

How sweet it is: cultural politics in Barbados

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Museums are not neutral places, nor do they exist in a state of political independence somehow suspended above the wash of dominant ideology. They embody, directly or indirectly, the distinctive views of those who hold control, those who claim a moral or intellectual right, and those who can afford to make museums happen. Moreover they fit into the socio-political structures of their day. However enabling, democratic and intellectually rigorous museums may aim to be, they cannot be divorced from their own times and circumstances. Sometimes, these processes are easier to detect than others.

Jeanne Canizzo here considers the National Barbados Museum and insightfully discusses the changes which have taken place there.

Museums are symbolic structures which make visible our public myths: the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are institutionalized and materialized in our museums. They are full of the categories we create and into which we divide the universe, both physical and cultural, in our attempt to understand the world in which we find ourselves. But a museum cannot hold all the artefacts which constitute a people's past, nor display all the objects which make up its artistic heritage. It cannot capture the whole of our material culture and national experience. Rather it presents a particular past and a particular society, what Raymond Williams has called 'the selective tradition' or 'the significant past'.¹

Museums are thus carefully created, artificially constructed repositories; they are negotiated realities. We need to examine the ideology and cultural assumptions which inform our collection policies, which determine our display formats and influence the interpretations placed upon the objects which we designate as the essence of our cultural and historical identity. In short, museums are amenable to analysis as visual ideologies.

I am not speaking here of ideology in the pejorative sense of political extremism and propaganda. Ideology is a cultural system. You might think of it as a coherent, or at least relatively coherent system of ideas, values, beliefs, etc. which people develop while taking part in their normal political and economic lives, but also in their normal religious or moral, philosophical and aesthetic lives. So ideology is concerned not only with politics, but also with symbols and styles, taste and trends.²

Ideologies are important in 'defining (or obscuring) social categories; stabilizing (or upsetting) social expectations; maintaining (or undermining) social norms; strengthening (or weakening) social consensus; and relieving (or exacerbating) social tensions'.³

Ideologies are a kind of 'schematic image of the social order' in which we find ourselves.⁴

THE NATIONAL BARBADOS MUSEUM

Most Canadians probably know Barbados as a holiday island whose people, sometimes called the 'Black Englishmen of the Caribbean', are famous for cricket and sugar cane rum. Interestingly enough, none of the elements of this image have been reflected in one of the island's major tourist attractions, the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. Housed in a wonderful building, originally a military prison built about 1853, the collections represent the history of the slave-owning planters and their families.

This situation, however, is rapidly changing as the Barbadian government implements a 'direct action' plan to modify the museum. In return for funding, the government has demanded major changes in the administration, staffing and collections policies of the museum in an attempt to have it function as 'an instrument of national identity' and 'an institution in the service of national development'.⁵

In late 1980, in a letter creating a select committee to make recommendations on the museum's development, the Permanent Secretary wrote: 'My Minister is most concerned about the fact that the Barbados Museum is not really representative of the various aspects of Barbadian life.'⁶ More particularly, under the section of the report labelled 'Deficiencies in the Content of the Collection', we read: 'While the collection tells the visitor a great deal about Barbadian merchants and planters, their lifestyle and their adoption of European material culture, it says little or nothing about slaves, plantation labourers, peasant farmers, and fishermen; African cultural survivals and folk culture; vernacular architecture and chattel house furniture and cooking utensils; traditional crafts and means of transportation. The collection focuses attention mainly on one segment of society and culture and therefore does not present a coherent or complete story of Barbados in history.'⁷

With noted understatement, the committee's report suggested that 'the museum authorities have possessed a limited view of what was worthy of collection, preservation and display'.⁸

The 'museum authorities' chastized here are the members of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society founded in 1933 by self-described 'public-spirited ladies and gentlemen interested in the history of the island'. As of 1984, all members, except honorary ones, had to be nominated in writing by an existing member and then elected to membership. This could have functioned, certainly in the past, as a social barrier, but I imagine a much more effective screen is that imposed by annual dues: life members \$400; annual individual \$30, husband and wife \$40, junior (under 18) \$5. Outside of elite circles, such fees act as both a racial and class barrier even if not consciously designed to do so.

The membership of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society has been overwhelmingly white and wealthy. Obviously it is their history, in the form of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furniture, glass and china (nearly all of foreign manufacture), that the displays have embodied.

When I first saw the Barbados Museum in January 1985 the contrast between the museum manifestations of European and Afro-Caribbean cultures was probably most pronounced. The displays from the plantocracy were in refurbished period rooms and were

quite lovely while those representing the black heritage had not yet changed. For example, arranged alongside a splendid interior courtyard complete with flowering and scented gardens were exhibition rooms created from the jail cells of the former military prison. The most spectacular to my eye was a plantation dining room. It is hard to convey the beauty and sensuality of this room with its beautifully kept and displayed furniture, china, crystal and silver. Cool shadows and soft natural light added to the seductive powers of great luxury.

There was a real contrast with the exhibition labelled *People, Places and Events in Barbados*. Housed in an interior room rather than a cell, it was a selection of local histories and a few photographs of political leaders and civic dignitaries. Here too were a few of the Afro-Caribbean objects, e.g. an old cook stove and a warri board (an African game brought to Barbados with the slaves). No real context was presented and the whole display lacked vitality; it was rather amateurish in style.

The primary black or Afro-Caribbean presence in the museum at that time was actually outside the main building, in an interior courtyard, where a performance of *1627 and All That* took place. The title is a takeoff on a fanciful British history book *1066 and All That*; 1627 is the date on which the first British settlers disembarked. The production is a private, profit-making one and a self-described 'historical celebration of Barbadian culture'. It is performed twice a week so that visitors and tourists can 'enjoy the old-world atmosphere of the Barbados Museum and its fascinating exhibits'. The \$60 ticket, according to advertisements, includes government tax, transportation to and from the museum, a tour of the museum, a two-hour dance show, a Bajan (Barbadian) buffet dinner and complimentary drinks all night. It claims to be the 'best value for money in Barbados' and I heard very few complaints from my fellow tourists.

But what of the content of *1627*? The first part, called 'Barbados Then', includes songs of the fieldhands, traditional children's games, European nineteenth-century folk dances, a choreographed flirtation and duel with cane sticks. After a break for a traditional dinner (flying fish, peas and rice, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, etc.), the second act, 'Barbados Now', begins. It features a dance hall scene where young people do the 'ruk a tuk' (a local dance) and calypso, and then a 'Crop-Over' (or carnival) scene with what were described as traditional folk characters including masked dancers and stilt-walkers. The programme notes remind us that 'Both presentations are punctuated by rhythmic African drumming, an integral part of Barbadian culture.'

If we consider the museum and the dance show-cum-historical drama together as a cultural production,⁹ we can infer that things representing plantation or white society are inside the building while the performance, the labour or action, representing the slave or black culture is outside, although contained by the museum walls. The message expressed here is obvious. But, and this might explain why the Barbados government is so interested in changing the message, this cultural production – the museum and the performance taken together – is not just or *only* expressive or reflective. It is also instrumental. For as Mark Leone reminds us in *Museum News*, 'reading, writing, telling, presenting and performing history are *active* and *form* modern opinion, modern nationality, modern identity, class interests and social position.'¹⁰ Geertz puts it another way: 'whatever else ideologies may be – projections of unacknowledged fears, disguises for ulterior motives, phatic expressions of group solidarity – they are, most distinctively, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience.'¹¹

Museums and their displays, then, are often active agents in shaping all kinds of identity. Although he was writing of art galleries, Terry Smith's thoughts are appropriate to

the analysis of the Barbados Museum. He writes that 'culture has been expropriated. High, official, elite culture is used by the ruling classes as tickets of self definition, by majority exclusion.'¹² In the old Barbados Museum, the products of plantation society are those celebrated. And indeed why would we expect that segment of Barbadian society to celebrate the past of the peoples whose labour they exploited? By not displaying the cultural heritage of the majority of the population, the museum has taken from them, by implication, their role as history makers, as active participants in their own past.¹³

How was this imbalance to be corrected? How were black Barbadians to be 'enfranchised culturally'? The select committee made several very explicit suggestions: the curator should be a Barbadian and not an expatriate; and the new museum Council would include five persons instead of the original one member, named by the appropriate minister of the government.

Besides these structural or organizational changes, a number of recommendations about the collections and their display were made. A real storyline was to be developed: 'The exhibits should feature a sequence of themes which tell a connected story of man in Barbados from earliest times to present day.'¹⁴ It would stretch from the migration routes of the Amerindians to educational policy in the last twenty years. Although lucrative, *1627 and All That* was to cease as it presented preservation and security problems. The period plantation rooms were to be joined by a fabricated and furnished slave hut or chattel house.

Furthermore, public mobile exhibits, radio talks and school tours were all suggested as ways to get the new message to the non museum-going public.

What has happened; what changes have been made? A new director has been appointed, a young Barbadian woman trained in museology at the University of Leicester, England, and the council composition has changed. But what of the museum itself?

When I returned to Barbados in February 1986, the museum had had a facelift to mark the visit of the Queen in 1985, but it was inside that the most startling changes had taken place. The new storyline does indeed now begin with the Amerindians, who had been represented in 1985 by a couple of poor, very small and old dioramas. We are now confronted with a new textual marker, the first in a series of what might be considered huge labels. Since its tone and themes carry on elsewhere in the museum, it is worth considering the message:

Few traces remain of our island's first people. Their possessions, now unearched, are spellbinding gifts from a previous world. These rare objects link us to an Amerindian legacy in some of our region's foods and folkcrafts, words we use, and even in the physical appearance of some Caribbean people. . . . Amerindian exploration and settlement of the Eastern Caribbean islands depended on especially high levels of basic skills and nurtured elaborate forms of artistic and spiritual experience.

Barbados has, in this introduction, become a plural society, with a present growing out of its past. There are no unchanging, pristine 'primitives' here. Indians actively explored and settled, as did the Europeans.

A life-size reconstruction of part of an Indian village, with hammock, pots and baskets, sits on top of a crosscut of an archaeological excavation showing artefacts in situ. More standard displays of decorative items in cases appear; then we move on to the next period, that of the European settlement and the introduction of African slaves and the plantation system. Again a long textual marker introduces the displays:

What do we really know about the history of Barbados after 1627? Documents, objects, and legends provide different, often conflicting views of the past. By looking at these we try to understand history as it relates to today.

History is presented as a living thing, not divorced from experience. The many sources of information about the past, including folk models or constructions, are acknowledged as is the idea that history is not just about dates but about meaning; that it is an interpretive art and not just a question of artefact identification.

It is impossible to discuss the large number of objects, photographs and documents which embody this new vision of Barbadian history. However, mention must be made of the display about 'A Slave Born in Africa', which uses archaeological material from a grave site, and reminders of the horrors of the Middle Passage and the slaves' terrible suffering on their journey to the New World. We learn not just about the pleasures and joys of life but of the financial chaos, epidemics, droughts and riots which affected black and white alike.

A small exhibition on the development of health care in Barbados should also be highlighted. Side by side in the same case are displays on the history of a modern hospital and the herbal medicines and teas used by elderly Barbadian women. Photographs, and a simple basket and hoe convey the ethos of the peasant farmer's life. Throughout the museum, black culture is shown as worthy of serious muscological investigation and display.

The storyline, as requested by the government, comes very close to the present. The development of tourism is outlined; the success of Barbadian cricket teams in international competition is celebrated.

The next large project is the chattel house, the Afro-Caribbean counterpart of the plantation period rooms. Eventually the director would like to have the chattel house illustrating not only a typical black household and garden, but functioning as a living history museum, with costumed staff playing music, doing crafts, and so on. But all this remains in the future.

We are witnessing an attempt to say that culture, in its material forms, doesn't come only from the past, from across the sea; that history isn't made only by the wealthy and the powerful. In the presentation and displays in the old museum, the artefacts themselves suggested that the ruling class ruled by virtue of its own natural superiority. Its ability to commission, purchase, order, use and preserve its own objects was just a symptom of its general authority. The absence of their cultural heritage seemed to suggest that the black population had produced nothing of sufficient quality or interest to be enshrined alongside that of their white countrymen.¹³

Thus the Museum Development Plan can be seen as a kind of cultural offensive.¹⁶ However, a number of questions can be raised regarding how successful, ultimately, such a plan might be.

On a very practical level, the museum faces the very real problem of unearthing objects to represent this other cultural tradition. Slaves were literally less materialistic than their owners, poor peasant farmers and share-croppers less than landowners. The general paucity of objects is aggravated by preservational bias; wooden spoons are less likely to be with us after 150 years than Georgian silverware. And it is difficult to capture the performing or verbal arts in the museum context without denuding them of their vitality and artistic integrity.

Assuming, however, that a sufficient number of objects are eventually collected, will the new constituency, the consumers of this bicultural world, come to the museum?

Museum-going is still a minority taste, related to education, income and leisure time.¹⁷ And if they do come, will they 'see' what the government wants them to see?

Tom Adams, Prime Minister until his recent death in office, was unusually attuned to cultural politics. In the late 1970s, ministerial control of the Crop-Over Festival was transferred from Tourism (i.e. an externally oriented ministry) to that of Culture, a move which highlighted national identity and internal or indigenous culture.¹⁸ This attempt backfired when the associated calypso contest, started in 1980, became one of the main forums for political opposition to the Adams government; indeed some of the more critical calypso songs have since been banned.

It can also be questioned if, in the end, the museum will be able to portray history as a process? Or will the chattel house and the plantation just be entombed side by side in some sort of static, ahistorical nether world? Will the displays be able to show how the past and the present are linked; can the objects illustrate relationships between races, classes and cultures?

All of these questions remain unanswered. They shouldn't, however, seem to be totally removed from the Canadian experience, for there is some congruence, not necessarily in terms of solutions but in terms of the issues raised, between the situation in Barbados and that in Canada.

The first stems from the plural nature of Canadian society. How are the indigenous peoples of Canada presented and represented in museums? The Metis? Immigrants? The same questions might be asked in reference to class and gender as well as ethnicity.

The other area is more directly in the realm of government policy in the cultural arena. While we may disagree with such an interventionist policy, particularly one in which popular sentiments could be manipulated in the interest of electoral gains, it is easy to feel some sympathy for this attempt to rectify a historical injustice and present a truer picture of island history. Such cases of government intervention may be seen as a kind of cultural affirmative action, often associated with the will of a repressed people or a minority group to assert its cultural independence, or restore its collective heritage.

We must not offer a blanket condemnation of government intervention in cultural policy without considering the particular historical events and social context within which it occurs. What we must recognize is the inherent ideology lodged in any collection and exhibition and condemn any world view which attempts to exclude or dehumanize any segment of the population.

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NOTES

- 1 Williams (1973: 9).
- 2 Hadjinicolaou (1978).
- 3 Geertz (1973: 203).
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Ministry of Information, Barbados (1982: 2).
- 6 *ibid.*: 1.
- 7 *ibid.*: 6.
- 8 *ibid.*: 7.
- 9 MacCannell (1976).
- 10 Leone (1983: 41).
- 11 Geertz (1973: 220).