

Exhibiting Recognition: Consultation and Self-Definition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, March 2016, San Diego, California.

Caitlin Tom
PhD Candidate
Department of Political Science
University of California, Berkeley
ctom@berkeley.edu

Abstract

This paper argues that the political theory of recognition can learn important lessons from the history of museology and how philosophies of representation, exhibition, and recognition are put into practice at national history and anthropology museums. It does so by analyzing changes in the philosophy of museums in the mid to late twentieth century and by connecting these changes to the broader social changes that preceded the late twentieth century rise of the politics of recognition. It outlines a detailed study, explored more thoroughly elsewhere, of the practices of developing exhibits and communicating their messages to a national public at the Canadian Museum of Civilization from its announcement in 1981 through the completion of its last permanent exhibit in 2003. It argues that we can see even in these brief examples that practices that treat minority groups as partners in knowledge and exhibition result in more productive exhibits than those that treat minority groups as objects of knowledge. It begins to suggest that this may provide guidance for how law should and should not engage in emancipatory projects of recognition.