

MAKING DIFFERENCES AND MAKING CITIZENS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

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Abstract

Over recent decades, ethnographic museums in many European countries have been remarkably vital, often drawing on their collections in new, sometimes experimental, ways to address topics of current concern. Increasingly, many position themselves as “socially relevant” agencies of “intercultural understanding” and cosmopolitan “spaces of dialogue” in demographic contexts in which those who would once have been the distant others of their displays might now live in the same city. Recent years have also seen, however, a growing intensity of “backlash” against “multiculturalism” in Europe, including highlevel political proclamations that “multiculturalism is dead” and needs to be replaced by a forging of new senses of national cohesion and affiliation. In some countries, this is having consequences for ethnographic museums in the form of restructuring (including incorporation into telling a “national story”), reduced funding and threatened closure.

The article addresses the current predicament of ethnographic museums by providing an analysis of some of the main policies on cultural diversity and citizenship that inform the contexts within which they operate. Through a comparative investigation of selected European countries that illustrate key differences of approach, the article highlights some of the various ways in which certain ethnographic museums articulate cultural diversity and citizenship through their operations and exhibitions, both within and sometimes beyond those of the nations in which they work. By doing so, the author shows not only ways in which ethnographic museums may variously “do” cultural diversity and citizenship but also how they have potential to challenge some of the widespread notions of citizenship and difference that operate elsewhere.