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‘The Will to Empower’: reworking governmentality in the museum

Abstract

A number of geographers have sought to develop the museum as a space ripe for geographical enquiry and to comprehend the positioning of the museum. This paper wishes to contribute to this burgeoning field of museum geography in order to consider the ways in which museum spaces rework notions of governmentality. Firstly, this paper seeks to comprehend how museums (specifically municipal museums) are positioned within processes of governance and how, as a state actor, it develops a form of soft-disciplinary power. The paper then follows the paths taken by participants involved in a community engagement project based at GoMA (Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow) which engaged them in a variety of cultural and arts activities. The project worked with adult learners to explore issues in contemporary art and to engage them in creative practice with the desire to improve their confidence, aspirations and to expand their creative abilities.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to position itself within the developing field of museum geography (Geoghegan 2010) and to think through the ways in which the practices of museums embody forms of governmentality. The museum in this context is presented as a spatial frame and location within the city (in this case) that represents a grounded locality whereby government policy is filtered down and implemented (see Phillips, Woodham, & Hooper-Greenhill (2015) for such an example based in England). Museum geography has sought to open up museums as spaces of geographic enquiry and this paper continues this by showing how the institutional space of the museum can be used to foster processes of governmentality. In turn, the paper calls for a more nuanced understanding to governmentality within such spaces, suggesting that when considering such processes of interaction, there is a need to focus upon those that are the subjects (citizens) of such interventions. This is something that to date, museum geography has not fully engaged with and is under examined by the discipline.

The paper follows the activities of Glasgow Museums (GM) and reports on research conducted with them between 2008 and 2010. GM is the largest municipal or local authority museum service in the UK, comprising thirteen museums in total. During its recent history it has developed some of the most innovative and progressive practice with regards to social exclusion and social justice policy in the UK (Bruce *et al.*, 2000). By focusing upon one case study, I wish to consider and highlight various mechanisms, intentions and reactions people have had to being involved with such projects. This is for both organisers and participants, with regards how they have chosen to engage with and respond to the challenges of being involved with work that has a specific focus upon the social, a focus that seeks to improve society for the ‘better’. This paper therefore questions how notions of governmentality are understood and interpreted by participants of community outreach programmes.

From the 1980s the museum community came under pressure to make museums more accessible and engaged with their audiences (see Vergo 1989). This has not just been within

the UK and Scotland but more broadly an international attempt (Simon, 2010) to make museums more attuned to their populations (Weil, 1999). Added to this, through the late 1990s and 2000s, national (UK and Scotland) and local state(s) ambitions aligned somewhat with this, with regards to repositioning museums towards concepts of social inclusion and citizenship development. This repositioning happened at the UK and Scottish levels (through Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), Scottish Government (SG) and Museums and Galleries Scotland (MGS)) under New Labour (Beel 2009; Orr 2008; Sandell 2003), but also at a local state level in Glasgow. At this time Glasgow City Council sought to create more engaged museums (Bruce *et al.* 2000; Glasgow Museums 2010; O'Neill 2002; Spalding 2002). Here, we see two constitutive discourses aligning; first, New Labour policy concerning social inclusion, and second, with a municipal history of being socially engaged, dating from the 1940s through to the present day as articulated by Munro (2014). These shifts in the role and purpose of Glasgow's museums reflects some of the ongoing needs the city has faced throughout its recent turbulent history, most notably, the problems it has confronted with its shift from industrial to post-industrial city (Boyle & Hughes 1995; Paddison 1993). From this and the organisational aims that GM works towards, this discourse has continued to develop placing the museum as an active social agent that has the ability to enrich people's lives. It is this desire that I wish to frame as '*The Will to Empower*' (Cruikshank 1999) which is somewhat alternatively phrased by the Glasgow Life slogan: '*To get the most out of Glasgow Life*' (Glasgow Life, 2016).

Firstly, the paper will consider geographical implications for using the museum as a research site before moving to comprehend it through the work of Cruikshank (1999). It will then move to frame the case study theoretically, before presenting the empirical examples developed from the empirical research. The paper aims to stimulate discussion with regards the use of discourses of empowerment in terms of how they are implemented by staff and in turn interpreted by participants. The paper argues that although '*the will to empower*' is a powerful product of policy intervention by the state, its end-point lies in its appropriation by citizens as a '*technology of the self*' (Foucault, 1993). This allows for a better understanding to notions of governmentality in the museum by demonstrating the complexities inherent in this process of appropriation. This therefore extends recent work on the museum as a disciplinary institution as well as thinking through the lived experiences of governmental practices (Wilson, 2010).

2. Thinking museologically and geographically about museums

There has been a sustained scholarly endeavour, since the 1970s, within Museum Studies or Museology to critically engage with museums and Carbonell (2012) gives a full examination to these key areas of study. Within geography (similarly to museum studies), there has been no single geographical perspective from which to examine them. This is represented by the works of different geographers who have attempted to comprehend the varied sets of geographies that museums present, hence this is a diverse field of enquiry¹. Geoghegan highlights this and suggests, that '*geographic thinking can illuminate many contemporary museum issues, particularly conceptions of museum space, objects and curatorial identity*' (2010:1463) and even though, as Munro (2013:54) comments, there has, to date, been only

¹ See Geoghegan (2010) for a thorough historiography to museum geographies

a '*sporadic engagement*' it is from this literature and that of museum studies that I wish to turn to pinpoint some key points for the framing of this paper.

The work of Wright (1989) and Merriman (1989), has argued that understanding a museum's 'public' is as important as interpreting their objects and collections. This is central to what this paper aims to do in terms of comprehending how participants internalise their experiences when engaging in museum activities. To add to this, Marstine (2011) calls for the ethical position of the museum in society to be considered and therefore this link between a museum public and ethics is a key focus of this paper. This is further highlighted by Simon (2010) in terms of how museums should be participatory institutions which engage communities in their work. This moves beyond thinking of museums in terms of who builds, directs or curates them towards understanding who walks into them, how do they engage and how do they interpret such an experience. This complements the work of Lynch (2011) as well as Morse & Munro (2015) who critically comprehend, from a museum practice perspective, how staff implement such policy concerns. They give a strong picture to the contested terrain museum staff negotiate in attempting to deal with the governmental frameworks that museums sit within.

The affective turn(s) in both geography and museum studies have led to a more holistic understanding of the role museums play. These papers have therefore sought to comprehend the complexity of interactions between visitors and project participants in museum and heritage spaces (Munro, 2014). Therefore a variety of authors have highlighted the ways in which the (potentially) hierarchical or didactic nature of museum programmes and exhibitions often produce unexpected outcomes (Crang 1997; Crang & Tolia-Kelly 2010; Gregory & Witcomb 2007). These outcomes are often far from the envisioned purpose of the museums', or the states' intentions when conducting community engagement work. It is this perception or gap between governance, activity and interpretation that this paper wishes to allude to with regards to the nature of museum power as an active social agent and the technologies of citizenship (Bennett 1995) which it harnesses.

Munro (2013, 2014) writes about this within the context of a 'geographies of care' within her work on Glasgow Museums' community engagement programmes but I wish to take a different cut through such activities to think *how the governance of museums relates to the implementation of practice and then in turn to its interpretation by citizens*. I examine the subtle ways in which specific professional activities may enable museums to enact processes of social control through the empowering of participants. The paper also wishes to pick up upon the work of Crang (1997) and Crang & Tolia-Kelly (2010) to think through the ways in which participants may interpret the governmental intentions of museum community work and how they may purposefully reinterpret such intentions for their own purposes. As a final caveat, the paper also wants to highlight that the museum is not just a space of governmental control (although it has a long history of this, see Bennett, 1995) but that this represents only one thread to follow in the assemblage of museums and their activities. As Lord (2006) neatly highlights, from a theoretical perspective, that despite museums being spaces of enlightenment, they may also be spaces of subversion, and spaces where assumed histories or narratives can be challenged. Which is in turn is empirically shown by Crossan et al. (2016) and their work on Trade Union Banners held within the Glasgow Museums Collection.

3. The Will to Empower and Extending Governmentality

I see these technologies of citizenship, however well intentioned, as modes of constituting and regulating citizens: that is strategies for governing the subjects whose problems they seek to redress (Cruikshank 1999:2).

Cruikshank (1999) argues that within democratic systems of governance, it is 'the Will to Empower' that gives the mechanisms to government in order to interact with its population in order to improve them as citizens. This 'will' then, aims to encourage the citizen, in order to enable them to help themselves and to benefit wider society through the deployment of technologies of citizenship. Within the discourses that surround social inclusion agendas presented by the state (through DCMS, SG and MGS) and posited by GM there is at its heart a desire to improve 'citizens' for the benefit of both the individual and the state.

The process of empowerment, as outlined by Cruikshank is one that is closely related to the work of Foucault (1977, 2009), relating specifically to the concept of governmentality. Foucault delineates the role of government in relation to its population in terms of how it attempts to order, to manage, to control, to 'improve' and finally to normalise. Foucault (1984, 1988, 1993, 2009) introduces the concept of 'technologies of the self' which became for him a key technology in the power relations within society. This is because in his later works, he becomes intrigued by (neo-)liberalism and the ways in which it greatly influenced processes of governmentality. Foucault argued that the way in which power is enacted had changed, from initially being focused upon the body, and then the mind, to shifting to a method of self-control where individuals are left to constitute themselves within wider structures of governance, Foucault states:

Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1988:18).

By creating individuals who can self-regulate themselves, the interaction between the state and the individual is renegotiated. The process of governmentality becomes about finding transformational techniques that allow individuals to govern themselves internally (Barnett, 2001), thus releasing the state from direct responsibility. This creates a much more pluralistic and open-ended description of power, in comparison to Foucault's earlier work on discipline, as now 'government' is a 'contact point' where techniques of domination and technologies of the self 'interact' (Burchell, 1996:20). Whereby, the museum as a *Foucauldian space* performs a 'soft-disciplining' power which presses upon the visitor or participant (*cf.* Jones *et al.* 2011a, 2011b).

This paper therefore seeks to probe the experiences of governmentality via the ways in which community engagement work is experienced. By doing this, it will illuminate the ways in which governmentality is produced and internalised before being reworked (Katz, 2004) due to the application of a soft-disciplinary power. This will develop an understanding to governmentality and disciplinary power within the museum, that moves beyond the work of Bennett (1995) in order to comprehend a more fine-grained and peopled account to the museum as a space of state power.

4. Methodology

Parr (2011) discusses the use of art in relation to its therapeutic potential with regards to mental health and considers its potential to move 'outsiders' to 'insiders' through their participation. In terms of this case study, I wished to observe this process taking place, what affect the physical process of producing art had on the group and subsequently seeing their work on public display in the museum. By participating in sessions this made my positionality interesting as I became 'normalised' within the museum setting. What would be termed as 'researcher' and 'researched' became less obvious as my participation meant I not only came to know the participants but they came to know me, and as I interacted, the relationship became slightly blurred. My role as researcher therefore consistently shifted, renegotiating itself throughout the process and follows what Van Maanen (1978:344) termed an '*overt member*'. By using an ethnographic toolkit in this way, it gave me a greater depth of understanding to the participants and their experiences, especially when it came to conducting interviews. This meant I had a strong sense of who they were, what they had done and they knew who I was, so that a level of 'trust' had built from the familiarity of a shared experience (Pratt, 2000). The methodology therefore allowed me gain further understanding to the processes of interaction, had I just interviewed groups without prior participation, I would have missed the considerable change in the group – *being there* really mattered, as it '*enriched*' (Dowling, Lloyd, & Suchet-Pearson, 2015) the interview data collected.

The project consisted of ethnographically observing and taking part in 14 sessions at GoMA (Silverman, 1993). Whereby, adult learners worked with an artist in residence in order to create art pieces for exhibition. For this time, I kept a field diary in order to record in my own thoughts with regards to what happened in each session and whilst each session, was taking place, I also took various notes of anything I observed as important. Following the project, I then conducted seventeen interviews, seven of which were with available participants (Latham, 2003). The interviews took place primarily in two locations, at GoMA and the East End Healthy Living Centre² (most of the participants had been regular attendees at the centre). The interviews served to further question participants' feelings towards the project and to understand what they felt they gained from taking part. The interviewed participants consisted of six women and one man, with five of the women and the man being middle to retirement age. The final female participant was in her twenties. The interviews with those who organised the project sought to understand their motivations behind the project. By their nature, the interviews served as an opportunity where they could reflect critically upon the project they had just conducted.

5. The Will to Empower in Glasgow Museums

GM has placed great emphasis on the importance of Learning and Access³ within the services approach to museum work. This has been at its foremost when conducting work related to social inclusion policy. This manifests itself as a 'will to empower' citizens within

² Based in Shettleston, Glasgow.

³ A department within GM, it is tasked with making the museum more accessible and inclusive.

GM's organisational discourse, and the then Head of GM reflects this in his philosophy towards museums as a space of learning:

I don't see it as a radical innovation, I see it as a continuation of the Victorian tradition of public education, social control or not. I think the difference is that the Victorian's understanding of the psychology of learning was wrong. I mean intuitively they felt that if you put the stuff out in the structure of the discipline you know whether it's art history, chronology or evolutionary structure of species people would get. It was kind of a locking in understanding of psychology, the mind is a blank slate, these things will imprint on people and not only will they learn it they will be morally improved and it turns out to be a bit more complicated than that (Head of GM, 2008).

An interesting point from the quote is the link made directly to the Victorian period and the ideas that animated the building and curation of museums at that time. Although strategies of engagement with visitors have become very different, the same ideas relating to museums being places of improvement for citizens still endures and therefore the linking of social inclusion and citizenship development to museum practice, is for the Head of GM, nothing new. These ideas of education and a progressive service that could be seen to be very paternalistic in nature, then filter into the projects followed at GM by staff, as they seek to create a greater connection between citizen, museum and state with a desired result being the improvement of the individual. This relationship manifested itself through various mechanisms and is exemplified by 'Altered Images', the case study I present here for discussion. Altered Images was established through a partnership between GoMA⁴ and Community Learning⁵. The project, sought to use art as a medium that could be used to interact with those who may have been less successful in more formal forms of education and for various reasons disadvantaged within society to benefit from participation. The taking part (the physical act of doing art, being creative and working with others) and the recognition for doing so became key mechanisms within this process:

I wanted them to realise that art's for them ... I wanted them to feel more active within Glasgow, making them feel that they can go to these big buildings and take part in workshops. That they are for people in communities that are marginalised. I wanted recognition ... I also wanted the social aspect of coming together as a group ... it builds up a trust and a bond between ourselves and the learners. So, they then come and get involved in other things with us (Community Learning Officer, 2008).

The attitude of project staff both at GoMA and Community Learning at all times endeavoured to benefit the group as much as possible and to show them that they did have the ability to be creative and through this, change their perspectives upon what they were capable of doing. This was facilitated by; art practice which offers various health (both physical and mental) benefits the experience of being within the museum where such a friendly and welcoming environment was created and finally how their work was then placed on public display for the wider public to view. Finally, another key reasoning for such

⁴ Gallery of Modern Art, based in Glasgow.

⁵ Community Learning is a service delivered by Glasgow Life, it is tasked with developing learning opportunities for adults and young people (16 and over). See Figure 1.

an empowerment was how the wider Culture and Sport Glasgow⁶ (CSG) infrastructure made an effort to engage with the group at the exhibition opening.

This specific event, the opening of the exhibition, represented a key moment at the end of the project. It showed to the group, a clear link between themselves and the local state. This presented them as citizens of Glasgow who are important to the local state and what they did mattered, as a participant suggests below:

I was really happy to take my family and show off and say 'I did that'. I felt like why should something I have done be in an art gallery, do you know what I mean, but I was really happy. It was an amazing opportunity to be able to get that chance to do something like that ... I felt that they were all pushing me to go to college and stuff and take it further (Clare, Participant 2008).

The above quote talks about gaining attention from various civil dignitaries at the opening but it also highlights how such a project aims to alter an individual's aspirations, the desire in this case is to see this participant progress onto some form of further education. In the case of this participant such ideas were internalised; from being someone who considered themselves to have failed at school, had been claiming benefits and was currently working a menial job, to the possibility of further education and a 'better' life which was now viewed as a realistic opportunity. This shows the wider policy desire of the local and national state which hopes to engage and 'empower' disadvantaged citizens and to link them into wider policy goals such as lifelong learning.

6. Reworking the Will

The desire to 'empower' is one that strongly drove the aims of staff as they attempted to produce a progressive service for the city which implicitly has the desire to interact with every strata of Glasgow's population (Glasgow City Council, 2004). Strategically this has been conducted through two main processes which have changed the nature of museum work greatly. The first relates to ideas of 'access' both physically and intellectually and the second, which I have focused upon, derives from a desire to be more proactive in the city and to use the museum as a tool for going out into different communities. The case study here represents one example of a much greater body of this work that the service is involved with. This obviously, is always a process that is constantly developing; it is never final and will always evolve and in this evolution will always be shaped by various voices; such as museum staff, policy, and the participants involved.

In engaging with the participants, an interesting theme arose from the ethnographic and interview data. This was the sense that for some of the participants involved, they had used such processes to rework the previously delineated patterns of involvement for their own personal benefit and welfare. Drawing upon the work of Katz (2004) and her ideas regarding 'resilience, reworking and resistance' whereby the Altered Images participants, had altogether different motivations and desires for taking part. The specific interest in participation reflected a desire to use the project and to rework the mechanisms to help them overcome various issues in their lives, firstly social isolation:

⁶ Culture and Sport Glasgow, now known as Glasgow Life, is both charity and community interest company. It was structured in this way to part-privatise a variety of municipal functions and spaces, see www.glasgowlife.org.uk for further information.

Well I gained a wee bit of confidence which I had been lacking for a few years (sighed). I learned to communicate a wee bit better with people because I wasnae doing that after my husband died. I just shut myself away so I needed tae start tae find company. I still find it a bit difficult, but in there it kind of a helped a bit cause there is all walks of life there, including the tutors and the people (Pam, 2008).

And secondly, clinical depression:

Well I don't want to go into a lot of medical stuff but I suffer from clinical depression which can just raise its ugly head. It has been nearly a year and it's since I have started getting more and more involved with art and doing this thing up at the GoMA that it has just lifted me so much, it really has. All my friends are saying what a difference in you. I used to have these days with big black clouds but they have disappeared and hopefully they won't come back. If they do I'll just paint them (laughs) (Sarah, 2008).

The above quotes highlight how for these participants, their participation largely negated empowering intentions of the project towards further learning. It was the participant's own choice to take part in such processes and they only took what they wanted from the process. In thinking back to Cruikshank and to consider the work of Cooke and Kothari '*Participation: the new Tyranny*' (2001) who look at similar issues in relation to development, a different power relationship to what the authors have presented can be seen to be taking place. Rather than most examples of participation showing some form of co-option, here, by reworking the processes, in which they have chosen to take part in, these individuals were able to use the museum's cultural assets to benefit themselves *on their own terms*. This reflects the work of Crang & Tolia-Kelly (2010) in suggesting the ways in which such processes often have unintended or unpredictable outcomes. Finally, this sits alongside work by Barnes & Prior (2009) who note the ability of citizens to be subversive within such governmental strategies and although, the above does not represent a 'subversion', the reworking does further highlight the ways in which such policy aims can be repurposed through participation.

7. Conclusions

In thinking through this paper's contribution to the burgeoning field of museums geographies it wishes to show the ways in which museums are spaces constituted and framed by governmental and professional concerns. This suggests that museums have a specific geography(ies) of power (Allen 2003) that needs to be unpicked in order to understand the ways in which museums are built, collections grow, displays are placed together and people encounter such activities. The paper has therefore highlighted the way in which the concept of governmentality needs to be nuanced to the spaces and places in which it is applied. Within the museum, it is both implemented by individuals and then interpreted by individuals. To understand this fully, this paper has sought to comprehend how such empowering aims have been interpreted.

The paper has highlighted these dynamics playing out, whereby, ethnography gave a methodological lens to follow Cruikshank's notions of *the will to empower*. This was developed through Foucault's notion of governmentality as expressed by social inclusion policy which in turn led to lived museum practice. In attempting to walk a graded path through the power relationships created in the community engagement work of museums, this paper has shown how manifestations of community empowerment are framed and implemented. The spatial dimensions and institutional setting of the museum created the

stage on which such events could unfold with regards to interactions with participants. The notion of soft-disciplinary power as a paternalistic technology of citizenship, specific to museums, has been shown to create opportunities for participants to rework the framing governmental intentions. This produces a form of empowerment for citizens but in these encounters with museum staff and collections such participants are able to shape their own personal outcomes from such activities in ways that suit their own personal wishes rather than those of the state. This extends and refines the governmental readings of the museum by the likes of Bennett (1995) who give a much more top down and unpeopled account to the disciplinary power of museums. The work also extends upon that of Jones *et al.* (2011a, 2011b) by highlighting the ways in which soft-paternalistic intentions of governmental strategies, like the 'nudge' strategies they discuss, do not always lead to the desired intentions of those deploying them.

Finally, Message's (2006a, 2006b) argues that the museum is always embroiled in a process of constant 'reinvention'. This continues through to the present and as the governmental discourse surrounding museums has changed via 'austerity'⁷, it can be observed that so has the positioning of museum within such processes. As Askew (2009) highlights more broadly and Morse & Munro (2015) divulge in a museum setting, the role of individual workers within institutions can shift when professional and governmental trajectories misalign. The current set of Conservative policies creates a very different policy landscape within which UK and Scottish museums now operate.

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⁷ The shift from New Labour to Conservative Governments.

Figures

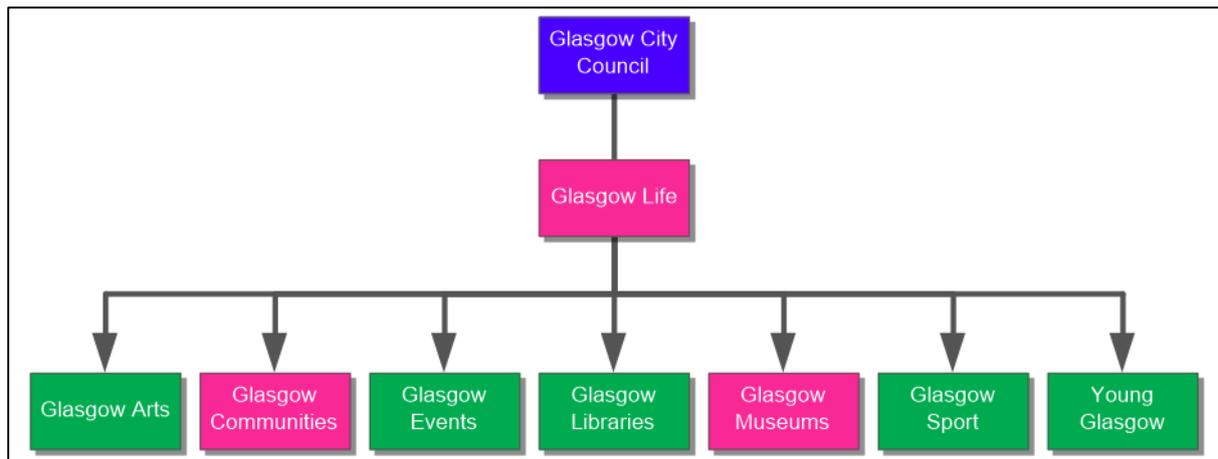


Figure 1 – Glasgow Life and its constituent sub brands

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