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'Whose cake is it anyway?': working through conflict and confronting empowerment-lite in the museum-as-contact-zone

For decades many museums have been committed to a utopian social justice image of the 21st century, democratic, 'dialogic museum'. Yet the reality of work frequently fails to match the rhetoric, even when the impetus behind the words is inspired by a genuinely democratic impulse. The paper is based on new research into the museum-as-contact-zone (Lynch 2009, 2011), focusing on issues of democracy; power; conflict; 'empowerment-lite' (Cornwall) and 'false consensus' (Gaventa). Reflecting also, on the results of a recently completed study of 12 museums and galleries across the UK on behalf of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (Lynch 2011), the paper will show that, with some notable exceptions, the majority of genuinely committed museum professionals express the feeling of being 'stuck' in terms of reaching their aspirations to engage with the public, while their community participants continue to express a significant degree of frustration and dissatisfaction.

The paper argues that this failure lies in both the museum's reluctance and/or inability to reflect on the complexity of power relationships within its engagement practices and primarily, to face up to conflict within these exchanges (as had been understood by both Pratt 1991 and Clifford 1997 as intrinsic to their notions of the contact zone). Furthermore, the museum's failure to put active agency, 'capability' or the 'power to do something' at the heart of their work with people, has led to a situation of stasis for both museum professionals and their community partners. How might the museum become a vibrant public sphere of active agency, contestation and deliberation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted (Mouffe) and new forms of active citizenship in the museum as civic space, where closer attention is paid to the discourses of which the language used in relation to participation forms a part. (Hajer 1993)

With examples of emerging practice in the UK that is beginning to address these issues, the paper demonstrates that far from seeing their community partners as passive 'beneficiaries' (Gaventa 2004), museums are starting to solicit the help of their community partners in order to generate, articulate and consolidate new 'customs' (MacGonagle) for the museum as 'participatory sphere institution' (Cornwall). Focusing on Nobel-prize winning economist, Amartya Sen's notion of 'capability' (Sen 2010, Nussbaum (2000)) a model of active participation rather than passive consumption is proposed, in which museums are beginning to realise their capability in actively supporting others to realize theirs.