The Pitt Rivers Museum's attack on scholarship

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The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford houses the anthropological collection gifted to the University in 1883 by the remarkable Augustus Henry Lane Fox, a soldier who fought in the Crimean War, a scholar, and a landed gentleman later known as General Pitt-Rivers.

General Pitt-Rivers' Deed of Gift to the University of Oxford states that the collection was accepted on the condition that 'any changes in details' made after the General's death 'shall be such only as shall be necessitated by the advance of knowledge and shall not affect the general principle originated by the said Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers'. It was also laid down that the University could 'expand and complete by the addition of further specimens such of the Series of Objects in the said Collection as are at present more or less imperfect or incomplete'.

The Pitt Rivers, as it is known, preserves a way of looking at the history and development of human civilisation that was current in the late-Victorian era – that its purpose is to show us not only a remarkable collection of artefacts collected from all over the world, but to illustrate an earlier approach to history itself. The collection is unique in its form of presentation: rather than organise objects in space and time, that is, by place of origin and historical era, the objects are organised morphologically by type. So all firearms, hunting knives, and spears, from all places and periods, are compared in their discrete locations in the museum, as are all tools, cooking utensils, religious artefacts, and costumes etc.

The Collections Policy of the University also states (para. 1.1) that 'The Pitt Rivers Museum aspires to be the best university museum of anthropology and archaeology in the world, using its unique galleries as a focus for exemplary teaching and research...' . It continues: 'The purpose of the Pitt Rivers Museum is to assemble, preserve, and exhibit the Pitt Rivers collection and to promote the public understanding of anthropology and world archaeology, and their teaching and research, based on the Museum's collections.' To achieve this the Director is responsible for 'the participation in, and fostering of, scholarly work and public education within the museum.' (Council Regulations 4 2019 para..10(5). The Director of the Pitt Rivers, however, takes a different view, as she frankly admits. In an interview with the Daily Telegraph Magazine (17 October) we read:

'But she does not deny that the museum's transformation is politically motivated. "I don't believe there's a way of non-political curation", she says. "Museums are political

instruments. In their establishment they were political instruments. What we are being is explicit about our politics. We are an anti-racist institution that looks at humanity with respect, and wants to be a welcoming space to all".'

To achieve this end the Museum is now plastered with notice-boards produced in garish colours, as if for a teenagers' school textbook, with arrows, bubbles, and capitals to reinforce their message. The visitor to the Pitt Rivers is treated on arrival to a diatribe against colonialism. Despite all the de-colonisation of the mid-twentieth century, a notice-board tells us that

The past is still present, and the invisible structures of colonialism still persist today. These invisible structures, known as coloniality, shape our ideas about race, class, culture, gender and sexuality. Coloniality divides the world into 'the West and the rest' and assigns racial, intellectual and cultural superiority to the West. Coloniality creates and shapes these ideas through three overall processes, by establishing Hierarchies, controlling Knowledge, and imposing White Culture and Place Names.

Is this an appropriate way treat visitors – to hector them and tell them what to think? Where is the sympathetic explanation of Pitt-Rivers' plan and an invitation to visitors to think themselves into another age with different views of the past?

The boards then go on to define Culture, Hierarchy, Knowledge and Place Names. We are told under the heading of Culture that *'Colonialism seeks to overwrite existing cultural systems in the belief that colonial cultures are superior. The cultural systems that often get imposed are capitalism, communism, religion, scientific logic, racism, patriarchy, and gender binary'.* Note the use of the present tense: colonialism is still at it, apparently. And note how everything at all in the world, from science to sexuality, is part of colonialism. But then knowledge itself is just a construct designed to keep the natives in their place: '*Part of colonisation is the colonisation of knowledge, which assigns the production of knowledge to the colonisers, specifically the Western world, and in turn silences, erases and invalidates all other knowledges*' Tell that to all the researchers in Oxford who labour to expand knowledge and apply it for human betterment, and see what they say.

If the Pitt Rivers curators have a special hatred, it's for the idea of social evolution, a very common feature of late-Victorian thought which informed the General's view of his collection.

Racialised hierarchies linked to intelligence, labour and gender have been a core part of the Pitt Rivers Museum from its founding. General Pitt-Rivers himself believed in social evolutionism, which identified universal evolutionary stages to classify different societies as

in a state of savagery, barbarism, or civilization. European societies positioned themselves at the highest rank of civilization.

In fact, concepts of social evolution long predate the Pitt Rivers collection, originating in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. What was known as stadial history, or history seen as a sequence of stages, informed Scottish enlightened thought from the 1740s onwards. In his lectures in the University of Glasgow and subsequently in *The Wealth of Nations* published in 1776, Adam Smith, among many, visualised human social development in four stages. They were 'first, the Age of Hunters; secondly, the Age of Shepherds; thirdly, the Age of Agriculture; and fourthly, the Age of Commerce', the stage of modern civilisation that Scotland and the other developed lands of Europe had by then attained. But social evolution in this form did not necessarily imply prejudice or superiority. There were those in the anti-slavery movement, for example, who adopted these same ideas to argue for the essential equality of all races, all of which would follow the same path to modernity, though at different speeds. Slavery, they argued, had disrupted the social evolution of African races, and this was another of many reasons why it should be abolished. Crucially, in this view there were no innate, genetic reasons why Africans should not attain the same civilizational levels as Europeans if given their chance.

Moreover, socio-cultural evolution is not an outmoded Victorian relic but is a keenly debated subject in modern biology and the social sciences, as indicated in this sample of work: G.Basalla *The Evolution of Technology,*1988. R.Boyd & P.J.Richerson *Culture and the Evolutionary Process,* 1985. L.L.Cavalli-Sforza & M.W.Feldman *Cultural Transmission and Evolution. A quantitative approach,* 1981. C.R.Hallpike, *The Principles of Social Evolution*, 1986; C.R.Hallpike *How We Got Here*, 2008; M.Sahlins & E.Service, *Evolution and Culture* 1973; E.Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization*, 1975; H.Claessen & P.Skalnik, *The Early State*, 1978; U.J.Jensen & R.Harré (eds.) *The Philosophy of Evolution,* 1981. A.T.Rambo & K.Gillogly (eds.) *Profiles in Cultural Evolution,* 1991. R.Rindos *The Origins of Agriculture. An evolutionary perspective,* 1984. W.G.Runciman *A Treatise on Social Theory* (II), 1989. W.G.Runciman *The Social Animal,* 1998; S.K.Sanderson *The Evolution of Human Sociality. A Darwinian conflict perspective,* 2001. The dismissal of socio-cultural evolution by the current Director of the Pitt Rivers and her staff simply illustrates their lack of scholarly background in the subject. Much the same can be said about their attitude to the idea of primitive society, as epitomised by their celebrated removal of *tsantsa*, shrunken heads, from display.

On the Museum website the Director justified the removal of these and other human remains as follows:

'Our audience research has shown that visitors often saw the Museum's displays of human remains as a testament to other cultures being "savage", "primitive" or "gruesome". Rather than enabling our visitors to reach a deeper understanding of each other's ways of being, the displays reinforced racist and stereotypical thinking that goes against the Museum's values today.' This is part of a broader programme to 'decolonise' the Museum and remove displays that 'reinforced stereotypical thinking about cultures across the globe that, as part of the colonial project, were seen as "primitive" or "savage".'

This entirely ignores the well-established fact that removal of body parts is thoroughly typical of primitive society. Primitive societies consist of small-scale and face-to-face communities, with subsistence economies and simple technologies, without writing, money, or the state, and based on age, gender, and kinship ties. They also often treated the human body in ways that modern societies find shocking, The Tauade of Papua with whom I [Hallpike] lived were traditionally cannibals, wore bones in their noses, and had rotting corpses in their villages. The Konso of Ethiopia, with whom I also lived, used to cut off the penises of men they killed in battle and wear them as bracelets on their wrists. The Pitt Rivers is stuffed with artefacts from these kinds of society and it is not surprising that many visitors find them savage, primitive, or gruesome. But the answer is not to remove them, or to pretend that the idea of primitive societies is a stereotype of colonialism or racism, which only promotes a different stereotype, that of the noble savage. The answer is to read the work of anthropologists who have studied primitive societies and try to understand why people do these things.

The current programme of 'decolonisation' at the Museum is not therefore educational or scholarly at all but openly political. They are merely dogmatic expressions of opinion of a generally amateurish and unscholarly nature, in very poor language and style, that might have been written by students. We recall the condition of the Deed of Gift: that any changes 'shall be such only as shall be necessitated by the advance of knowledge and as [such] shall not affect the general principle originated by the said Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers'. To proselytise for an extreme version of anti-colonial ideology in the museum, and directly criticise the views and theories of General Pitt Rivers himself, especially on the subject of socio-cultural evolution, must be in breach of this condition in the Deed of Gift. Secondly, the texts on the various boards are in no way a contribution to the advancement of

knowledge or of public understanding, and are clear violations of the University Regulations, and in particular, clear violations of the conditions of the Deed of Gift.

Since 1883 the collection has grown and indeed ‘developed’ as new objects have been donated and collected. Notwithstanding the Museum’s timeless feel, its items have been displayed in changing ways over the decades, though not so as to undermine the Museum’s founding principles. This is as it should be: no one insists that the Pitt Rivers should be preserved in aspic. But the Deed of Gift evidently envisaged the addition of ‘further specimens’, not the imposition of aesthetically and intellectually alien billboards, disrupting the visual experience of visiting the Museum and forcing anti-colonial ideology onto a collection that is, to its core and in its essence, a product of a colonial era.

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