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# Where Do We Go From Here? This is the Real Dope

**Abstract** As our world becomes illiberally democratic and authoritarian, a look at the legacies of the First World War might help museums reconsider their place in society, their mission and responsibilities. When their surroundings change, museums cannot go on doing things the way they have always done them and keep allocating resources on superficial solutions. There is an urgent need to defend the principles of a free, tolerant and just European society, and museums must be part of this collective effort. Either they will assume their responsibilities, or they will continue aggravating the state of their irrelevance.

**Keywords** museums, democracy, human rights

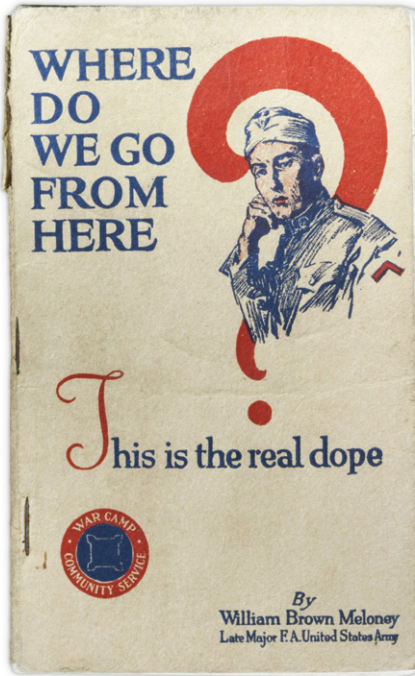


Fig. 1: Booklet, *Where Do We Go From Here? This is the Real Dope*, 1919. Contributing Institution: Missouri History Museum ([missourioverthere.org](http://missourioverthere.org))

### The *déjà vu* of an increasingly illiberal world

I'll start by explaining the title of my presentation. "Where Do We Go From Here? This is the Real Dope" was a handbook for soldiers, written by William Brown Meloney, an American journalist and writer who served in France (fig. 1). The book covered a variety of topics about life after the military, from dos and don'ts for finding a job and wearing your uniform after being discharged, to artificial limbs and vocational training. One reads in the forward that "Its single purpose is to bring to you in the simplest, quickest, and most accurate form the things which every man who has served in The Great War must know to put him in touch again with God's Country."<sup>1</sup> The War Department published five million copies.

1 Published in 1919 by Thomsen-Ellis Press, Baltimore. Full reproduction of the handbook is available at: <https://www.gjenvick.com/Military/WorldWarOne/Brochures/1919-Where-DoWeGoFromHere-TheRealDope.html> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

These days, I often think how handy it would be to have a handbook that could put us back in touch with the world “in the simplest, quickest and most accurate form”. If Donald Trump’s election and the Brexit vote took us by surprise, we were nowhere near imagining the result of the Brazilian election. We are trying to deal with the fact that our world increasingly looks illiberally democratic and authoritarian, and wondering what we did wrong.

In a recent speech in Australia, British actor, writer and presenter Stephen Fry put my feelings into words when he proclaimed that “We are irrelevant and outdated bystanders”. He went on to say that

‘A grand canyon has opened up in our world,’ Fry said. On one side is the new right, promoting a bizarre mixture of Christianity and libertarianism; on the other, the ‘illiberal liberals’, obsessed with identity politics and complaining about things like cultural appropriation. These tiny factions war above, while the rest of us watch, aghast, from the chasm below.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps not all of us share this kind of perplexity and anxiety. This is certainly what I thought when I recently read that the European Union announced a two-million-euro investment to investigate the feasibility of a European Museum Card.<sup>3</sup> In the heat of the moment, I wrote on Facebook:

I hate to disappoint you, but if we continue thinking about and spending money on cards, without demanding fundamental changes in the ways most museums exhibit and interpret objects and engage with people, we’ll be wasting time and money. Populism and fascism are growing, what have museums done about it? Described objects?

A month later, away from the heat of the moment, I stand by the views expressed at that moment.

What brings us here today is the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War. In his State of the Union Speech

2 Convery, S. (2018) Stephen Fry pronounces the death of classical liberalism: ‘We are irrelevant and outdated bystanders’. *The Guardian* 5 November 2018 [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

3 NEMO (2018) The European Parliament Allocates 2 Million Euros for the Creation of a European Museum Card [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ne-mo.org/news/article/nemo/the-european-parliament-will-allocate-2-million-euros-for-the-creation-of-a-european-museum-card.html> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

in September, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, reminded us that

History can also show up, unannounced, in the life of nations and be slow to leave. Such was the fate of Europe's nations during the Great War starting in 1914. A war which took the sunny, optimistic and peaceful continent of the time by surprise. In 1913, Europeans expected to live a lasting peace. And yet, just a year later, a brutal war broke out amongst brothers, engulfing the continent.<sup>4</sup>

So, one hundred years ago, people were taken by surprise. Perhaps just like some of us are today. What did that war mean for the world, apart from the redrawing of the geographical map (resulting from the fall of four empires, the restoration or creation of nine independent states, the sharing among the winners of German colonies and the drawing of new political boundaries in the Middle East – issues that still haunt us today)? The First World War also changed the nature of warfare, with technology becoming an essential element and new techniques for building armaments, revolutionising other industries in the post-war years. The first chemical weapons were used; modern surgery was born. And the League of Nations was formed with the aim of preventing any repetition of such a conflict.

Today we know something that not everyone who lived at that time knew. That it did happen again and it can happen again. At that time, the new successor states were weak, the economic depression brought many people to their knees, there was a feeling of humiliation (especially in Germany) and nationalism flourished. It makes me think of people today who feel afraid because the world they know is changing, who feel afraid of their future and that of their children, who say they feel foreigners in their own country and vote for the Trumps and Bolsonaros of this world, who say they will protect them and put their world back in order, the order they know and value, where there is usually no place for “others” (we should not forget that white supremacist Steve Bannon was a consultant to both Trump and Bolsonaro). These are things that museum professionals ought to think about.

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/state-union-speeches/state-union-2018\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/state-union-speeches/state-union-2018_en) [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

## Museums, Borders and European Responsibilities

I'll start from the end: European responsibilities. The Copenhagen Criteria were set 25 years ago, in 1993, and marked a milestone in European history as they set out the essential conditions that all countries must satisfy before becoming a member state of the European Union. Essentially, they require stable institutions that can guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights. These principles form the foundation of a free, tolerant and just European society; but more and more citizens (voters) in different member states seem to believe that these principles have been overvalued and have created a fertile ground for threats, rather than guaranteeing safety and prosperity. Some member states have turned into illiberal democracies or partial democracies, with the blessing of voters, in return for the safety promised by democratically-elected authoritarian leaders. Are we willing to consider the reasons that led so many people to distrust the European institution and are we able to safeguard the values that helped us set it up in the first place?

Museums claim to be spaces of memory, which allow us to learn about the past, and promote social cohesion and tolerance in the present. I often wonder how many museums in Europe are actively dealing with the Copenhagen Criteria today. I also wonder how many of us think museums have something to do with all this. Which past are we preserving and researching? Whose past? What ways are we using to allow people to learn about it? And what can we claim to be achieving with that?

I left borders for the end, because this is what I would specifically like to discuss. The word first brings to mind countries on a geographical map. But I would like to consider another kind of border first, that which does not allow us to know the people next to us, with whom we share the space of a city, before migrants and refugees come into the equation.

This year, 2018, is the European Year of Cultural Heritage. My association, Access Culture, decided that the theme of this year's conference should be the LGBTQI+ heritage: a heritage that we consider to be unpreserved or even hidden, ignored, silenced, inaccessible, uncomfortable, undervalued. It was the least-attended conference ever. We had 32 participants. Most of our colleagues (some of whom attend every year, no matter what the subject is) wondered what there was to discuss. Everyone talks about LGBT rights, they are safeguarded in Europe – what is there to discuss?

When Odete, a trans artist, asked us if we knew who Valentim de Barros was, there was silence in the room. Valentim de Barros was a classical ballet

dancer. He lived for 70 years, 40 of which held in a psychiatric hospital for being a homosexual. He died in 1986. In 1986 I was 16 years old. My home country, Greece, had been a member of the European Union for five years and Portugal for one.

Recently, I found out that one of the First World War's most enduring legacies is also largely unknown or forgotten: it sparked the modern gay rights movement. The partner of a German soldier who died in the front, known from the archives as S., called it deplorable that good citizens, soldiers willing to die for their country, had to endure the status of pariahs. "People who are by nature orientated toward the same sex... do their duty", he wrote. "It is finally time that the state treated them like they treat the state."<sup>5</sup> Many veterans agreed with S. When the war ended, they formed new, larger groups, including one called the League for Human Rights that drew 100,000 members.<sup>6</sup>

Where are these stories? How many museums include them in their narratives? "But why must we discriminate", a person asked us on our Facebook page, "aren't we all one?" We shall all be one when people stop having to hide who they are; when silence will not be enforced on them; when they will see that they are also represented in museum narratives and that they can be proud of who they are and of those who came before them. We are still far from that, despite what we might think, for as long as a person advises us on our Facebook page to see a good psychiatrist, for choosing this subject for our annual conference; for as long as the now President-elect in Brazil, the country with the highest rate in the world in trans murders, says that he would be unable to love his child if he was homosexual; for as long as the Identitary Shield, a group that is making its presence more and more known in the public space in Portugal, feels free to put up posters in schools warning of the danger of gender ideology.

Are museums able to promote critical thinking about these issues? Not just gay rights, but more. It is worth having a look at three recent incidents in Portugal.

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5 Marhoefer, L. (2017) The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Gay Rights Movement in WWI. *The Conversation* 12 May 2017. Available at: <https://theconversation.com> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

6 Kaye, H. (2018) The Forgotten Gay Soldiers of the First World War. *Attitude* 10 November 2018. Available at: <https://attitude.co.uk/article/the-forgotten-gay-soldiers-of-the-first-world-war-1/19583/?fbclid=IwAR2f-F9afoZz9xVPytiZ9yr7d7lz9Moo9pZsdHzQKoa7jM-m3wql9ANQaLsg> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

The Portuguese police published degrading photos of arrested criminals, an action that was criticised by the Minister of Justice and later by the President of the Republic. One Police Union defended the act, by publishing photos of beaten elderly people (only that they were not the victims in Portugal) and by claiming that not everyone deserves our respect. Isn't this extremely serious in a state subject to the rule of law, when some policemen seem to believe that they are there to interpret the law and not to enforce it?

A judge considered that a 15-year-old Roma girl does not have to finish school, like everyone else, in the name of tradition. Aren't judges supposed to defend individual human rights and aren't we all equal before the law?

A Law Professor claimed that homosexuals should not work with boys and that it is OK not to hire a recently married woman as a model, because she might become pregnant.

These are a few episodes in Portugal's recent contemporary history; I am sure other countries have similar cases to present. These, in my view, are small, everyday aggressions to democracy, the rule of law, human rights, looking for fertile ground to flourish. How many museums are working on these issues? How many even think they have something to do with this and that there should be a good reason for investing so much in preserving, researching, exhibiting and interpreting the past? A reason such as defending the principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights which we claim are the pillars of the European Union.

Finally, we need to consider, of course, the other kind of borders, those some of us feel must be protected at any cost from the threat posed by Muslims, Africans or the poor. These are cases where sometimes Europe seems to be at a loss. President Juncker, on one hand, says in his State of the Union speech that "Europe must remain a tolerant, open continent. Europe will never become a fortress turning its back on the world, notably the part of the world which is suffering". Yet Malta and Italy disregard both international law and the principles of the European Union by putting people's lives in danger by not allowing their boats to dock and refusing them refuge; or while people are still kept in appalling conditions at the Moria refugee camp in Greece, waiting for their asylum requests to be processed.

## Museums and the promotion of critical thinking

I believe that museums should promote critical thinking about issues that mark contemporary societies. At the same time, I am thinking what a difficult task this is at a time where, in the words of Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe, reason is once again on trial and many don't trust any longer its power to free us or to lead us to the path of truth. Mbembe was in Lisbon last month (this time he made it, as on a number of occasions before he hadn't shown up because of visa issues up to the last moment). He said that "Many turn their back on reason in favour of other faculties: affection, feelings, emotions. Passion is tramping on reason. Acting with one's guts is becoming the norm."<sup>7</sup>

So many decisions taken by so many people (voters) in different parts of the world based on feelings and emotions: anxiety, fear, anger. Populists know it and base their rhetoric on it. They spread fake news because they know that many people do not have the capacity or patience to question.

It seems to me that we need to build our own "Where do we go from here?" handbook and help museums get back in touch with the world. I believe we should consider the following:

- » We need to rethink what we do, how and why we do it. If the European Union has 2 million euro to spend, it is better spent on promoting this reflection at a European level. We cannot go on doing things the way we have always done them. The world has changed dramatically.
- » We need to be aware of the world around us, to be in touch with society and not to live in a bubble. We need to know who those people we wish to engage with are, how they live their lives, what their anxieties are, what matters to them. We need to read newspapers (also the populist ones) and find the courage to read the comments in them from time to time: this is a hard task, I assure you, but it is an excellent way of becoming aware of realities we ignore.

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<sup>7</sup> The podcast of Achille Mbembe's speech "For a World Without Frontiers" is available at: <https://www.culturgest.pt/pt/programacao/para-um-mundo-sem-fronteiras-achille-mbembe> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].



- » We need to help people make connections between past knowledge and contemporary life. Yes, we must remember; yes, we must share knowledge. But humans have proved again and again that they don't learn from history. We need to find ways of relating our research and collections to what matters to people and to issues that concern the communities we wish to engage with. In a recent interview Françoise Benhamou, a specialist in the economics of culture who had also been an advisor to French Minister of Culture Jack Lang, discusses a number of known difficulties in attracting diverse audiences, but the word “relevance” is not mentioned once!<sup>8</sup> It is indeed hard to attract people whom we prefer to ignore, and when all we wish is to impose a culture we consider worthy, without further thinking.
- » There's no point in just bombarding people with facts. We have to be empathetic and use clear language. We need to communicate with people, and plan exhibitions and activities, in a way they understand and find relevant.
- » We need to be places of encounter. Many people express fear, anger and contempt against people they have never really seen or talked to. Even living in the same city, certain people don't get to see and meet each other. Museums can be the place where this happens.
- » Museum teams and boards must be as diverse as the society around them. And by diversity I don't mean “We are all under the same roof: white men as directors and black women as cleaners”. There is a clear intention behind rapper Killer Mike's appointment to the Board of the Atlanta Art Museum<sup>9</sup> and there is a reason why actor John Leguizamo's performances are so engaging.<sup>10</sup>

8 Campos, J.M.G. (2018) Culture Belongs to the Upper Classes. It is Hard to Attract Families with Lower Education Levels. Available at: <https://observatoriosociallacaixa.org/en/-/entrevista-francoise-benhamou> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

9 Sutton, B. (2018) The Rapper Killer Mike Joined the High Museum of Art's Board of Directors. *Artsy* 13 August 2018. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/news/artsy-editorial-rapper-killer-mike-joined-high-museum-arts-board-directors> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

10 Genzlinger, N. (2018) Why John Leguizamo is so Invested in Telling the Country About Latino History. *Smithsonian Magazine* December 2018. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/john-leguizamo-invested-telling-latino-history-180970680/?fbclid=IwAR3b4umzR3Cr2vGCVIC7rXEJ2YY50O9tSOIWF6aN4QZSyPICSmjG35srqo8> [Accessed: 1 June 2019].

- » We need to take responsibility for our actions and choices. Everything we do sends a message, endorses or confronts human rights violations. I was very displeased to see non-Iranian women colleagues willingly covering themselves in a celebratory end-of-the-symposium photo of the ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), last month in Tehran. I was displeased because this might look exotic to us, but many Iranian women put their freedom at risk every day by going out uncovered in order to protest compulsory hijab. Last year the women's chess champion refused to participate in the World Championship in Saudi Arabia, despite what this decision meant for her career, because principals were more important for her than professional gains. I can't imagine what kind of an excuse a cultural organisation like ICOM might have to not only go to a conference in a country with a severe record on human rights violations, but also to willingly comply with those violations.
- » Finally, I believe we should reflect upon these points, and others, expressing less arrogance, less certainties, more doubts.

These are some of the issues I think we should consider for our “Where do we go from here?” handbook. And this is not something we should put on our five-year plan. This is urgent. We have European elections in May 2019 and Steve Bannon is alive and kicking also on European territory.

Going back to Achille Mbembe's conference in Lisbon, “Europe has a choice: to contribute to a new imagination of how we share the earth or to face the political and moral consequences.” Museums also have a choice: to assume their responsibilities and be part of this effort or to continue aggravating the state of their irrelevance.