

Pushing boundaries - establishing the International Slavery Museum

David Fleming, Shanghai, 9 November 2010

There is a very good reason that the International Slavery Museum is based in Liverpool, which is that Liverpool was the capital of the transatlantic slave trade at a time when it had reached industrial proportions. Liverpool was responsible for more enslavements than any other European city. Liverpool became the epicentre of the greatest forced migration in human history.

During the 18th century more than 5,000 slave ships departed from Liverpool, and after 1780 Liverpool was the largest slave port in the Atlantic world. While slaving was not the city's only trade, it was the keystone of its economy, and the foundation of the wealth which was to lead, more than two centuries later, to the city's being named the European Capital of Culture.

At least 12 million Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean, but many millions more were profoundly affected. The transatlantic slave trade distorted African societies, stealing from them their young people: two thirds of enslaved people were males aged between 15 and 25.

Arms and ammunition brought to Africa by European traders helped perpetuate conflict and political instability. Robbing the workforce of young and healthy individuals caused industrial and economic stagnation. Trade routes that existed before European intervention were disrupted. The development of African communities and cultures was stunted. Agriculture suffered as communities abandoned fertile land while fleeing the long reach of the European slavers.

The labour and inventiveness of enslaved peoples shaped the Americas and enriched Western Europe, rather than their African homelands.

The products of slave labour, such as cotton, tobacco, coffee and sugar, fed the development of consumerism in Europe. The cotton industry powered technological innovation and industrial development, speeding up the process of turning this raw material into finished goods.

As the demand for plantation produce increased, so did the demand for enslaved Africans to produce it. In order to purchase more Africans, traders needed more guns, textiles, and luxury goods. To cope with the increased flow of goods across Britain, rivers were made more navigable and canals and roads were constructed.

The forced labour of millions of Africans and their descendants also transformed the landscape and future of the Americas. Enslaved Africans and their descendants cleared the forests and bush, built roads and houses, dug canals, worked down mines and in forges, all at the whim and to the financial benefit of their owners.

Ultimately, many African, Caribbean and South American countries have faced abject poverty and long term underdevelopment as a direct result of slavery and colonialism. The poorest, least developed countries today are those whose peoples were misused and manipulated during the last three centuries.

Perhaps the worst, most damaging, dangerous and long term legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, is **racism**. It has affected all of the countries involved in the trade.

The idea of white supremacy grew out of transatlantic slavery. Slave owners justified their abuse and violence towards enslaved Africans by claiming that they were inferior to whites. The laws that these white supremacists created denied enslaved Africans the most basic human rights, and laid the foundations for modern racism in Western society.

Although slavery as an institution was abolished in the slaving countries over a period of time, the struggle for equality and civil rights has continued and has not yet been won, because of racism. In the USA, for example, we may have a Black President, but this should not delude us into thinking for a single moment that the cultural and economic oppression of Black people has ended.

Most of the people in the African Diaspora have never been able to progress at the same rate as their white contemporaries. Black people have been discriminated against and disadvantaged in terms of wealth, educational opportunity and lifestyle for the last three hundred years. In terms of diversity issues, the slave trade has left us with truly enormous social challenges.

Despite the trauma of transatlantic slavery, people of African descent have helped shape the society and cultures of the Americas and Europe. Enslaved Africans were forced to deny their own culture and traditions. They were given new names, foods, clothing, languages and beliefs, but used the lifestyles and traditions of their homeland to make them distinctively their own, and the fusion of African, European and indigenous American traditions has resulted in new and vibrant cultures throughout the world.

The spirit of enslaved Africans, despite efforts by their oppressors to kill it, has survived and lived on through their descendants and achievements. Across the Americas and Europe, the cultural influences of the African Diaspora can be seen everywhere – in religious ceremonies; cuisine, music, language, literature, fashion and festivals.

The modern world is awash with the influence of Africans and those of African descent. As we say in the Museum, “the sun never sets on the children of Africa”.

This has been a very abridged version of what the International Slavery Museum contains, but I have dwelt at some length on the stories in the Museum because I want us to think about what we are trying to achieve in this Museum.

I often refer to the International Slavery Museum as the **Museum as Freedom Fighter** – a socially responsible museum which takes an ideological stance, and which

campaigns actively against human rights abuses. This is not a museum that takes the traditional museum **neutral** stance to issues of cultural diversity. The Museum is about people, not objects, and people are about identity and emotions, not things.

Injustice permeates this museum, and in the Museum we question racism and intolerance, and we attempt to transform the way our visitors think about human rights.

We do not restrict discussion to the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, but range over wider human rights issues, such as sex trafficking, modern forms of racism and racial intolerance, and the exploitation of child labour. These are all global phenomena, of fundamental importance to us all.

According to the British Anti-Slavery Society, "Although there is no longer any state which recognizes any claim by a person to a right of property over another, there are an estimated 27 million people throughout the world, mainly children, in conditions of slavery."

We want visitors to the Slavery Museum to leave in a determined and campaigning mood, in a mood to take action about this, in a mood to do something about such iniquities.

It used to be unthinkable that a museum should campaign in this way. If museums are to be trusted by the public then they should remain neutral, says the orthodox view of museum neutrality. Well, it is no longer unthinkable. Most of the 1 million plus people who have visited the Slavery Museum since it opened don't seem to think this way, and nor do the supporters of the Torreón declaration that I quoted in my Stephen Weil Memorial lecture yesterday evening.

In order to give you a better idea of how the Museum operates, I want to tell you about a recent initiative, the setting up of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM).

Two years ago I attended a meeting of INTERCOM (the international ICOM committee on management) in Rotorua, New Zealand. The meeting's subject was tourism. At the meeting there was a session on "Dark and dangerous tourism", that featured presentations on atrocity museums in Cambodia, Auschwitz and Jewish museums in Poland, slavery museums, and a paper entitled "Museums and tourism in a country you are not supposed to visit" (Colombia). At another session we discussed museums in Africa – Kenya, Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania.

As a result of what I heard, it occurred to me that the international museum community ought to try to find ways to work together more on human rights issues.

My thinking was informed by a number of perspectives.

First, it seemed to me that the museum profession in the West needs to hear from our colleagues in developing countries – **we have a lot to learn**. I had seen the impact some of the Rotorua presentations had on Europeans and

Americans, Australians and New Zealanders, and few of us were not moved, in many cases moved to tears, at hearing about how powerful museum work could be.

For example, recently in the UK we have taken a national interest in **malaria** since a television celebrity contracted the disease, but how many of us know that **40% of deaths of Malawi children aged under two are from malaria**? How many of us know that the **Museums of Malawi have a malaria collection**? That the **prizes for children's quizzes in the Museums of Malawi are mosquito nets**, taken to Malawi by Canadian student volunteers because nets are unaffordable to many Malawians? That **children write poems on malaria prevention**? That **drama workshops, and traditional dances, focus on malaria**? When Michael Gondwe from Malawi described his work, he made the simple point that in conditions such as those in Malawi, museums can provide leadership and value, or, to use his phrase, **"museums can prevent people from dying"**. In an audience of 150 you could have heard a pin drop.

Second, having recently visited Cambodia and seen museums there striving to do their job educating people about the horrors of civil war and genocide, with hardly any financial support and with no discernible ways of networking with colleagues in other countries, it occurred to me that richer Western museums ought to be trying to find ways of supporting our colleagues in developing countries, who are often working in the most difficult conditions imaginable, with no resources. And yet, **their work is of incalculable value**.

Third, I could see that through collaborations we could find a collective voice across the globe, and museums could have stronger impact on politicians and on the general public. By finding ways to improve discourse and joint working, and by bringing the global network of NGOs into play, museums could generate real value.

The result has been the launching of the **Federation of International Human Rights Museums - FIHRM** - with an inaugural conference just last month in Liverpool, where we discussed many perspectives on museums and human rights.

We considered that **museums no longer look purely to collections for inspiration when relating histories – they now look much more to people, and to people's stories, and to ideas**.

We considered that **museums have become more emotive, and even emotional, which means that they are better able to communicate ideas**.

We considered that **museums are no longer monocultural, concentrating on the histories of dominant social groups, of the privileged – they embrace the histories of minority or oppressed groups, oppressed and alienated and excluded because of their class, or their ethnicity, or their gender or their sexuality. Museums have begun to embrace the notion of "cultural diversity"**.

We reminded ourselves that **not all is well in the world of museums**. The forces of reaction are strong and deeply engrained in their resistance to any challenges to the existing order, an order that demands that museums should be neutral in their outlook and interpretation, as though such a thing is possible, let alone desirable. We have to remember that **the museum world remains one where all sorts of outmoded ideas live on**. Those who, for example, revere museums as unique and special *purely* because they look after collections of objects, rather than because they are also places where ideas can be explored, stories told, and emotions expressed, may struggle with the idea of museums joining in the fight for human rights, respect and equality.

Nonetheless, in National Museums Liverpool we have no doubts whatsoever that museums can and should help fight for human rights. The International Slavery Museum is a socially responsible museum which takes an ideological stance. **This is not a museum that takes a *neutral* stance.**

Recently we launched the Slavery Museum's **Campaign Zone**, an area that demands quite explicitly that human rights should be cherished. The first exhibition in the Campaign Zone is entitled *Home alone: end domestic slavery*. Domestic work is one of the oldest occupations in the world and currently represents 10% of employment in some countries. Domestic workers in other people's homes perform tasks such as cooking, cleaning, laundry and taking care of children, sick and elderly people. Home alone, invisible to society and lacking legal protection, **domestic workers are among the most exploited and abused workers in the world**. Many are in slavery. International action is needed to give them legal protection.

The exhibition is the result of a collaboration between NML and Anti-Slavery International, and I am firmly of the belief that museums need to work collaboratively with such organisations. They offer us expertise, knowledge, contacts, experience. We offer them a platform. In Liverpool we offer them exposure to millions of museum visitors.

So to conclude: the global museum profession should abandon its outmoded and cowardly commitment to "neutrality", a neutrality which in any case is completely bogus, and embrace a new, more active role. This role is one where we are expected to explore what Carol Ann has called "unresolved social issues", and actually to counter injustice and oppression, human rights abuses, as required by the Torreon Declaration, wherever we are able to do so.