

The Museum as Arena

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In my short presentation about the future of the museum, I want to start by looking back. I want to look back to a perhaps particularly German set of ideas, hoping that this ideas' paradigmatic value is not bound to its country of origin, but can be generalized, at least to a certain degree.

The name of Wilhelm von Humboldt sounds familiar to the most of us. He was the reformer of the university system in the Prussian state in the late 18th until mid- 19th century. What plays a crucial role in his theory about the university and education system is a word that first was used in times of European mysticism by Meister Eckhart: the word *Bildung*. It contains the word *Bild* = image, which is in Meister Eckhart's writing related to the *imago dei*, to man's likeness to God. *Bildung* means a process, a process of forming a *Bild*, an image. As in Christian theology, the similitude to God can't be established as a similitude of form, it only can be conceived as an inner similitude, a likeness inside. The form of *Bildung* is an inner form, the process of *Bildung* as forming this inner imago is an internal process.

It is helpful to remember the origin of the word that became since late 18th, early 19th century a key word in many political discussions related to the struggle for political participation in Germany. With its sister term, *Kultur*, which was synonymous with the French "civilization" or "civilization", it had a particular German career and significance which is reflected in the relevance Humboldt ascribes to it.

It is obvious that *Bildung* is only insufficiently translated by the term education, for which the German equivalent would be *Erziehung*. *Erziehung* relates to the transfer and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, sometimes also termed as "instrumental knowledge". Education helps to excel in a profession, may this be the profession of a carpenter or of an art historian. But *Bildung*, in Humboldt's hierarchy of values, would be superior as it doesn't aim at any pragmatic purpose. It represents a value that is not derived from any other values and is therefore autonomous in the true sense. *Bildung* only serves the purpose of the self-forming of the human being to become what he or she is able to become. It is a tool to become a human being in the complete meaning of the word – an emancipated subject and full individual and a citizen of the world.

Similar to Kant's concept of disinterestedness in the aesthetic judgment as reflexive judgment, Humboldt conceives an ideal of *Bildung* by which the individual is put into a position to learn and to acquire knowledge beyond the horizon of practicalities and necessities. It has no particular interest in anything it learns, but a particular interest in understanding the world and in understanding how it understands. The process of *Bildung* is a process of understanding myself, and by understanding myself beyond or without my particular interests, leanings, desires, I understand something about the entire world. By

becoming myself, I become a citizen of the world, as I find within myself what can be found within everyone precisely because of the disinterestedness of my interest.

But *Bildung* needs to be provided, and Humboldt saw it as the state's task to establish and to maintain a schooling and university system that enables the individual to pursue both, the acquisition of instrumental knowledge, and the self-perfection by forming the inner self. In his text "ideas for an attempt to define the limits of the power of the state" (1792), Humboldt writes: "In my opinion, the *Bildung* of the human being should always prevail, and this *Bildung* should aim at the maximum of freedom and it should as little as possible consider the social circumstances. The human, formed in such a way, then shall enter into the arena of the state, and the state's condition has to be examined and scrutinized in relationship to it, and it (the state) needs to prove itself right. Only by instigating this fight (struggle, battle, dissent, "Kampf"), there is hope for the nation's true improvement, and only by this I would not be worried about the influence of the bourgeois institution on the human being."¹

These lines are quite astounding even after 220 years. Humboldt says nothing less than, that it should be the state's task to equip its citizens with the knowledge, the intellectual capacities, the capabilities for reflexion to oppose what seems to be the state's interest; to fight the state, if necessary, as the state can only improve by being scrutinized by its members, the citizens. And the justness of the state is qualified according to what it provides for the citizens to become the free individualsthey are supposed to be.

Of course, we are not talking about armed insurrection; the fight, he is arguing for, is a non-violent, an argumentative one, it is a fight in the form of exchange of rational arguments, finding reasonable arrangements and administrative procedures that put into place what seems to be fair and just.

Humboldt's ideas need to be seen in the light of the theory of the just state by his contemporary Hegel. Hegel says:

"The polity is the reality of concrete freedom; concrete freedom means, that the individual singularity and its particular interests are entitled to enjoy their full development and the recognition of their rights, as well as they transform themselves by themselves into the interests of the generality. (...) They recognize the generality as their substantiality and as their final goal, so that neither the general can be valid or achieved without their particular

¹Wilhelm von Humboldt Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen (1792) PDF-Version: www.mises.de, S. 25.

Daher müßte, meiner Meinung zufolge, die freieste, so wenig als möglich schon auf die bürgerlichen Verhältnisse gerichtete Bildung des Menschen überall vorgehen. Der so gebildete Mensch müßte dann in den Staat treten und die Verfassung des Staats sich gleichsam an ihm prüfen. Nur bei einem solchen Kampfe würde ich wahre Verbesserung der Verfassung durch die Nation mit Gewißheit hoffen und nur bei einem solchen schädlichen Einfluß der bürgerlichen Einrichtung auf den Menschen nicht besorgen.

interest, consciousness and desire, nor the individuals only live for the purpose of just having a private life, but they want to live within and for the generality (...)."²

This idealistic concept of the complete congruence between the state's and the citizens' interests has something totalitarian, which Foucault would later criticize with the term of governmentality. But what is interesting about it, is that it constructs the relationship between the citizen and the state as a dialectical one.

The state constitutes itself as the totality of the subjective and individual, reasonable and reflexive intentions of its citizens; it is the realization of the citizens' freedom as the ultimate and rightful convergence of general and individual reason, universality and particularity. The individual, the citizen is fully recognized and reflected in the generality of the state as the highest formulation of its aspiration for freedom.

If we repeat one more time the central sentence in Humboldt's paragraph – "Only by instigating this fight (struggle, battle, dissent, "Kampf"), there is hope for the nation's true improvement" – it is clear, that Hegel's dream of the peace between the state and the individual receives a particular note with Humboldt. The way he conceives of the relationship between state and citizen is much closer to what more recent political theory has termed agonial. In the center of the political process are not consent and harmony, not agreement and peace, but dissent, disagreement and fight. As the democratic state cannot be based on any substance – people, race, religion, truth, destiny or whatever – but only on the representation and the negotiation of interests, the center of the democratic process is a void. In this void, politics and the political, the constituted and what aims to be constituted, the established and what aims to be established are in constant fight. The democratic arena or, what Humboldt called the arena of the state, is an arena in which what is recognized and what wants to be recognized are battling with each other. In Hanna Arendt's thinking, the political opposed to politics is essentially the making of the polis, the public sphere, as a space of freedom as the response to the fragility of all human affairs.

If we ask how the idea of *Bildung* is related to our today's topic, the museum – and I restrict myself to museums of fine arts, crafts etc. – and in particular to my topic, the future of the museum, several answers would be possible:

²Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, § 260: „Der Staat ist die Wirklichkeit der konkreten Freiheit; die konkrete Freiheit aber besteht darin, dass die persönliche Einzelheit und deren besondere Interessen sowohl ihre vollständige Entwicklung und die Anerkennung ihres Rechts für sich [...] haben, als sie durch sich selbst in das Interesse des Allgemeinen [...] übergehen [...] und zwar als ihren eigenen substantiellen Geist anerkennen und für dasselbe als ihren Endzweck tätig sind, so dass weder das Allgemeine ohne das besondere Interesse, Wissen und Wollen gelte und vollbracht werde, noch dass die Individuen bloß für das Letztere als Privatpersonen leben, und nicht zugleich in und für das Allgemeine wollen und dieses Zwecks bewusste Wirksamkeit haben.“ My translation.

- Museums are institutions of *Bildung* insofar as they provide the basis for it: education, instrumental knowledge, on which *Bildung* rests and builds itself upon: information about origin, date, possible iconography, cultural use of artefacts etc.; there is much to say about the specific encounter the aesthetic object requires – the reflexive judgment compared with the determining judgment according to Kant’s aesthetic theory and the particular reflexive mode the individual needs to develop when facing the unique and always incommensurable object that asks for a unique and specific judgment.
- Museums represent spaces of exemption, a rupture, a delineated exception within the social fabric. They are, to use well known terms, dystopical and dyschronical spaces: Dystopical as they group together in one space items of different spatial and cultural origin; dyschronical as they group together simultaneously items that come from different times. In this sense, museums represent an interruption in the homogeneity of time and space.
- Historical objects from vanished or foreign cultures as well as objects of aesthetic significance are characterized by what can be called “structural points of indeterminability” (Ingarden), points of equivocity, that point in one direction and the opposite at the same time. This equivocity is the result of an over determination of each of the artwork’s elements, a syntactic and semantic density or overcharge that is an essential property of the aesthetic object. What the aesthetic object is, is the result of a debate how to read the material object which we encounter; it is the result of a translation of the materially given into an artefact into an aesthetic object.
- What the museum as an institution of *Bildung* then provides is a space for the contemplative and individual interaction between the beholder and an object; an exchange of observations, knowledge, information among individuals; and a solitary or shared process of assessment and evaluation of the object as a temporary determination of the indeterminable and the value of the evaluation. It is in this process, that the individual not only becomes aware of his or her own history, or a history of a faraway civilization or any other fact hitherto unknown; it also becomes aware of its own methodologies of reflection; it becomes a self-aware, an emancipated subject that uses its own intellectual capacities according to its own capabilities.
- The aesthetic judgement can, as Kant says, only be subjective and reflexive. It needs, to achieve intersubjective relevance, to be held against other subjective judgments, it needs to be compared. It needs discourse; it needs debate to escape the confinement of a mere private opinion. The discourse that is built on the aesthetic judgement is a public discourse; it needs the public discourse to escape its detriments. In this sense, the aesthetic judgement calls for the debate in public, and, furthermore, it establishes the public in which the discourse takes place. Enlightenment asks for a very simple freedom; the freedom of the public use of one’s own reason. As the aesthetic judgment is never a determining, only a reflexive one, the use of reason is essential,

and the use of reason is essentially the exchange of judgments in public. Kant, also in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, identifies three different ways of how to use one own's reason: 1. Selbstdenken = think autonomously. 2. An der Stelle jedes anderen denken – think as if in the position of the other. 3. Jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken – think consequently in the line of your own thinking.

- In this sense, the museum as a place where these three modes of thinking are required as a praxis of freedom, as a praxis of establishing the polis, is by definition a public space, a space of debate, of agonism. And it is in this sense, a highly political space. It produces the political as it produces the political subject.

It is clear, I suppose, what in my eyes the museum should not try to be: It should not try to be an institution of mere instruction or information, one has to take in unquestioned. And it should not try to be an institution of entertainment. Museums tend to favor one or the other of these alternatives: dry, uninspired display; a graveyards silence, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it; or, in recent days, the overkill of moving images, an assault onto all senses, edutainment at any cost. The first extreme alternative institutes the museum as the holder of unfathomable knowledge, a paradigm of patriarchal superiority that should not be doubted; the second one follows the dictate to produce ever more footfall to be able to justify the expenditure of taxpayer's money. In both instances the institution loses what is its most precious potential: the potential of *Bildung*.

The state organizations which are responsible for maintaining museums, preserving their holdings, making their treasures accessible, developing new methods of reaching out to people, raising awareness of the cultural richness of the past will be measured against their efforts and their success in making museums places for the citizenry. The citizenry not as the receiver of information, instruction, ideology; but as an equal counterpart in the arena, where the meaning of artefacts is debated, the reflexive capabilities of each individual are fostered, the desire for emancipation is supported, a new vision of the relationship between the authorities and the individual, the state and the citizen takes shape in the Humboldtian sense as an agon, as a fight for the sake of the state's improvement.