

# Cosmopolis: The Pivot of the World

## Anthony Alan Shelton

*University of British Columbia, Vancouver*

Historically, Mexico - Tenochtitlan was always a cosmopolitan centre where different cultures were forced into dialogue, despite it having been characterised in political histories from Justo Sierra to José Vasconcelos and Octavio Paz as part of a tidier and essentialized history in which diversity was reduced and hidden within the racialized categories of the Indigenous, the European and the mestizo. Since 1428 the triple alliance between the Mexica, the Tepanacs and the Texcocans, the predominant seat of power in Mexico was Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The Aztec metropolis, which Bernal Diaz described as outshining all other cities including Madrid and Saville, in its size, orderliness and grandeur, received ambassadors, and emissaries from its conquered territories, traded in slaves and war captives, and was the central destination and pivot of a vast tribute, network and imperial administration system. Although Nahuatl was the dominant language, priests, administrators, and war captains possessed multilingual skills necessary for its administration, diplomatic negotiations and continuing military expansion.

After 1492, this cosmopolitan mix was extended by the arrival of Spaniards, and the European Catholic priesthood which brought and imposed new languages on the existing polyglot nations and who themselves transplanted an estimated 200,000 Africans prior to Mexico's independence in 1821. These arrivals from Africa and elsewhere in the Hispanic-American world originally spoke Bantu languages, which through intermarriage and integration into indigenous communities have



now disappeared. Nevertheless, in the 2015 Encuesta Intercensal, which for the first time provided people the opportunity to self-identify, 1,381,853 individuals registered their African origins. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dictator Porfirio Diaz successfully encouraged large-scale European immigration to help modernize and develop the country. These, in turn were joined by Lebanese traders and Chinese workers. More recently starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, North Americans increasingly visited and stayed in Mexico, supplemented in the last few decade by Indians and Koreans. The 2017 adoption of the general law governing culture and cultural rights whose principles are enshrined by the federal government as well as Mexico City's own constitution mark the culmination of a long and not always felicitous history in which different regimes installed in Mexico-Tenochtitlan have usually dominated

and unilaterally defined the terms of intercultural dialogue throughout the nation.

The City of Mexico, its museums and UNESCO have not been slow to realize that such dialogue can and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been mediated by one of the most extensive and important networks of diverse cultural institutions found anywhere in the world. The academic forum, Ciudad de México: Lugar donde las culturas dialogan, held in conjunction with the ninth Feria Internacional de las Culturas Amigas between 29<sup>th</sup> May-2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2017, was intended to encourage dialogue between countries, institutions, academics, artists, administrators, directors and those responsible for projects and programs for the promotion and protection of the cultural diversity in order to exchange reflections, best practices and draft recommendations designed to strengthen existing links and initiatives and stimulate cultural diversity in the City of Mexico” (2017: 5-6). Following the well-established vision expounded in the 2010 UNESCO annual report, Investment in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue and the 2015 UNESCO evaluation of the progress secured within the first decade of the implementation of the Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the 2017 program focused specifically on the future of languages, education, the communication and transmission of cultural contents and expressions, the interface between culture and the markets and the defense of human rights and the freedom of creativity (Ibid.). The following paper will focus on the strengthening relations between the re-identification of cities as cosmopolitan spaces embodying intercultural knowledge, and museums as spaces for intercultural exchange and learning. It will argue that multilingualism, intercultural education, cultural heritages, the cultural market, including copyright law, and the defense of the right of cultural expressions are a closely related constellation of subjects which, because they imply a new cultural contract based on epistemological decolonization, might best be approached through a new kind of institution or a new integration of existing institutions, which for brevity’s sake we have termed the “cosmopolis”.

The growth of cities worldwide has been accompanied by cultural diversification and the establishment of coexisting epistemologies, multiple knowledge systems and ways of seeing and expressing the world. Unfortunately, the florescence of knowledge systems has progressed alongside the development of hierarchical structures that often differentiate and devalue their merits and frequently ghettoise and marginalize non-dominant knowledge systems and their practitioners. Museums, universities and cultural organizations have new roles to play as portals and interrupters through which alternate ideas can be networked, disseminated and innovated. It will be argued that museums and the wider organizations of which they are part, in the urban civilizations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to transform themselves into a cosmopolis, a physical and digitally connected institution, that bring together diverse tangible and intangible cultural, mathematical and scientific expressions under a multicultural group of curators, intellectuals and facilitators, regulated by international (including Indigenous) governance structures.

Although the cosmopolis currently does not exist, we could imagine such an organization emerging from institutions like the Humboldt Forum, the Palais de Tokyo, the Japan National Museum of Ethnology and the INAH. Each could provide world theatres in which difference and complexity would be mediated, and interfered with through public participation. Any of these institutions if reconfigured would be capable of providing a substitute platform for the now dysfunctional former social contract based on established differences, homogeneity and value consensus, which is fundamentally incompatible with multi and intercultural decision-based dialogue.

This transformation is more urgent than ever because of three critical social, cultural and environmental requirement. First, the cosmopolis is required to fulfill and expand the conditions recognised by UNESCO for the protection of cultural diversity and the encouragement of its unhampered growth. Culture is notoriously difficult to define, but most definitions fall into one of two categories, first, that which abstracts, isolates and essentializes

culture as a creative expression and/or materialization of visual stimuli, transcendental knowledge, ideas, theories, performance or sound patterns, and a second category, which acknowledge these characteristics as expressions of political conditions. Most museums mobilize their resources in the first of these arenas, with only a few avant-garde ethnographic museums and art organizations, daring to participate in the second. The paradox for UNESCO is that it too almost inevitably adopts the first of these definitional arenas because essentializing such expressions allows for their recording and preservation, while culture as political action and expression neither allows consensus on its merit for preservation or provides easy techniques and methodologies for its preservation and transmission. The first definitional arena, through objectification produces an embalmed culture, while the second by replacing objectivising discourses with greater subjectivism gives at best unstable and fragile institutions like the Multiplex in my fictional 2011 story *Multiplex Babel*. What then, given such limitations, is UNESCO and institutions with similar mandates to do in supporting cultural diversity? By supporting the idea of cosmopolis, they accept the cacophony of political difference, but they also recognize the possibility of its resolution. Culture is alive only within its wider social and political context. It accepts necessarily more fragile and compromised institutions, whose unitary imagination is an accepted idealised but useful transcendental deference only to defend human rights, political tolerance and pluriculturalism.

Important elements of the intellectual architecture required to transform the museumification of culture are already present in human rights museums like the Museo Memoria y Tolerancia, Mexico City, Museo de Reconciliation, Lima, and the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg. Instead of seeing the transgression of rights not as an abhorration, but as a negative aspects (and necessarily critiqued) aspect of certain cultural conditions, it becomes easier to recognize the political aspect of everyday cultural expressions. Our museums currently divide the history of aberrations from the expression of normative cultural

expressions, utilizing politics to explain the first while denying it in the interpretation of the second. In so doing we correctly unleash emotional response to rights-based museums mobilizing outrage to the ever-present danger of barbarity, but at the same time we accept a passive approach to cultural diversity which is easily digestible as mere folkloric veneer, that brings colour, 'spice' and celebratory appeal, while usually ignoring its vital, critical and sometimes frightening and menacing qualities which are capable of filling us with excitement, anticipation and sometimes trepidation.

Nowhere is the dead-hand of the de-politicisation of culture more clearly seen than in folk art museums. The Museo de Arte Popular in Mexico City can be read as the opposite of the City's Museo Memoria y Tolerancia, though memorialization is an essential part of the philosophy behind both museums. The Museo de Arte Popular with its spectacular and colourful scenography presents different folk expressions through object types (presentation showing the diversity of Indigenous costumes from across the country, or a stunning display of trees of life from Metepec, Izúcar and Coyotepec); materials and techniques (in which pre-Columbian examples are sometimes compared with contemporary pottery to suggest the preservation of ancient forms); religion and ritual (with displays of masks from throughout the Republic, and the section presenting altars from the Day of the Dead). (To learn of Huichol and Cora religion the visitor must visit the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Historia). Special exhibitions look at the varied arts and crafts from specific states. This great panopticon, redolent with ingenious forms, shimmering with bright colours, and bursting with creativity suggests a conjunction between the Indigenous, Hispanic and mestizo worlds which mysteriously preserves a common national spirit against the onslaught of migration, globalization, NAFTA – in a word, of history. It is design and form that takes the place of culturally contiguous functional objects; the result of techniques that substitute for their description and the rainbow spectrum of object types that is exchanged for explanations of their unique and changing significance, curious survival and the cultural palimpsests of rituals calendars or cultural borrowings forced by foreign migration

and the exploitation of labour in the fields of California, the orchards of British Columbia and the factories and construction sites of Chicago. At home, the effect of foreign markets and supply on the decline of lacquer work in Chiapa de Corzo or the changing conditions underlying the supply of amber to the jewellery makers of Chiapas is passed over in silence. The Museum's indisputably rich displays express through forceful and unforgettable scenography, the cultural diversity of Mexico, but there is no space given to dialogue about how this diversity came into being; the establishment and growth of folk art production to buttress rural workers against their shrinking land shares and declining profitability of the agricultural market, nor the competitive arenas established by government policies to bestow awards for competence, quality and perseverance in pursuing functionally redundant crafts and the politics of cheap imports of new goods that have made such traditional wares obsolete. These are displays, which blot-out sweat, suffering, hardship and struggle. Despite their celebration of cultural difference, dialogue is completely missing from these exhibitions. In contrast, another museum based in Mexico City, the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares' space upholds a broader view of folk art precisely by treating it as a political cultural production. For this museum, popular culture is not limited to the Indigenous population, but also includes migrants and the urban mestizo population as well. Having no collections of its own and assisting smaller and community museums to organize dispersed exhibitions, the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, founded by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, focuses on the cultural and socio-economic conditions of folk and popular art production. It is the polar opposite of the Museo de Arte Popular and strongly assert the foci for cultural dialogue rather than simply tranquilizing its visitors by a spectacularized aesthetic stultification. The Museo Universitario del Chopo plays a similar role to the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares by providing a popular forum. Not always adhering to legal restrictions, such as during the 1980s when rock music was banned by the Government, Chopo provided the space for a market for trade in banned records. Since then it has built a strong constituency with urban youth curating exhibitions on punk and other youth movements as well as avant-garde

photographers and graphic and installation artists. Like the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, for Chopo, culture is never independent of history and politics and it is the history and politics of culture, rather than culture by itself that encourages the deep, sustained and innovative thought that is essential for the healthy life of culturally diverse cities.

Museums in Mexico City, as elsewhere, inevitably promote cultural dialogue but specific institutions focus on different interest, have diverse aims, and use varied methods and models of engagement. There is here an interesting correlation that suggests the closer the relation between government and museum the more formally structured is the engagement that takes place. The less proximity between the two on the contrary supports informal, non-normative types of engagement. It follows therefore, that for the cosmopolis to succeed it must depend less on federal government funding and more on municipal, community-based or university funding.

The second advantage for cultural engagement when channelled through a cosmopolis is, the space they allow for criticizing and superseding current academically imposed disciplinary divisions. While promoting, and deepening research, disciplinary divisions have caused a split between the public and the understanding of science and the humanities. Humanity has been cut off from the contemporary sources of knowledge production leaving a void subject to manipulation by the purveyors of false information and lies. The research functions of universities have grown enormously during the past seventy years so much so that periodic discussion in the North American university sector on funding crises usually refers to undergraduate teaching rather than their expanding research activities. Funding has been increasingly focused on specific topics within particular subjects, causing less financially appealing research to decline. However, my point here is that increase in research has led to the reorganization of science into a proliferation of increasingly specialised departments. Examining these departments as intrinsically inward looking units, raises problems of how their research is connected and the nature of the currently

wider picture, which they have built. In other words, we need to interrogate the conditions of pursuing knowledge, its epistemological coherency, how knowledges fit together and modify our view of the world, in order for us to clarify and revitalize the basis on which we make everyday decisions. These questions have enormous importance for the way we understand the world, our relation to it and the basis on which we make decisions and legitimate our actions. Moreover, a proper if necessarily superficial answer to these questions is extremely important in negotiating our relationship to other cultures, which we widely assume to possess different knowledge systems to our own. Would a general and unified Western scientific knowledge system which we are far from being given, indicate that the barriers between epistemologies and different knowledge systems lie far more apart or are other cultures more similar to our own than we usually assume? Such basic questions remain unanswered by anthropologists, but even if there was more clarity, we have no institutions to disseminate the cutting edge implications of new knowledge production. It is not, after all, so long ago that anthropologists, having been unable to identify non-Aristotelian logically constructed knowledge systems, concluded that the inescapable constraints of their own logical construction of the world would be unable to identify alternatives, even if they did exist. Does science provide alternative methods for dealing with such conundrums?

A third role of the cosmopolis, in its attempt to decolonize knowledge systems, is therefore to research and present the implications of this disciplinary fragmentation on knowledge as a whole. A series of exhibitions are needed to present different slices of universal knowledge drawn from re-totalizing the specialist research areas which have divided it and, in the process, to evaluate common assumptions about ethics, mind/body, subject/object, and the common language assumptions that have grown and continue to be accepted as truth presuppositions based on an older and simpler concept of Western knowledge. Currently, only its critics claim to know what Western knowledge is. It therefore falls to knowledge producers and epistemologists to help disclose the nature of the sources on which contemporary knowledge is based.

Such a project is enormous and requires the cosmopolis to be able to draw on wide intellectual and curatorial resources. Not, however, before we know what constitutes the contemporary thought-world of the West, can we determine our level of appreciation and understanding of anybody else's view of the world. Only once these questions have been answered are we in a position to expand our dialogue to cultural others to obtain a deeper appreciation of the difference and hybridity that promises to enrich our understanding of the world and its peoples and provide alternative thought worlds through which to confront the leading problems and crises of our time. Perhaps the greatest levelling factor between knowledge systems that promises equality of thought and opinion might be the emerging common experience of the similar unique and uncharted condition of living in an increasingly hostile and unpredictable new geological age.

The cosmopolis, far more than a museum or gallery, might have as its closest model the *theatrum mundi*, a grand representation of the cosmos but unlike the institution, I propose, designed to answer questions, but seldom to formulate them outside of theology. The *theatrum mundi* too encouraged dialogue about cultural difference, but unlike what we advocate, its discourses were constrained by the prejudices of classical writers and Christian dogma. Both *theatrum mundi* and the cosmopolis express a living, vitalized universe in which change, in one was constrained by archetypes, while in the other, driven blindly and at accelerated speeds by innovation and historical unilinear movement - both are equally undesirable. Whatever it may become, the name given to this new institution is not accidental. Taken from the Greek designation for a world city based on a differentiated moral community of rational beings, the cosmopolis acknowledges difference and dialogue and proudly gives expression to Seneca's dictum that "I am not born for a single cranny: this whole universe is my homeland." The cosmopolis forms the pivot on which, knowledge generated through cultural dialogue, turns the world. The binary opposite between the old museum as an institutionalization of representation and the city as that which is signified is broken to create an essential interdependent complementarity between them.

I would finish by recalling the opinion of the late Edmund Leach, an eminent and still relevant anthropologist who was never afraid to cross-disciplinary boundaries or use his discipline to encourage greater plasticity of thought. In his 1967 Reith Lectures, *A Runaway World?*, Leach reminded us of the importance of knowing the whole; of discharging our sense of privacy to re-embrace and therefore know the other; that the old need make room for the young; and he counselled that when we can no longer fit the change taking place in the world into established categories, we must be ready to discard those classifications and the knowledge and institutions on which they depend, to create others that can better account for the world. Towards the end of his fourth lecture Leach reminded his radio audience: “The more that each one of us can come to understand the inter-connectedness of things, the more likely it is that we shall collectively generate an attitude which will not result in self-destruction. What is important is not that you should know what to do, but that you should feel really deeply that all parts of the system are of equal importance (1967: 85). In a world in which, in some parts, intelligence and prudence are no longer required of political leaders, empathy and understanding have suddenly become in short supply. Dialogue, not the silence of fear, is the only sure way to regain control over what otherwise will remain “a runaway world”.

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