seem to reflect the main trends of public life and discourse of present-day society, either by recreating the present in the past or by making (conservative)

alternatives. To write of the past is, of course, to comment on the present; and here and now the market and the ideological functions of this all-encompassing institution ‘[...] weigh[s] like an Alp on the brains of the living’ to quote Marx (1852) again. For are not identity-politics, ethno-politics and the present critical elites also the children of globalization, market orientation and individualization? Whom and what are we defending in our critiques?

In my opinion, the fundamental question that Sindbæk raises through his criticism is not the balance between the populace and the elite. The core of the problem is the status of academic and cultural capital in relation to economic capital after 30 years of NPM. The museums and the universities are increasingly dependent on business and business-like income. They are also more and more dependent on private funding. This is the reality; still, there is always room for alternative actions. The question, though, is how to establish enough ontological security (to paraphrase Anthony Giddens 1991) to make room for alternative actions. Job security and predictable public funding are obvious basics for considering alternative management models. Regrettably, we read that this backbone is now under attack in the large Scandinavian museums.

The present left-wing government in Norway announced that they would replace the NPM (characterized by the former conservative government as a de-bureaucratization reform – read budget cuts) with a reform of trust. So far, the reform of trust has been very much like the former reform, with new budget cuts, where room for manoeuvre has been utterly severed by also removing the incentives for private funding. However, an effect-full reform of trust would be to initiate a general debate about what kind of role the public sector in general, and museums in particular, should have in contemporary society. From this perspective, Sindbæk’s initiative is very welcome, as I understand his criticism not as a sole slayer of the museums in Copenhagen and Stockholm as such, but to question the role of museum institutions in present-day society. To proceed, the scale of analysis, the analytical tools chosen and the possibilities for stable support and supplies must be carefully considered. If not, this campaign will quickly turn into resignation. The line between critiques and silence is in reality very brittle.

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