REPORT ON THE TOPOI-FUNDED WORKSHOP: 'ON COMMON GROUNDS? RESEARCHING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS OF MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE SITES' AT HOCHSCHULE FÜR TECHNIK UND WIRTSCHAFT BERLIN. OCTOBER 1-5, 2018.

Report on the Topoi-funded workshop: 'On Common Grounds? Researching Public Engagements of Museums and Heritage Sites' at Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Berlin. October 1-5, 2018.

BY CHRISTINE GERBICH (CARMAH) AND RIKKE GRAM (HTW)
ALL PHOTOS: ISABEL ALVAREZ

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND AIMS

Archaeological museums, sites, and community initiatives around the world are engaged in manifold projects to engage publics with material cultures of the past. Among these are exhibitions, tours, and workshops, as well as lectures, conferences, festivals, and long-term collaborations. Some of these projects are geared to go beyond the idea of transmitting expert knowledge to lay people. Instead, they are deliberately set up to inspire critical reflection on heritage and the values and power dynamics attached to it, and to facilitate dialogue about the uses of the past in the present. Many of these approaches are inspired by theoretical ideas and methods from critical pedagogy, critical heritage and museum studies, indigenous or community archaeology. While they are intended to increase the accessibility of museums and heritage sites, empower people and enhance participation, research has also pointed to the challenges connected to them in practice, such as the danger of 'empowerment-lite' (Lynch 2011), tokenistic treatment of collaboration partners, or the challenges of feeding the results of such projects back into the heritage institutions.

The TOPOI-funded world café On Common Grounds – rethinking (Islamic) heritage in Europe was a joint endeavour between CARMAH (the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage, which is part of the Institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt-Universität)1 and the Department for Museum Management and Communication at HTW (Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft) in Berlin. It emerged as part of a larger project titled Dealing with heritage – Dealing with damage initiated by the research cluster TOPOI. The aim of this sub-project was to create a space that allows for thinking about stabilities and instabilities of heritage, and the uses of heritage in light of perceived political and economic crises across Europe and elsewhere in the world.

This project incorporates four sub-projects that deal with questions such as legal perspectives on the preservation of heritage from an international perspective

---

1 CARMAH is funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as part of Prof. Dr. Sharon Macdonald's Alexander von Humboldt Professorship, the Humboldt-Universität, the SPK and the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde.

(Translocations), preservation of endangered heritage (Art preservation during war), and digitalization (The Digital Heritage Protection Commando). The fourth project, Searching for Common Ground seeks to investigate different notions of heritage, and to trace the various ways in which they are negotiated in pluralistic societies. Such an investigation seemed crucial, especially in light of the European Cultural Heritage Year (ECHY) 2018 which had been promoted under the slogan "Sharing Heritage", thus giving renewed prominence to the idea of heritage as a facilitator in cross-cultural communication and exchange.

The motto, 'sharing heritage' was taken as a point of departure to ask the following questions: What is understood by cultural heritage? How does its understanding differ in various contexts? And, which challenges occur when cultural heritage is being 'shared', negotiated and questioned in plural societies?

The concept of the On Common Grounds workshop was international and transdisciplinary and the call for applications was spread widely across the globe and across academic disciplines, but with a focus on archaeology, museum studies and anthropology.

AIMS OF THE 'ON COMMON GROUNDS?' WORKSHOP

The aims of the workshop were twofold:
- To bring together a heterogenous group of researchers for an intensive five-day workshop on the topic of public engagement in museums and at heritage sites. Heterogenous through its mix of nationalities, but also by aiming for both getting people mainly situated in praxis and others in the academies, as well as those early in their career and ones with more seniority.
- To enhance understanding about different ways of critically engaging people with heritage in museums and other projects around the world, that is, to explore the processes, dynamics and complexities of such heritage projects.

CREATING A 'COMMON GROUND'

Underlying the workshop's concept were ideas of radical democracy, as put forward by Chantal Mouffe (2013) who proposes that democracy demands the acknowledgement of differences, and that the political is an inherent part of everyday life. Creating a 'Common Ground' through the workshop was, thus, not connected to ideas of consensus or similarity, but rather, to establish a communicative space which would afford multivocality. Moreover, in the concept we drew on a socio-cultural understanding of learning as a situated practice (Bruner 1991; Brown und Duguid 1991; Lave 1988; Holland et al. 2001; Hickey und Zuiker 2005) meaning, that we understand learning as a process which is not happening (only) in the individual, but through participation in specific social contexts. Organizers deliberately went for a mixed methods approach which would promote learning on various levels, and

asked the facilitators of the different workshop days to do the same. Besides lectures, and panel discussions, this included methods that would allow participants to engage as much as possible with each other.

PREPARING THE WORKSHOP

The call for applications to the workshop was send out in late June 2018, and during the following month almost one hundred applications had been received. The call was sent out to our various networks, but a big effort was also put in reaching beyond those and getting to people who do not have the privilege of being part of museum studies departments, networks or other academic contexts where knowledge about public engagement is being exchanged on a regular basis. Also, issues of global justice in academia were explicitly addressed in the call for applications. This procedure already revealed differences with regard to the ways in which professional public engagement practices are embedded within the discipline of archaeology in different countries. For example, despite the Topoi funding and the call being send to several relevant networks, most of the applications we received came from countries outside Germany. Those applications we received from people working in German institutions were sent in by researchers who had been trained elsewhere, e.g. in Syria. One of the questions that arises from this is, thus, about the reasons for the relative lack of applications from archaeologists working in the field of public engagement in Germany.

In the selection of participants, we valued people's individual research projects and interests above their abilities to use a specific language or way of structuring arguments; we wanted people who did not only engage in public engagement work as part of their research, but who were critically reflecting on their and other publics role in heritage and its making from a theoretical point of few; another critera for the selection of participants was whether they expressed motivation to think collaboratively and were keen on exploring other ways of exchanging knowledge than the more conventional style applied during international conferences.

All 21 participants met the formal requirements and had presented a research project which they wished to discuss during the workshop. They came from different disciplinary backgrounds, mainly archaeology but also anthropology, art history and museum studies. They differed from each other with regard to their levels of experiences with academic research and public engagement practices, as well as their countries of residency: Argentina, Australia, Germany, Great Britain, Greece; Pakistan, South Africa, Tanzania, Turkey, United Kingdom, USA, and Zimbabwe.

At this point, organizers wish to highlight two of the structural difficulties connected to the organization of events that aim to reach out on a global level. First of all, some of the selected participants from outside the European Union were not able to join the workshop due to difficulties with visa applications. And second, some participants were not able to

advance money for the flight ticket thereby jeopardizing their participation. Organizers and participants collectively where at the last minute able to find a less-than-ideal solution and the two people whose participation was on the line could get tickets. The issue nevertheless raises questions with regard to structural discrimination of researchers from afar and of ones who do not belong to a global elite which may be able to afford, or even to advance, travel expenses regardless the average income in their countries. This discrimination on a structural level may lead to an uneven distribution of knowledge in general.

WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS

Each day of the workshop was devoted to a specific theme and facilitated by individual researchers who joined the discussions during the other days as regular participants.

Day 1: Creating a Common Ground

The aim of the first day was to create a "common ground" by providing opportunities for researchers to get to know each other and their respective research. Therefore, the workshop started out with a 'Meet and Greet' session, during which people introduced their research projects to each other via images of objects connected to their research that they had brought with them. One by one these were arranged on the so-called 'exhibition wall', together with labels participants had prepared. What followed was a world café format to collect questions and issues that researchers wished to address during the days to follow. This was considered useful by facilitators of the respective days, as it enabled them to understand

'I was inspired by the group and informal discussions and of course the joint cooking activity. There are related topics that I could use'
Wandile Kasibe

where the participants were 'at'. In the evening, a communal cooking session in a public kitchen in Berlin Kreuzberg was organized. Participants were split into groups, and each of these groups was preparing a dish. The collective activity of cooking was chosen over a more formal dinner setting with the purpose of creating a sense of community among the participants who, so far, was a group of strangers. But the aim was not only social, it was also a method of creating a situation for learning and exchange in which people would feel comfortable to speak out and discuss about their fields of interest.

Each of the following days were facilitated by professionals whom we beforehand had asked to provide a general input to the specific theme; to raise questions; and to use methods

of critical learning that would make participants reflect on these inputs through their specific field sites.

Day 2: Problematizing 'Heritage' and 'Archaeology'

This day was facilitated by Antonia Davidovic-Walther, an anthropologist and archaeologist from the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Davidovic-Walther presented an input on different theoretical notions of heritage and archaeology. This was followed by group discussions during which researchers reflected on and discussed different notions of heritage and archaeology in their respective field sites, and how these shape public engagement practices. In the afternoon, participant Anna Szöke from CARMAH gave

> 'I am quite struck by how the issue of human remains can bring out so many different kinds of emotions and reactions' Mustafa Kemal Baran

an input on the question of how to problematize heritage through exhibition curating. This was informed by her work with the research project TRACES[2] , where Szöke has been especially interested in understanding how publics react to the exhibition of human remains. This led to a heated debate in the workshop group about the different ways of handling the subject of human remains in museums, and a broader subject of dealing with difficult subjects and situations in our respective research and fields. This fruitful discussion contributed to an understanding about similarities and differences across fields, disciplines and borders.

Day 3: Reaching Out: Sharing Heritage, Sharing Power?

This day started with a presentation by facilitator Andrea Witcomb, professor of cultural heritage and museum studies at Deakin University. Witcomb reflected on exhibition projects as public

> 'How can we define the 'public'? Public = for all?' Cecilia Benedetti

engagement, exemplified with how this has been carried out in Australian museums on migration since the 1980ies where they, through continuously introducing new modes of engaging people with museum collection, can serve as inspiring examples of good practice for others. This was followed by group discussions and reflections on individual field sites, concerning

---

[2] http://www.traces.polimi.it/

topics like the creation of publics through heritage related activities, the meaning of exercising power through the politics of representations, and the problems and conflicts we as researchers observe among the actors involved. In the afternoon, the group went to see and reflect on the exhibition 'Restless Times. Archaeology in Germany' in Martin-Gropius-Bau, through which we could continue our discussions on ethical issues connected to the display of human remains in exhibitions, the differences of approaching the issue in different cultural contexts, and the institutional obstacles for negotiating the issue in public engagement work. Moreover, the group critically reflected on the narratives put forward through the exhibition, as well as its strategies of displaying objects.

Day 4: Reaching in: Negotiating (institutional) Heritage

In reaction to discussions on the previous days, facilitators Bonita Bennett, director of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, and Christine Gerbich, CARMAH, started out by providing a brief theoretical reflection to problematize concepts of 'the public', 'participation', and 'museum'. This was followed by an interactive session which staged 'public engagement on trial'. Two volunteers were asked to 'defend' failures of public engagement that had been identified by researchers during previous discussion. After having trialed PE, without a verdict though, the turn had come to the heritage institutions.

'It was definitely a thought-provoking day' Lena Stefanou

Participants were asked to reflect on the issue of institutional challenges, and to develop together possible strategies of solving these. This exercise worked well for comparing our different field and institutional setting, and to look for commonalities and differences when coming up with possible solutions. In the afternoon, a public panel

discussion took place under the title 'Sounds great, but in reality...' – an encounter with heritage professionals from Germany' Invitees were Duane Jethro, CARMAH, who presented his research on strategies of non-participation by anti-Humboldt activists in Berlin; John-Paul Sumner, Museum for Islamic Art Berlin, who talked about challenges of access curating within the museum; Susanne Kuprella, Museum for Prehistory Berlin, who problematized the process of making the exhibition 'Restless Times'; and Felicia Meynersen, German Archaeological Institute who provided a critical reflection on the Institute's practices of working in international contexts. This meeting was later reflected on by the international participants as a great opportunity to get more insights into the practices and realities of public

engagement work in Germany and by German institutions, and the panelists were keen on using this group of global experts to reflect on their work.

Day 5: Doing research on public engagements with heritage: ethical considerations

The facilitator of this day was Andrea Witcomb who took point of departure in the exhibition

'Andrea's presentation spoke to some of my on-going research key issues. How do communities displaced from their 'land' imagine their ancestral lands and how can they be engaged in the governance of heritage sites?' Munyaradzi Elton Sagiya

'Identity: yours, mine, ours' at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia. This exhibition deliberately aims to promote emotional engagements through exhibitions, and the presentation was followed by an intensive discussion on the role of affects and emotions in exhibition contexts, and the ethical questions arising from this. Continuing the discussions from day three where Witcomb had brought up the ethical guidelines from the Migrant Museum in Adelaide, participants compared ethical guidelines from various national and institutional contexts and discussed the ways in which they address practices of public engagement, how they differ from each other and suggestions for how they could improve.

The workshop's final afternoon concluded with a discussion on future collaborations concerning the work begun on this workshop, and an evaluation session. The latter is being revised below with further comments by us as organizers.

DOCUMENTATION

To document the outputs of the workshop, participants were asked each morning to devote a few minutes to reflect on the discussions of the previous day which were collected on the

so-called Exhibition Wall. The results of group discussions were documented on a separate wall, the so-called Forum Wall. The reasons for doing this was first of all to give participants time to contemplate on what they learned and how they could use it in their future work, but also to record people's ideas in a way for others in the team to see and be inspired. During breaks participants

would stroll the room, reading each other's reflections and the results of group discussions.

OUTCOMES

The individual reflections of participants have giving us a valuable insight into the themes and questions raised by participants concerning their own field sites, what they are taking with them home of new or different academic knowledge and methods.

Recurring themes on these reflections include:

- the need to complicate concepts such as 'engagement', 'the public', 'empowerment' etc., and to reflect more on them both on a micro-level and how they are being shaped and mobilized in international project;
- the interplay between 'learning' and 'remembering';
- the role of affects and emotion regarding public engagement work, that is, the way how these emotions may be engineered through public engagement work and the effects of this in their specific contexts;
- the challenges regarding institutional change, and the promotion of porous structures within these;
- reflections on cultural differences regarding the way of dealing with contentious heritage;
- reflections on the role of heritage in areas of conflict, e.g. in how far different notions of heritage are useful to enable dialogue between opposing groups;
- questions regarding the positionalities of researchers in the field, that is, their role in transformational processes;
- the question of 'tone', that is, the ways in which conflicts in institutions and on sites are addressed and what kinds of research may be useful to grasp this;
- reflections regarding the creation of ethical futures through 'restorative' heritage;
- the ways in which international stakeholders shape heritage-making processes;
- the different dimensions and dynamics that lead to inclusive/exclusive mechanisms.

EVALUATION OF WORKSHOP THROUGH PARTICIPANTS

In the following, we are going to present crucial points brought up during the feedback round at the end of the workshop:

A good alternative to conferences: A general appreciation of the format of the workshop in comparison to the more classical conference format (presentations by few) as 'we got deep into things'.

*Diversity as a useful resource for reflections***:** Having a heterogeneous group of people from different parts of the world, but also bringing practitioners and researchers (and those working on the intersections of theory and practice) together was seen as being of high value as it enabled reflection on similarities and differences of public engagement work both from a global perspective, but also from different professional points of view.

Methods fostered a positive learning atmosphere: There was an overall agreement that the workshop fostered a positive learning atmosphere as it enabled active participation (e.g.

through group exercises, using objects to introduce fieldwork, reflections in the morning, forum discussions).

Creation of a community of learners: The workshop was successful in that it created a community of researchers, that is, people sharing similar interests, practices, values, and enjoyed working together. It was highlighted that the format managed to create a personal and confidential atmosphere which allowed them to share failure and to give and receive critique.

Workshop enabled reflection on own research project: The texts provided together with the discussions allowed for a critical reflection on individual research projects.

A need to gain a better understanding about each other's field sites: More detailed insights into each other's fields of research would be necessary to allow for a better understanding of similarities and differences.

A need for more reflection on how museums and heritage sites differ with regard to their publics and modes of engagement: Most of the sessions used public engagement work of museums, especially the exhibition as public engagement, as examples. A need was expressed to widen the perspective, and to reflect more on the differences between specific engagement contexts, especially at archaeological heritage sites.

Restricted time: While the themes and discussions were appreciated, many felt that the workshop did not leave enough time for in depth discussions of complex conceptual and practical issues.

A need for a more theoretically grounded reflection on public engagement work: Some participants mentioned that the readings provided were useful and that they felt that discussions needed to be more theoretically framed and grounded. This also made clear the differences in accessibility to readings prevalent among participants, due to language barriers, local and financial difficulties.

A need to reflect on the political dimensions of public engagement work: Several people pointed to the more activist, political dimensions of public engagement work and the necessity for more criticality, e.g. with regards to the handling of human remains.

The workshop as 'the beginning of a journey', 'a first level': The group agreed on the necessity to continue working together as a group, as this would allow them to continue conversations and give and receive advice in a trustful environment.

CONCLUDING REMARK

As organizers of the workshop 'On Common Grounds? Researching Public Engagements of Museums and Heritage Sites' we were extremely satisfied with the workshop, and as researchers of public engagement work in museums ourselves, we have learned much from our fellow participants and facilitators. Even though we found the double role as both organizers and participants difficult at times. There has been an urge to continue our collective work, and the workshop has become the founding event for a network consisting

of participants, who will continue working together on the subjects initiated in Berlin. This will currently take place online, but collectively we are looking for funding for a second workshop in the future.

Reflecting on the workshop subsequently we agree on a few things that we can do better next time: the preparation of facilitators especially on the methods of critical learning need to be more extensive, but we also acknowledge the need for in-depth presentations of concepts and methods due to people's diverse backgrounds. In the future we will also put forth peoples different and similar academic backgrounds to support participants in their disciplines but also to strengthen the interdisciplinarity of our common grounds.

Despite the *InStabilities* Excellence Cluster not being realized, we conclude that the workshop has brought forth valuable insights into plural understandings and use of heritage around the world and their meaning for and use by different publics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brown, John Seely; Duguid, Paul (1991): Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovating. In: *Organization Science* 2 (1), S. 40–57. Online verfügbar unter files/511/Brown und Duguid - 1991 - Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practic.pdf.

Bruner, Jerome (1991): The Narrative Construction of Reality. In: *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1), S. 1–21. DOI: 10.1086/448619.

Hickey, Daniel T.; Zuiker, Steven J. (2005): Engaged Participation: A Sociocultural Model of Motivation With Implications for Educational Assessment. In: *Educational Assessment* 10 (3), S. 277–305. DOI: 10.1207/s15326977ea1003_7.

Holland, Dorothy; Skinner, Debra; Lachiotte Jr., William; Cane, Caroline (Hg.) (2001): Identity and agency in cultural worlds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.

Lave, Jean (1988): Cognition in practice: mind, mathematics, and culture in everyday. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lynch, Bernadette (2011): Whose cake is it anyway? A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in 12 museums and galleries in the UK. London: Paul Hamilton Foundation

Mouffe, Chantal (2013): Agonistics. Thinking the world politically. London: Verso.