

Museums, Equality and Social Justice Routledge by Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (eds.), London and New York, Routledge, 2012, GBP£28.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780415504690

Museums, Equality and Social Justice is a vital addition to the established and flourishing scholarship exploring the social role of museums and heritage organisations. It is unique in taking a social justice perspective to explicitly address questions of ethics, rights, diversity and equality as they apply to all aspects of museum functions, from curatorship and public programming to management, leadership and governance. The social justice standpoint is the way that museums, galleries and heritage organisations ‘acknowledge and act upon inequalities from within and outside of the cultural domain’ (p.3). Such concerns are explored over 21 chapters with contributions from scholars, practitioners, artists and activists, mainly from the UK, but also from the USA, Australia, Europe, Taiwan and Yemen. This balance in perspectives is driven by the editorial team of Richard Sandell, a scholar whose work on museums and equality has defined the wider field, and Eithne Nightingale, a practitioner with over 30 years experience in community development and museums predominantly in the UK. Their joint aim is to provide a critical resource for informing research, practice and policy and they are most successful in advancing practice.

The collection addresses the topic of social justice across a range of equality strands – race, gender, religion and beliefs, disability, sexual orientation, age and socio-economic status – while at the same time challenging the bounded nature of such classifications. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1, ‘Margins to the Core?’ charts the progress towards social justice from an organisational change

perspective. The first five chapters provide rich reflexive accounts from authors who have been directly involved in equality work, reflecting the challenges faced in effecting long-term change across areas such as leadership, missions and values (Fleming is insightful here); strategy, policy and the workforce, in particular the need to diversify the workforce (Nightingale and Mahal); and the critical role of external collaboration with community agencies (Keith), self-advocacy groups (Smith, Ginley and Goodwin) and artists (Marstine with Fred Wilson). Part 1 sets a decisive tone for the collection: first, that social justice, diversity and equality are not marginal concerns or the sole remit of single teams, but are shared concerns across all aspects of the museum profession that require mainstreaming within the organisation; and second, that there is much to be learned from evolving practice and policy in recent years. Janet Marstine's chapter closes this section of the book reflecting this through the concept of 'good work' (after the GoodWork project at Harvard University), which announces the second two parts of the volume that look at examples of inclusive museum practice with/for named groups.

Part 2, 'Connecting/Competing equalities' examines specific equality strands centering on their common grounds, but in equal measure the tensions between them, through a number of illustrative case studies and descriptions of temporary exhibitions. As an opening piece, Gary Younge's chapter provides an important introductory text on identity politics, in the engaging and accessible style for which he is known from his Guardian newspaper column. The core/margin motif, which described the positioning of diversity and equality work at the edges of the organisation in the first part of the book, is expanded in Younge's chapter as he vividly describes individuals' lived experiences of categories such as race and gender, to illustrate how the margins define the core (and vice versa) through categorisations

determined by power and resources. He reminds us how identity is never fixed, and so the relationship between core and margin is in constant flux and it is possible to occupy both simultaneously. Recognising these tensions is the starting point; how museums have navigated the spaces between is the creative journey described in the following chapters. To name just three, they range from John Reeve's chapter, which reviews examples of exhibitionary and consultative practice around religious objects, to Amy K Levin's chapter 'Unpacking gender: creating complex models for gender inclusivity in museums' that outlines the (unfinished) task of 'queering' the museum, and Susan Davis Baldino's contribution on museums and autism, based in an action research project involving museums, schools and young people.

Part 3, 'Museums and the good society' presents the main theoretical contribution of the volume. In these final 8 chapters, the descriptions of exhibitions and museum practice are more explicitly framed in the traditions of critical theory, drawing on cultural rights and human rights discourses, critical legal studies, and postcolonial perspectives. Collectively the chapters articulate the role of museums as agents of cultural activism by acknowledging their generative potential for not only reflecting, but also reconfiguring, moral standpoints and their capacity to positively impact the lived experience of those who have experienced prejudice and discrimination. Sandell's opening contribution is central here in describing how museums can become 'sites of moral activism' that challenge normative values by adopting a human rights frame. Drawing on the work of the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art, which undertook a series of social justice oriented-exhibitions that explored LGBTI issues in 2009, he considers the media controversy that ensued and audience responses to the exhibition. The contested nature of human rights (and the debates between universalist and relativist standpoints) is recognised but only touched

upon in such a short chapter. David Anderson and Kylie Message's contributions also stand out. Anderson takes cultural rights – as enshrined in international legislation – which he brings together with the rights to social participation, creativity, learning and intercultural exchange to outline a framework for cultural rights as pertaining to museums. Message's chapter explores aboriginal struggles over land reform in Australia and how they have been represented in a range of local and national museums. She considers the conditions and possibilities for exceeding the limits of representation, and in a formidable manner reveals the active interplay of culture, law and society. Finally, Amelia Wong's chapter 'Social Media towards social change: potential and challenges for museums' is noteworthy as the only chapter addressing the digital reach of museums.

Museums, Equality and Social Justice is ambitious in scope, however the majority of chapters remain on the whole broadly descriptive. The volume provides a richly detailed overview of museum practice in this field but readers looking for more sustained arguments or theoretical engagement will be most satisfied by the final third only. Despite this, or rather instead, I felt the volume illustrated the value of the edited book as an archive of temporary museum events and a record of reflections from those practitioners involved, which might otherwise not be captured. With such a range of contributions, what is perhaps lost in stylistic coherence or scholarly precision is made up for by the energy that comes across in the writing. Parts of the volume shudder with frustration and impatience with the slow-moving traditional museum, yet each chapter is unified by optimism and a certain fervour, tempered by humility honed in collaborative and community-based practice. It powerfully reminds us that museums are shaped by people and are also practised in ways that are dynamic, caring and ethical. It also highlights the importance of action-research and

collaborative forms of scholarship that include practitioners as a worthwhile starting point to examining questions of social justice in the museum. Further, a broad consensus emerges across the chapters around the role of the museums as an agent of (cultural) activism, a position that readers will likely find convincing. What is missing however is the community voice, as well as more consideration of audience responses. Nor does the book really get to grips with interrogating the 'new' authority or morality of this reconfigured role: who defines the 'good work' of the museum?

Published in 2012, *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* is described in the opening foreword as 'a clarion call' to re-imagine museums as agents and sites cultural activism, at the same time as the editors' introductory remarks warn of a slowing down and even a reversal of proactive and progressive practice. Some years on, museums are still in a 'troubled world' (Janes, 2009), and the authority of experts and public trust in the establishment, including public institutions, is further eroding (take as a recent example Brexit) and so debates about the role of museums as social institutions have heightened significance.

Museums, Equality and Society is an inspiring, defiant read for anyone with an interest in equality and diversity. It forms an excellent reference point for social justice-focused museum practice that will be of particular interest to practitioners, students and scholars across disciplines.

Reference

Janes, R. (2009) *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?*, Routledge, Abingdon.

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