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World culture, world history, and the roles of a museum: a conceptual study of the Swedish museums of world culture, debates concerning them, and their roles in cultural politics

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ABSTRACT

The Museum of World Culture opened in 2004, partially in response to the increased immigration of the 1990s. This article analyses the political process leading to the establishment of the museum, and of the government agency that administers it and three other museums. It also analyses one of its permanent exhibitions, and the recent examples of public criticism of the museum, and of the government agency. Using conceptual history and analysis of historical periodization to analyze understandings of culture, history, and the role of museums, I argue that the museum represents a museum-idea focused on current issues, understanding history in terms of flows and encounters, in contrast to a museum-idea focusing on particular cultures and historical contexts and on understanding these as distinctly separate and context-dependent. Debate about the museum has become intertwined with the debate about the history, and nature, of the Swedish nation, making the museum both, a symbol of, and an actor in, the ongoing debate about Swedish national self-identity. The museum can thus be understood as a national museum, in the sense that it institutionalizes a version of national self-identity, and acts as a focus for debates about it.

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The National Museums of World Culture should create something new in the museum world, something that does not exist yet. Its activities should depict what is similar and what is different in modes of thinking, lifestyles, and life conditions, but also cultural changes in Sweden and the world. The visitor should be given opportunity to reflect over his, or her, own cultural identity, and that of others (Ministry of Culture 1998:27).¹

What is currently happening with the National Museums of World Culture is a microcosm of a cultural policy lost in postcolonial thinking, and a suffocating normative norm-criticism. It grows from a populist worldview, where belief in objective facts is denied, and thereby also the need for the museum as an institution for collecting, discovering, and spreading knowledge (Wong 2016a).

The Museum of World Culture opened in Gothenburg in 2004, partially as a cultural policy response to the increased immigration of the 1990s. It was part of a new government agency coordinating museums dealing with what the government described as 'World Culture'. Like many similar museums around the world, it has become a focus for debates on what museums and cultural policy are, and should be, and sometimes even on what the nation is, and should be (quotes from the government commission preparing for the establishment of the new museum, and from one of its recent detractors, cf. e.g. Aronsson 2015, Gray 2015; Knell 2018). Swedish historian Aronsson (2015) has described the role of national museums as constituting a kind of cultural constitution, a way of institutionalizing the history and values central to the self-identity of a polity:

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The cultural constitution of a nation-state provides the political constitution with long-standing, highly explicit and materialized evidence of shared history, culture and values understood as essential for the community circumscribed by the political constitution, and providing a relevant value base for orchestrating directions to be taken by the community. (Aronsson 2015, 175).

In spite of not being explicitly concerned with the Swedish nation, the Museum of World Culture appears to be this kind of museum, a museum created by the government as a part of a discussion concerning the self-identity of Swedish society, and which has become a focus for public discussions. Discussions concerning the museum have become deeply intertwined with discussions concerning Swedish cultural politics. In this article, I will analyze the political process which has led to the establishment of the Museum of World Culture, and the government agency National Museums of World Culture (NMWC); the current exhibitions in the Museum of World Culture; and examples of public discourse around the NMWC. This article uses conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and analysis of historical periodization to analyze understandings of the role of the museum, the concepts of culture and history, and Sweden's place in the world, and in history. The analysis is based on the perspective that national museums, and nationally protected heritage, institutionalize a public and authoritative image of national self-identity. It is intended as a contribution to the analysis of cultural politics, and of the roles played by museums and cultural policy in it. Although interest in heritage is increasing, both within and outside of the field of cultural policy research, this is still an understudied area within this field (Gray 2015; Harding 2016; James and Winter 2017, Vestheim 2016). As a secondary aim, I explore the usefulness of such an approach in understanding museums, and the usefulness of studying museums from these perspectives, to understanding larger issues in the cultural politics and self-understanding of a society.

Methods

The empirical part of this article starts with a textually based analysis of the process leading to the opening of the Museum for World Culture in 2004, and to the creation of a new government agency – National Museums for World Culture (NMWC) – in 1999. This analysis is simultaneously an institutional analysis of a policy process, and a conceptual analysis of the development of the concept of 'World Culture' as the area of responsibility of these new organizations, in a mode of analysis inspired by Reinhart Koselleck's notion of *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history (cf. Koselleck 2004; Palonen 2014). The textual material used in this article consists of the government commission reports, and the government bills specifically concerned with the NMWC 1995–2019. These are interpreted within the context of Swedish cultural policy, as described in research on cultural policy and heritage policy, and in the context of general Swedish debate on national identity.

The second part of the article is concerned with the exhibitions presented in the NMWC, and in particular with *Crossroads*, one of the permanent exhibitions. My analysis of this exhibition is based on visual observations, as well as on text and image material found in the exhibition, and on the museum's website (NMWC 2019). I have visited the museum in November 2018, and in March 2019, and documented the exhibition photographically (over 150 photographs, including photos of the texts displayed in the exhibition). My analysis of exhibitions is made from a visitor perspective, and thus includes the material available to visitors (cf. Berg and Grinell 2018).

The third part of the article continues the textual analysis presented in the first part with an analysis of public debate in Swedish press 2016–2018 concerning the Museum of World Culture, and the NMWC. The material in this part of the article consists mainly of newspaper articles, especially debate articles, and the analysis is based on a reading of the longer articles concerning these museums in the main newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Expressen*, during that period.

Central concepts

National museums emerged as an institution in the 18th and the 19th centuries, beginning when royal collections were increasingly seen as the property of the nation. They developed hand in hand with

claims to nation-state legitimacy raised by states and national movements. Sometimes – as in the case of British Museum – the emphasis was on the imperial ambitions of the state, displaying collections representing the cultures of the Empire, as well as narratives of the Western civilization of which the Empire considered itself to be the epitome (Anderson 2006; Berger 2015; Bennett 2015). The museum thus placed the national community in the world, by imposing meaningful order on the surrounding world, of strangers, thereby solidifying the identity of the national community, and the legitimacy of its claims on the surrounding world. Almost universally, these museums could be understood as manifesting national self-identity, and the ideals with which their organizers wanted the nation to be associated (Anderson 2006; Aronsson 2015; Berger 2015; Grinnell 2010; Loseke 2018).

The use of authentic historical objects and artworks, supporting the narratives told by museums with their material connections to the past, has been central to such endeavors. These narratives, and the authenticity and relevance of the objects were confirmed by emerging academic disciplines such as history, anthropology, and art history, which also participated with museums, artists, politicians, and public intellectuals in creating the new national narratives (Anderson 2006; Appiah 2007; Grinnell 2010; Macdonald 2013; Smith 2006; Ricœur 2004). History and heritage create frameworks for understanding the present. In this sense, the construction of national museums could be understood as a part of the project of realizing European nations as imagined communities (Nora 1998; Anderson 2006; Berger 2015). In recent decades, national museums have often played a part in reinterpreting national narratives and self-identities. National museums have played this role e.g. during the transition from Communism in Eastern European nations, and in re-imagining nation-states as multicultural, rather than culturally homogeneous states (Apor 2015; Aronsson 2015; Blomgren 2019; Macdonald 2013; Grinnell 2010; Gstraunthaler and Piber 2011). At the same time, many museums – including ethnographic museums – are dealing with their own colonial history, a process that has often become intertwined with the corresponding processes in their respective national societies (Bennett 2015; Knell 2018; Plankensteiner 2015).

The concept of historical time is fundamental to historical narratives. According to Koselleck (2004), historical time is organized as a series of events. Traditionally, such events were generally connected to battles and politics, often to heroic figures. With the modern era came the notion of history as an irreversible process of development, irrevocably changing the nature of societies, and of human life itself. In earlier societies, it had been common to understand history as cyclic, and the nature of the world as more or less unchangeable. With modernity came an understanding of history as organized by sociocultural change, by mundane forces, rather than by divine ones. These understandings of history have continued to exist side by side. Nationalist narratives typically start with mythical, or semi-mythical, foundations, and continue as narratives of rulers and heroic figures. They also tend to build on notions of cultural and institutional particularity. Benedict Anderson (2006) famously described nations as 'imagined communities'. For Anderson, nations are imagined communities, because they are based on imagination, belief, and narratives, rather than on any knowledge among the members of actually having anything in common. This is why institutions such as schools, libraries, and museums – as well as symbolical representations, such as maps, monuments, and museum exhibitions – have played such a role in stabilizing the imagination of national communities, and in setting out their boundaries in time, territory, cultural characteristics, and membership (Anderson 2006).

In the following sections, I will look specifically at these boundaries in terms of historical time, culture, and territory. Historical time is understood following Koselleck (2004), in terms of events, persons, and socio-cultural and political change. Culture is understood in terms of the national culture of imagined communities (cf. Anderson 2006), but also as a sphere dealing with the creation and expression of meaning within a society. As such, the institution of the national museum plays the central role in this article, and its position in relation to politics, and political power will be analyzed in terms of autonomy (cf. Bourdieu 1996), and ascribed societal and political roles (cf. Aronsson 2015; Porciani 2015; Gray 2015).

A museum of world culture?

The story of the Museum of World Culture started in the mid-1990s. Wars in former Yugoslavia were creating a stream of refugees. International cultural policy discourse increasingly focused on multiculturalism. In 1995, the World Commission for Culture and Development published its report *Our Creative Diversity*, which became a strong influence on both, UNESCO, and on national cultural policies. The Swedish government was planning for Stockholm being European Capital of Culture in 1998, as well as for a follow-up summit to *Our Creative Diversity* the same year. The government was also in the process of reevaluating its cultural policy. When the government commission on cultural policy published its report in 1995 (Ministry of Culture 1995), it contained very little concerning multiculturalism, or immigration. When a government bill was presented to parliament in September 1996, several proposals had been added by the government to amend this (Government of Sweden 1996). One of the main goals of cultural policy introduced in the bill was to 'promote international cultural exchange and encounters between different cultures within the country' (ibid. 27). It included an understanding of Sweden as a multicultural country, and of cultural policy as a means for the state to facilitate exchange between the various cultures existing within its borders (Harding 2006, 2007). The way in which these issues were introduced into the government bill suggests that the government understood the current cultural situation as one characterized by large-scale changes in the nature of culture, or at least in how culture was understood:

It is an obvious task for cultural policy to contribute to people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds meeting and exchanging cultural impulses. Integration should be stimulated, xenophobia and racism fought. It is also an important task to create spaces for the multiethnic, and multicultural, generation that does not fit into traditional categorization of cultural and ethnic identity. It is in the mix of different cultural backgrounds, and forms of expression, that the conditions for new creativity and new quality are to be found (Government of Sweden 1996, 30).

The following years would include several cultural policy initiatives intended to update cultural policy for a changing and increasingly multicultural society. These included a new government agency to counteract antisemitism and xenophobia through the use of heritage and history, as well as the new government agency National Museums for World Culture (NMWC). The latter would take over responsibility for four existing museums – the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, the Gothenburg Museum of Ethnography, the Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities, and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities – as well as create a new museum in Gothenburg: the Museum of World Culture (Harding 2006, 2007; Government of Sweden 1996).

While the idea for the new museum appears to have been discussed in the Ministry of Culture somewhat earlier (Lund 2018), it took concrete form between the government report of August 1995 and the government bill presented in September 1996. Its presentation did not elicit entirely positive reactions (Harding 2006, 2007; Muñoz 2011; Lund 2018; Government of Sweden 1996). Many were concerned about the idea of moving the collections of the three museums in Stockholm to the new museum in Gothenburg. The proposal that the state should take over the Gothenburg Museum of Ethnography from the City of Gothenburg, had much broader support, including the support of the City itself. In particular, the directors of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, and of the Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities, were against joining their museums to the new conglomeration, and even more critical of moving the collections to Gothenburg. They were joined by local politicians in Stockholm, by the centre-right opposition in parliament, and by scholars at Stockholm University and Uppsala University, who were working in cooperation with the museums in Stockholm (Muñoz 2011; Lund 2018).

In parliament, opposition parties put forward the idea of administratively merging only the Stockholm and Gothenburg museums of Ethnography, but leaving the collection of the former in its current location, and entirely leaving the two other museums outside of the merger. Possible damage to the collections was cited as an argument, as was the lack of proper inquiries and consultations before presenting the proposal, financial costs, and potential damage to the scientific

level of the museums. In the end, the parliament accepted a new text from its committee on cultural affairs, espousing the creation of a new government agency responsible for the four museums, but making it clear that the three Stockholm museums would stay in their existing buildings (Riksdag Committee on Culture 1996; Harding 2006, 2007; Johannisson 2006; Muñoz 2011; Lund 2018).

In spite of the protests, a new museum, and a new museum agency, were formed, focusing on World Culture. What then is 'World Culture'? Prior to 1996, the term did not occur in Swedish cultural policy. Internationally, many ethnographic museums have now been redefined as museums of world culture in order to signify a process of reimagining their role in the world, but the adoption of the term was relatively early in Sweden (Plankensteiner 2015). When the government proposed merging the four museums in 1996, the new organization was described as a 'unified ethnographic museum' (Government of Sweden 1996, 142 f), while the term 'World Culture' was suggested for a new institution for contemporary culture in Stockholm, the House of World Culture (Government of Sweden 1996, 182). The government commissioner assigned to prepare that project described his understanding of World Culture as follows:

I will, in this context, limit the concept of World Culture to cover cultural expressions from different parts of the world, that contribute to increasing diversity in Swedish cultural life, especially expressions from countries and environments that are not naturally made available to an audience in Sweden through established commercial or institutional channels (Ministry of Culture 1997, 14).

In December 1996, when the government appointed a commission to prepare for establishing the new museum, it described it as preparing for 'a museum for World Culture in Gothenburg' (Ministry of Culture 1996).

The museum should be a meeting place, and an arena for discussion. The cultural heritage of multicultural society should be exhibited, clarified, and debated. Objects should be exhibited in a dynamic environment mirroring the development of various cultures, similarities, and differences (Ministry of Culture 1996, 3).

In this context, World Culture appears to be almost synonymous with the cultural heritage of multicultural society, but also with cultures from all over the world. The list of museums included in the new government agency suggests that the concept was similar to that in the government report on the House of World Culture, quoted above, i.e. a concept of World Culture as referring to cultural expressions from other parts of the world, and new to Sweden. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities had previously been a part of the National Museum of Fine Arts, although located in a separate building. The Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities had been a part of the Swedish History Museum, but also in a separate building. They had been understood as, respectively, an art museum, and an archaeological museum. Now they were redefined into the same category as two ethnographic museums. The new group of museums was first described as ethnographic museums and later placed under a new headline as the National Museums of World Culture, seemingly for the only reason that they represented what would later be described as 'cultures originating outside Sweden' (Government of Sweden 2007). Considering that the Nordic Museum holds collections from the Nordic countries, and to some extent from Germany (Hillström 2006), and the Museum of Fine Art covers Western art history, it would be more correct to say that what defined the responsibility of this new group of museums was that they were concerned with culture considered to be non-Western, or foreign. We will return to the status of Greco-Roman Antiquity in relation to this.

When the government commission charged with preparing the establishment of the new museum submitted its final report in 1998 (Ministry of Culture 1998), the concept of World Culture was already on its way out in the official context. Much like later government reports on cultural policy, the report almost never used this term, other than as a part of the name, either of the new museum, or of the new government agency. Instead, it used other terms, such as 'multicultural society', and 'cultural diversity', emphasizing the multitude of cultures, and the new museum as an actor in interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting cultural change:

The National Museums for World Culture should create something new in the museum world, something that does not exist yet. Its activities should depict what is similar and what is different in modes of thinking, lifestyles and life conditions, but also cultural changes in Sweden and the world. The visitor should be given the opportunity to reflect over his, or her, own cultural identity, and that of others (Ministry of Culture 1998, 27).

This passage from a government report published in 1998 was quoted approvingly by the government commission on museums in its report in 2015 (Ministry of Culture 2015, 78). It thus appears that this view still forms part of how the area of responsibility of the museums is understood today. In the current government instruction to the NMWC, its responsibility is described as follows:

15 The National Museums of World Culture is responsible for displaying and invigorating the cultures of the world, especially cultures originating outside Sweden. The government agency should work to make its activities relevant for all people in society.

The government agency should document and display the expressions and conditions of various cultures, cultural encounters and cultural variation, historically, and in the society of today, nationally, and internationally (Government of Sweden 2007).

Crossroads, and other exhibitions

The new government agency National Museums of World Culture (NMWC) is now composed of four very different museums, with collections gathered for different purposes, at different times, and from most parts of the world, but only seldom from northern Europe (including Russia). The collections of the Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities included objects from ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and Cyprus, most of them the results of archaeological excavations, including materials from a Swedish archaeological expedition to Cyprus 1927–31. This composition is still evident in the exhibitions of the museum, with permanent exhibitions covering cultures limited in time and geography, primarily those mentioned above. The museum's previous connection to the Swedish History Museum suggests an understanding of these cultures as the beginning of world history, as seen from a Western perspective. Its new categorization as a museum of World Culture suggests a loss of this privileged position, but also a change from a temporal, to a geographic, understanding of its area of responsibility. Since the 1990s, the museum has also had an ambition to assemble collections from the history of the Middle East after the Muslim conquests, and especially concerning modern times. This new development is better reflected in its temporary exhibitions, which include both such topics, and thematic exhibitions related to the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East (Ministry of Culture 1998; Lund 2018; NMWC 2019). In 2015, the museum was the most visited museum in the NMWC (Statskontoret 2015).

The collections of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities consist primarily of Chinese art and archaeological material, but also include objects from Japan, Korea, and India. Most of the permanent exhibitions focus on these regional cultures and their respective history: China, Japan, and Korea, with the addition of a sculpture hall, primarily displaying Hindu, and Buddhist religious art. Temporary exhibitions tend to be more focused, but generally presenting one of these culture, and often focusing on specific art forms. The museum could thus be described as focusing on cultural history, with an emphasis on the history of art. In 2015, this was the museum in the NMWC that attracted most international visitors. Both of the aforementioned museums also hold significant academic libraries within their respective areas (Ministry of Culture 1998; Hyltén-Cavallius and Svanberg 2016, Lund 2018; NMWC 2019; Statskontoret 2015).

The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm had originally been a part of the Museum of Natural History but became a separate organization in 1966. Its collections included a wide range of objects from East Asia, Oceania, Africa, and North and South America. Its permanent exhibitions range from thematic to focusing on specific cultural areas, including North American native culture, Caribbean Creole culture, dance masks, Japanese culture, a Japanese tea house, historical art from Benin, and the history of the museum's own collections. The museum also has more space for temporary

exhibitions than the two aforementioned museums and has used this to give space to a number of exhibitions with similar focus as the permanent ones (Lund 2018; Statskontoret 2015; NMWC 2019).

The Ethnographic Museum of Gothenburg had originally been part of the city museum, with exhibitions of ethnographic material primarily from Latin America, but also from North America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Oceania (Ministry of Culture 1998; Muñoz 2011; Lund 2018). These collections are now connected to the new Museum of World Culture, but are at the time of writing still in the process of being moved from separate storage into that building. When the Museum of World Culture was established, it included no permanent exhibitions. Instead, it focused on temporary ones, in line with the government's intention that the museum should contribute to the continuous renewal of the Swedish museum sector. Since its opening in 2004, the museum has produced a number of temporary exhibitions, most of them focusing on current issues, or identity, several of them displaying contemporary art from various parts of the world. (Lund 2018; Statskontoret 2015; NMWC 2019). According to a report from 2015, the Museum of World Culture displayed significantly less of its collections than the three museums in Stockholm. It was also the museum, among the four, where the largest part of the visitors were well educated people from the county in which the museum was situated, i.e. not from the new audiences which the museum was intended to attract (Statskontoret 2015).

The first two permanent exhibitions were established at the Museum of World Culture in 2015 and 2016: *Together* (Swe: 'Tillsammans') and *Crossroads* (Swe: 'Korsvägar'). The first is directed 'at children and their adults' and connected to various activities directed at children and families. In this article, I have chosen to go somewhat deeper into analyzing the latter, *Crossroads*. As the main permanent exhibition in the Museum of World Culture, it gives a good view into the self-identity of the museum, and to some extent of its understanding of the world. Entering the exhibition, the visitor faces a relatively dark room. The light is concentrated on a few displayed objects, and groups of glass cases with smaller objects. To the left is a wooden boat, which a sign informs us has been used as transport for refugees trying to cross into Europe over the Mediterranean. The exhibition is divided into several smaller exhibitions, or groups of display cases, texts, and video displays. Electronic screens give access to additional texts, and to information about each displayed object, information that is also available on the museum's web page (NMWC 2019). The focus of the exhibition is on meetings between cultures and peoples, on routes for trade, pilgrimage and travel, and on metaphorical crossroads in history. When entering the exhibition hall, one is likely to face a text describing crossroads as a concept (in English and Swedish, here quoting from the English version).

CROSSROADS ARE PLACES OF euphoria and tragedy – of communication, contemplation and consumption.

Here we explore the collections from various perspectives on crossroads. Epochs and geographic areas cross and intermingle.

The objects in the exhibition all carry stories of how worlds and people met and been enriched or deprived (photo documentation).

Enclosed within a circular wall to the left is a small exhibition with objects from the Inca Empire, displayed under the headline 'Pachakuti'. A text informs us that this term refers to radical change:

The turbulence and tragedy that was caused by the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire in the 16th century can be described with the Andean concept of *pachakuti*. Worldviews, traditions and communities were shattered. The colonization was a turning point not only for the Andean population, but indeed in human history, marking the beginning of the modern era. [...] In today's political context, the term is used to express the need for radical change for the survival of the planet, in which *pachakuti* can lead to destruction as well as revival (photo documentation).

Another sub-exhibition – 'Dikenga' – consists of objects from the former Kingdom of Congo, 'where the Congo River meets the Atlantic' (photo documentation), many of them of religious significance. Here, the emphasis is on the crossroads between this world and the spiritual world, but also on the

syncretism that has resulted from the meeting of European and local cultures. When reading from the electronically available descriptions of objects, it also becomes clear that many of the objects on display came to Sweden as a result of the collection work done by missionaries in the early twentieth century. Some objects are connected to syncretistic religious and political leaders, others are ritual objects, many of them relating to contact between the worlds, something that is specifically emphasized in the texts accompanying them. Other parts of the exhibition *Crossroads* describe themes such as the Silk Road, the pilgrimage to Mecca, democracy, migration, and the role of water in various cultures. On the far wall of the exhibition hall, the Silk Road can be traced from location to location on a map that forms a background to exhibition cases displaying objects connected to the ancient trade route. Texts give information about the roles it has played in trade and cultural exchange since the days of Alexander the Great. In an adjacent room, the exhibition discusses the Anthropocene in terms of changes in environment and climate, including the continuing eradication of cultures and, eventually, of whole countries, but also emphasizing how everything is connected, 'we are part of the same system as every other living thing' (photo documentation).

In terms of chronology, the exhibition spans much of recorded history. The earliest person named in its texts is the biblical patriarch Abraham, who is mentioned as the supposed builder of the Kaaba, in Mecca. The texts concerning the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca goes on naming persons such as the medieval Malian sultan Mansa Musa, and the Chinese eunuch admiral and explorer Cheng He, both of whom were Muslims who made the pilgrimage to Mecca. In spite of the mention of some famous historical individuals, the general impression is that of a history less concerned with rulers, and more with major socio-cultural shifts. While a number of historical events are mentioned – such as Cheng He's travels, or the creation of the Haudenosaunee confederation in what is now north-eastern USA – most changes and major events mentioned in the exhibition can be grouped into two major historical shifts: various cultures facing European colonialism, and current environmental destruction. The historical narrative presented by the exhibition could thus be described as composed of two historical eras – before and after encountering Europeans – and pointing ahead to a possible third era, one created through negative human influence on the environment, i.e. a chronology composed of a pre-modern, modern, and post-modern era (cf. e.g. Koselleck 2004; Castells 1996). Several of the main parts of the exhibition focus on the pre-modern era, or on the meeting between other cultures and Europeans. Such meetings are sometimes described as destructive, but also in terms of syncretism, and the creation of new cultural expressions. Some parts of the exhibition continue to the present situation, e.g. the ones focusing on the Hajj, and on Democracy. The part concerned with the Incas is entirely focused on their culture before the Spanish conquest. The part focusing on the Silk Road doesn't go much further than the early 20th century. In spite of a fair amount of attention given to China, there is no analysis of current issues there. Chinese Muslims, and the Silk Road, are dealt with primarily as historical phenomena. Especially the exhibition-part focusing on the Anthropocene points forward towards the future. During my visit to the museum in the spring of 2019, this narrative was continued in the temporary exhibition *Human Nature*, focusing on human impact on the environment, an exhibition focusing on the costs of Western lifestyle, and on the importance of personal choices. As noted on one of the texts displayed in *Crossroads*: 'What the Anthropocene will entail remains an open question'.

In terms of space and culture, *Crossroads* presents a number of particular objects and their particular sociocultural – and sometimes ecological – contexts, often framed in the worldviews of those particular cultures. It also presents them as interconnected in a network of intercultural exchange, and the lasting impression becomes that it is these connections, and the results produced by the network as a whole, that matters. In this sense, the exhibition could be said to focus on what Castells (1996) referred to as the 'space of flows' connecting particular localities in an interdependent web, rather than on any particular node in that network. It is on this level that Anthropocene is presented as moving forward. The objects displayed originate from places all over the world, with the notable exception of what could be described as Western culture. This is to some extent the result of the collections at the museum's disposal. The only notable European objects in this

exhibition concern Sámi culture or Muslim minorities. While European voices are included in the discussion of democracy, including a discussion of the Sámi people in Sweden, the historical examples of democracy are from New Guinea and Native American culture. This is likely a conscious choice of presenting something other than the more common Eurocentric narratives of world history.

Recent debates

The history of the National Museums of World Culture (NMWC) has included a number of controversies. In 2016, debate intensified once more. The previous year, the Swedish Agency for Public Management had presented a report on the financial situation of NMWC, suggesting that the number of buildings used for exhibitions should be reduced in order to balance its finances (Statskontoret 2015, 24). In 2016, the head of the NMWC submitted a report to the government, offering three solutions for merging its three museums in Stockholm (NMWC 2016). This suggestion resulted in a number of public reactions, including protests from the museums' local trade unions, journalists, representatives of the Royal Academies, the associations of friends of the museums, and the political opposition. Among the critics within the NMWC was Si Han, the curator for Chinese art at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities:

All over the world, researchers in the area of Chinese cultural history know the importance of the collections. The museum thus belongs not just to Sweden, but also to China, or to an even higher degree, the world. [...] Unfortunately, Swedish politicians today do not know this. They want to move the museum from the city center, and merge it with others into a so-called museum of world culture. To what place it should be moved is yet unknown, but judging from figures in the report, and the savings targets, it will be to a smaller and cheaper building in the outskirts of the city. If the rent on the facilities is too high, why is not the Museum of Fine Arts, a neighbor of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities focusing on Swedish, European, and Western culture, and the Museum of Modern Arts, or the Royal Armory, moved out of the city? [...] To gather all of the non-European museums under one roof is real us-and-them-thinking, pretend-multiculturalism (Han 2016).

In this debate article in a major newspaper, he defended the museum, using authority based in academic and cultural capital, accusations of 'pretend multiculturalism', and references to its international importance, linking it directly to the financial and geopolitical position of China and Chinese culture in the world. The headline of the article suggests that a threat against the museum would be noticeably negative for Sweden's image, globally, and especially in relation to China. He also suggests that the motive was not respect for non-Western culture, but rather disregarding the interests of a prestigious museum dealing with Asian culture, while prioritizing museums dealing with Swedish, or Western, arts and history, simply because the government is not recognizing the value of expertise in non-Western culture.

As the debate continued, it came to include other aspects than the potential merger of the three museums in Stockholm. Most participants in the debate opposing the move and merger of the three museums, focused on defending their collections, and the role of professionals with specialist competence relating directly to these, or to specific cultures, or periods of time, primarily expertise in Greco-Roman archaeology and art history, and in East-Asian studies and art history. In October 2016, the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History, and Antiquities, published a statement, expressing its worry that institutions with internationally unique collections were now losing their scientific competence:

We now turn to the government, urging it to change its current policy, and once more support the principle that expert knowledge should stand in the center of the management of the leading museums of the country [...]. The current policy of the Swedish government will, in the long term, lead to the loss of scientifically based thinking, and threatens Swedish responsibility as a caretaker of international cultural heritage (Vitterhetsakademien 2016).

One of the first to protest was the journalist Ola Wong, who also became one of the central figures in the following debates. His main target became what he viewed as the politicization, and

centralization of cultural policy. These tendencies were presented as a threat against the arm's length principle, and these formerly established, and relatively politically neutral, professionalities and competencies. As he wrote in an article a few days after the statement of the Academy:

How could things have been allowed to go this far? This is one of most common of the reactions that I have received in the museum debate I started in September [...]. How can the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities, as one example among many, not have curators specialized on Greece or Rome? [...] As a typical reader wrote in an email, "The problem is that the educated middle class, which once carried arts and culture, has now been replaced by analphabets [...] who could not care less about museums?", [Judging from the reactions,] the educated middle class appears to be quite alive [...]. What does appear to have faced the fate of the Tasmanian tiger, is the educated political class (Wong 2016b).

In February 2017, while this debate continued, the government presented its government bill on cultural heritage. This bill proposed a new law on museums, protecting their independence from the government, and emphasizing issues of representation, as well as professionalism, and a view of culture as constantly changing (Government of Sweden 2017). It said nothing about merging World Culture museums in Stockholm, but given that this was a financial issue, it was also a proposal that it was up to the NMWC to solve internally. When the parliament Cultural Affairs Committee discussed the government bill, a majority consisting of the center-right opposition and the populist Sweden Democrats stated preservation of the uniqueness of each museum as a priority. The Moderate Party chairperson of the Committee viewed the statement as a support for the continuation of the museums in Stockholm as separate-specialized museums. At the same time, the Sweden Democrats argued for permanently closing the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (Riksdag Committee on Culture 2017; Andersson 2018). The parties of the center-right have a tradition of defending established cultural institutions, often with reference to the arm's length principle, and the political neutrality of museums (Harding 2007; cf. Gray 2015). In the case of the Sweden Democrats, the main target appears to have been the Museum of World Culture as a representative of what they viewed as government-controlled multiculturalism. Their support for the museums in Stockholm may be understood as a tactical alliance at this time, but more research on Sweden Democrat cultural policy would be necessary to judge this. At the time of writing, no further public measures have been made by the government in order to merge the museums in Stockholm.

Looking back at the museum debate 2016–2018, it had much in common with the debates surrounding the creation of the Museum of World Culture and the NMWC in the 1990s. There is good reason to agree with Johan Lund's (2018) conclusion that the legitimacy of the Museum of World Culture, and the NMWC was undermined by these debates, or never truly established. This lack of legitimacy appears to have been connected to an undermining of the legitimacy of the cultural policy of the sitting government in the 1990s, as well as in the 2010s. The legitimacy of the three NMWC museums in Stockholm appears to have been unthreatened at both occasions, and in fact, defended by those arguing against the NMWC, and government cultural policy as a whole. To these critics, the professional competence of the museums was under threat. Expertise and the arm's length principle were contrasted to a politicization driven by both, the Minister of Culture, and the head of the NMWC. Expertise in the academic core disciplines traditionally connected to the collections of each museum was contrasted to new recruitments directed at competence in communication, exhibition, and critical theory.

Concluding discussion

At a time when national self-image is commonly perceived as changing or challenged, national museums can, as Aronsson (2015) suggests, become foci for public debate concerning the nature of that change, and the role of culture, and the culture sector, in it. The four museums of the NMWC appear to be in the position of national museums, in this sense, not in spite, but because they focus on cultures imagined as foreign to Sweden. In relation to the imagined community of the Swedish nation, they appear to represent the Other (cf. Saïd 2003), simultaneously representing the cultures

of the non-Western world and the future of Sweden as a multicultural society. This appears especially clear in the government documents where the Museum of World Culture is introduced as 'something new in the museum world', displaying the cultures of the world, as well as 'cultural changes in Sweden and the world' (Ministry of Culture 1998, 27). The selection of museums for inclusion in the new category of World Culture suggests placing these 'foreign' cultures at the same level, no longer giving Greco-Roman antiquity, or ancient Egypt, a privileged position at the beginning of (Western) world history (cf. Koselleck 2004), or presenting Chinese art history as high art, side by side with the Western high art displayed at the National Museum of Fine Arts, nor placing ethnographic collections in the context of natural history (cf. Bennett 2015; Grinnell 2010). The new organization instead separated all of these museums, and collections, from the Swedish, or Western, collections displayed by the other national museums, thus institutionalizing their otherness.

Crossroads presents a narrative of world history emphasizing syncretism, and the creative meeting of cultures, focusing on, firstly, the encounter between Christian European culture and the rest of the world, and, secondly, on present day environmental destruction. While there is criticism of the West, the exhibition's focus is on culture and history geographically outside of Europe and North America, although including indigenous peoples and refugee immigration in these areas. This is likely both, a conscious choice, and a result of the emphasis in the collections available to the museum. The current political and cultural situation in other current political and financial power centres, such as China and Japan, is also largely left out. While the intention is likely to emphasize non-Western culture, while simultaneously problematizing the West, this creates a classically modernist understanding of world history, where history has a clear direction, the Modern era represents something substantially new, and history culminates in the present or near future late-modern, or post-modern, time (cf. Koselleck 2004; Giddens 1991). This is presented from a perspective of criticism of the identification of modernity with the West, and at the same time emphasizing its negative aspects (cf. e.g. Saïd 2003).

While the government policies that created, and now support, the Museum of World Culture, and the NMWC strive to take an active position on current issues in Swedish society at a time of sociocultural and environmental change, their critics focus on the fundamental role of museum collections and museum professionalities in the culture sector. This position could be described as defending established cultural institutions, their perceived neutrality, and their cultural and academic capital, against critical approaches to culture trying to connect it directly to current political issues in Sweden, but also as emphasizing the need for specific expertise in dealing with chronologically and geographically discrete cultures. The conflict could thus be understood as placing two different ideas of culture and its role in society, as well as two ideas of history, against each other. On the one hand, an idea focusing on the active role of museums, and the culture sector at large, in the current issues of cultural politics, an idea which also appears to be common in the international discourse on ethnographic museums and museums of world culture (cf. Plankensteiner 2015; Knell 2018). On the other hand, an older idea where the museum is an autonomous, and largely neutral, institution centered on its collections of authentic cultural artifacts, headed by professionals with expert knowledge relevant to the understanding and preservation of these collections in their particular geographic and historical contexts, and as a source for understanding of our world, in the long term. In the first view, culture is mainly understood in terms of interconnected global flows, with a focus on the present. In the second view, cultures (plural) are understood mainly in their geographic and historical contexts, with a focus on the specific. As a consequence, the authentic objects forming the connection to these specific contexts become more fundamental to what a museum is. From this position, it becomes natural to view current cultural policy as politicization of the culture sector.

As we have seen, there are strong parallels between these recent conflicts and the conflict surrounding the foundation of the museum in the 1990s. Both conflicts are connected to cultural policy concerns with recent waves of immigration, as well as to conflicts regarding the role of museums, political control, and the nature of culture. It would appear that in spite of political efforts,

as well as international trends within the museum sector, more traditionally collection-oriented understandings of museums and their associated professions, still have high legitimacy. Considering that museums can become connected to national self-identity, it should be no surprise that such debate can become more intense at times when this is under partial re-evaluation. These discussions stand out in Swedish cultural policy discussions, traditionally characterized by broad consensus, and represent an increasing polarization of cultural policy debate, connected to polarization of politics in other culture-connected fields, such as immigration.

This article thus confirms that museums can become both, institutionalizations of national self-identity, and foci for discussion of its renegotiation. This does not mean that museums are simply instruments in the hands of politicians wishing to reformulate national identity. Museums can become arenas for public debate about the nature of history and culture, and about the place of societies in the world, and in world history. While the museum and its collections institutionalize and materially manifest such identification, museums and their personnel can also take part in these conflicts, becoming significant actors in cultural politics. Nor are museums monolithic institutions, but conflicts regarding the nature of museums and their roles in society can both cut through museum professionalities, and be connected to conflicts between them. The article also confirms at least four specific foci as relevant for further research: museums as physical representations of national self-identity, the roles ascribed to collections in museums, the balance of power and authority between political power holders and museum professionals, as well as how these issues in cultural policy relate to polarization and the roles of culture and identity in other fields of politics.

Note

1. Quotes from sources in Swedish have been translated by the author of this article.

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