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EDITORIAL

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Each year the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Research Project led by the University of Gothenburg issues a report summarizing the status of democratic processes and politics around the world. The 2024 report makes for a sobering read. While there are roughly the same number of democracies in the world as autocracies (91 and 88 respectively), many more people now live in countries governed by autocratic regimes – 71% of the global population in 2023, or 5.7 billion people. 42 countries meanwhile are classed as "autocratizing," a label that indicates the weakening or wholesale suspension of often hard-won democratic values and standards. Troublingly, many of the countries currently undergoing processes of autocratization are economic and military regional and global powers (V-Dem, 2024, p. 10). While a simple binary of democratic/autocratic cannot do justice to the complex social, historical and economic factors underlying this geopolitical trend, the scale and pervasiveness of the shift towards authoritarianism – and the dangers that accompany it – cannot be ignored. As a recent article on the rise of "illiberal democracies" puts it, "the 21st century is a quarter complete. So it's the right moment to consider this century as one during which so much of what we assumed was given, solid and established by the end of the 20th century has cracked and crumbled" (Vaidhyanathan, 2025).

Examples of this crumbling are numerous and extend beyond liberal democratic norms and principles. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program – another dispassionate Scandinavian chronicle of global affairs – identified 2022 and 2023 as the most conflictual years in the world since the end of the Cold War (Poast, 2023). In January 2025, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved the so-called "Doomsday Clock" to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to catastrophe, citing climate change, biological threats, an increased risk of nuclear conflict, and the emergence of AI as ominous signals of the world's "existential predicament" (Mecklin, 2025). Scholars and policymakers in varied fields have begun to characterize this situation as a "polycrisis," wherein multiple crises reinforce one another to push already volatile global relations into harmful disequilibrium (Lawrence et al., 2024). Perhaps unsurprisingly given these intersecting forces, uncertainty about the present and future has risen dramatically in recent years; a 2022 special report by the United Nations Development Programme found that more than 6 in 7 people worldwide felt insecure, with even those benefiting from historically high levels of good health, wealth and education reporting greater anxiety than ten years previously (UNDP, 2022).

The feedback loop between insecurity, uncertainty and the rise of autocratic regimes would require something much more than a short editorial to explore fully, but history tells us that experiences of polarization, hopelessness and enormous material gaps in wealth and privilege can lead to social and political upheaval, opening the door to emancipation or – conversely – new forms of oppression and despotism. In her recent book *Autocracy Inc.*, Anne Applebaum clarifies the stakes of such uncertainty, arguing that today's authoritarian leaders are adept at seeding and amplifying legitimate feelings of cynicism and futility to undercut ideas of transparency, accountability, justice and democracy wherever they are found (2024, pp. 12–13). In stark contrast to authoritarian regimes of the past, which *did* typically promise a brighter future (at least for some), contemporary autocracies have largely retreated from progress as

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an organizing principle of society. Rather than offer a better world to build, they seek to "persuade people to mind their own business, stay out of politics, and never hope for a democratic alternative" (2024, p. 74). As Applebaum notes, however, this strategy only makes sense if the democratic alternative is broadly seen as "weak, degenerate, divided, dying" (2024, emphasis in original). To this end, autocratic regimes have become proficient at exploiting genuine faults in democratic processes and further denigrating such systems through internal and external propaganda. The success of this approach is now visible in many parts of the world, explaining – at least in part – the data seen in the latest V-Dem report. To borrow from Applebaum, at the end of the Cold War "everybody assumed that in a more open, interconnected world, democracy and liberal ideas would spread to the autocratic states. Nobody imagined that autocracy and illiberalism would spread to the democratic world instead" (2024, p. 27).

Museums of course are not exclusively found in democratic contexts. Russia has over 3,000 museums, while China has experienced a "museum boom" over the past twenty-five years, with almost 1500 museums built between 2002 and 2013 alone (Wong, 2015; Zhang & Courty, 2020). Indeed, the idea of the museum has proven highly malleable for political actors globally, serving diverse cultural, scientific, historical, and economic aims, from fascism and communism to decolonization and queer liberation. The erosion of democratic norms and principles does not therefore pose a fundamental threat to the *existence* of museums. The simple fact of museums existing in the world is not however the core concern of this journal. Instead, *Museums & Social Issues* explicitly aims both to track and help shape new perspectives on the role of museums in society, paying particular attention to the kinds of agendas autocratic regimes have long demonstrated hostility towards: diversity and inclusion; participation and civic engagement; sustainability and the environment; rights and justice; activism and social change. Defending such ideals is likely to take up much energy within and beyond the museum world for some time to come.

To help in this task it may be useful to consider the relationship between museums and progress – a much-maligned term that nevertheless remains an important terrain of struggle in the present moment, not least because of the multiple ways authoritarian leaders routinely seek to undermine any faith in the idea. At the risk of oversimplification, there are perhaps two main ways in which museums historically have been entangled with notions of progress. The first of these concerns what we might call Progress with a capital P – this would be progress as a general project of civilizational advancement. The second, more uneven, notion of progress relates to the emergence of progressive ideals and agendas geared towards social justice and emancipation. While the latter version of progress often involves a critique of the former, we should not see these models as diametrically opposed. Rather, they exist in a complex non-linear relationship: advances in one area may prompt developments in another or reveal tensions and fault lines to be resolved in the pursuit of further progress (technological, societal, intellectual or otherwise).

Accounts of capital P Progress (at least in the Euro-Western tradition) typically move from Enlightenment ideals around the pursuit of freedom through the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution and on to racialized concepts of evolutionary and civilizational development, ending somewhere in the 1950s or 60s with sci-fi visions of cosmic exploration and a life free from inequality, injustice and labor. The history of museums can be understood in relation to these phases of Progress, from the earliest Wunderkammer to Dubai's Museum of the Future. As Tony Bennett famously argued in relation to the emergence of the exhibitionary complex in the nineteenth century, the display of natural, social, technological, and artistic objects in developmental stages was about much more than simply narrating history; such displays sought to shape visitors *as* subjects by situating them in relation to Progress, typically conceptualized "as a collective national achievement with capital as the great coordinator"

(1988, p. 80). Progress in this sense acted as a general principle underlying the propagation and consolidation of museums as socializing – and civilizing – tools of modernity and empire.

In his recent book on the subject of progress, Slavoj Žižek offers a typically vivid image of the dark underbelly of this idea, describing a magic trick in which a bird disappears from a flattened cage, only to reappear in the magician's hand. The trick of course requires two birds, with the first killed in the performance, squashed and disposed of where "no one who matters will see" (2025, p. 1). For Žižek this trick clarifies "the basic premise of a dialectical notion of progress: when a new higher stage arrives, *there must be a squashed bird somewhere*" (2025, emphasis in original). What Žižek fails to acknowledge, but what museums have long made clear, is that the modern "trick" of progress did not in fact depend on hiding all the squashed birds – some were stuffed, mounted and put on display for all to see, alongside the objects, stories and ecosystems of those deemed "other" and outside of modernity. Indeed, such displays were central to the project of Progress, which needed to be documented, authorized and constantly re-staged to convince diverse publics that the enormous changes they were facing served a greater moral purpose.

Since at least the 1980s this notion of Progress has been called into question on so many levels that any confidence in the term no longer seems tenable. David Graeber and David Wengrow for example highlight the "idea of progress" as a "prime example of the way we no longer think about history and society" (2021, p. 442). Anna Tsing meanwhile suggests that progress has "stopped making sense" given the scale of economic and ecological ruination wrought by modernity and capitalism (2015, p. 25). Thomas Eriksen sums up the problem in his book *Overheating*:

> As late as the 1970s, there existed a widely shared hegemonic narrative about the way in which the modern world had grown. It was a story about enlightenment and invention, conquest and decolonisation, progress and welfare, war and peace. The story existed in loyal and critical versions; it was produced in liberal, conservative, socialist or communist flavours. And then, the story of progress lost its lustre, not with a bang, but with a whimper. As of today, there is no story about where we are coming from and where we are going with general appeal in most, or even any, part of the world. (2016, p. 13)

The recognition that social and material progress in one area might result in oppression, ruin and death in another area is now practically a given for most critical thinkers. As Žižek makes clear, "there is no such thing as progress in general: progress is the inner development of a system, the gradual actualization of its potentials, so it all depends on which system serves as a point of reference" (2025, p. 7). Shifts in the museum world over the past half-century reflect this retreat from Progress as an organizing principle of politics and society. Given the central role museums played in shaping and disseminating Progress narratives, there is often an ironic – or at least revisionist – quality to such work. Displays that once celebrated "civilizational progress" may now serve as evidence of the violence and injustice experienced by those on the other side of such Progress. Indeed, the profusion over the past few years of decolonial and reparative initiatives focused on healing the wounds of colonialism and modernity suggests that the end of Progress has proven to be remarkably generative for the museum field.

What has filled the gap left by Progress? The answer – for many museums at least – has been progress of the second order: this is progress as fragmented and partial, as uneven and contingent. Absent any faith in *progress in general*, liberal museums have embraced a broader reflective notion of progress, one associated with the pursuit of social justice, rights, representation and other forms of cultural freedom rather than national, technological or civilizational advancement. The emergence of New Museology in the 1980s is a perfect example of the retreat from Progress giving rise to new forms of museum thinking and practice. With its

aspirations to *accessibility*, *inclusivity*, *diversity*, *participation* and *sustainability*, we might also understand ICOM's new museum definition in this light. Such a shift suggests that the moralizing mission of nineteenth century displays has not disappeared entirely but has rather evolved into a *progressive* model of reform and redemption focused on making a better world for all.

In a geopolitical climate marked by nativism, illiberalism and the resurgence of far-right parties and coalitions, this characterization of museums is already beginning to seem like an echo of a world fading from view. Having embodied and narrated Progress for two centuries, the museum world's recent embrace of progressive politics rests on shaky foundations. Just as the so-called Liberal International Order is now being undermined by actors intent on building a "multipolar" world where "universal" rights and values hold no sway, so museums are facing significant criticism for being too ideological, too inclusive, too "woke" (e.g. Charlesworth, 2025; see also al-Gharbi, 2024). While some may see this as a necessary course correction, others will view any retreat from such ideals as a capitulation to regressive politics, exacerbated by a "confused splintering of the liberal ideological consensus" (Davis, 2025). Museums must now confront not just a world where *progress in general* has been judged untenable, but where progressive hopes for the future are not simply disputed but actively suppressed by powerful forces.

Contemporary debates and anxieties around progress are of a different order from postmodern critiques of the same idea. The sixth mass extinction, ecological breakdown, technogenocide, and the resurgence of autocratic regimes worldwide may – without exaggeration – be seen as signs of a pervasive *regression* of social and political relations. As Žižek puts it in characteristically bleak terms: "After centuries in which visionaries of all stripes dreamed of what humanity might achieve together, the only indubitable 'progressive' goal that humanity can pursue today, in view of ecological and other threats, is to simply *survive*" (2025, p. 5, emphasis in original).

The absence of progress narratives from contemporary public life – whether in the autocratic suppression of any dream of a better world, or the catastrophic horizons of liberal uncertainty – seems to demand a new approach to the subject, one alert to the failures and contradictions of progress without retreating from hope altogether. A common refrain emerges across critical work engaging with this dilemma: the possibility of repurposing, redeeming and reanimating "the tools of modernity" to reveal and subvert the ambiguities of progress (see Tsing et al., 2017, p. M7). In Ariella Azoulay's terms, "declining to partake in progress" means "reversing speed into slowness, turning growth into degrowth [and] repurposing existing technologies toward reparations rather than inventing new ones" (2019, p. 569). Žižek meanwhile speaks of "unearthing" and "retroactively redeeming" the *potentiality* of progress contained in historic dreams of liberation, up to and including the "emancipatory dimension of the rise of modern subjectivity" itself (2025, p. 11, p. 91). We could say that this is precisely what many of the museums committed to questioning Progress have been doing in recent years, leading – without a hint of irony – to attacks claiming they are too progressive. Museums are unlikely to escape this bind so long as they cling to liberal reformist models of social and institutional transformation. Being *after* progress today means joining the struggle for other ways of being in the world, searching for and defending refuges of hope that offer something radically different from what has come before and what dominates the present. As Tsing puts it, "unencumbered by the simplification of progress narratives, the knots and pulses of patchiness are there to explore" (Tsing, 2015, p. 6).

This volume of *Museums & Social Issues* is one example of this patchiness in action, with museological explorations across five research articles, a reflective essay, an interview, two book reviews, and an exhibition review. As with previous volumes of the journal, contributions come from early career scholars, established researchers, and those working in or with

museums. We are hugely grateful to the authors, editors and peer reviewers who have helped to shape this volume, which touches on issues ranging from visitor participation and sustainability to gender-based activism and the pluriverse. The diversity of voices and perspectives brought to bear on museums across these texts is evidence of a vibrant field of research and practice, with authors documenting, critiquing and reimagining the *work* of museums in a rapidly changing world.

Four articles in the volume focus on issues of community engagement, visitor experience and participatory practices. In their text "Taking time to listen and learn," Steiner et al. reflect on a research-practice partnership between museum-based educators, scientists and community members to support climate change education in rural Western Pennsylvania. Linn et al. meanwhile critically examine participatory projects involving young people with a refugee-background, offering a review of existing literature on this topic that draws out the potential for such initiatives to extend beyond individual museums and shape the development of the sector as a whole. Irene Lopez addresses this broader picture with a framework that aims to help museum workers understand how precisely participatory strategies might encourage shared authority, especially in relation to interpretation. Finally, Calvi and Vermeeren investigate how small museums in the Netherlands primarily run by volunteers think about and work with digital 'innovation.' Tellingly, their conclusion – that such museums should not be led by technology or social media and should instead capitalize on their strong community ties – echoes the insights put forward in the other articles addressing this theme.

Our final research article – "Towards the pluriversal museum" by Paul Basu – is kindly re-published from *Culture & Musées*, where it originally appeared in French in 2023. Basu's conceptualization of the pluriversal museum responds to the entanglement of the modern 'universal' museum with the logics of extraction and exploitation that underlie the varied crises now facing humanity, from climate change and species extinction to vast inequalities in wealth and wellbeing. While the argument put forward in this text is grounded in critical decolonial theory, Basu's model in many ways echoes and elaborates on the relational, participatory work described in the more empirical articles contained in the present volume. Indeed, in the final estimation, pluriversal museums would replace buildings, fetishized objects, disciplinary separation and 'pedagogies of telling' with a focus on people, relationships, knowledges, experiences, emotions, networks and 'epistemic humility' – all central elements of current participatory practices. The difference however would be a general reorientation of the museum world to prompt entirely new ways of sharing and understanding the planet, not just an introspective rethinking of museums as singular, isolated entities.

The approach Basu maps out in his paper intersects in a productive manner with two recent books reviewed in the present volume – *Museum Practices and the Posthumanities* by Fiona Cameron (reviewed by Harry Reddick) and *Museums and Societal Collapse* by Robert Janes (reviewed by Jennie Morgan). Both these texts advance sweeping new agendas for museum studies in an era of intersecting crises. And while the frameworks and politics may differ, both excavate fundamental museum ideas and practices to imagine alternative futures for the field, whether it be the more-than-human flows and agencies animating museological contexts, or the possibility for care, storytelling and education to help people navigate chaos and collapse. The urgency of such work is captured in the remaining contributions to the volume, which document in different ways how museums are evolving to address the challenges of the present. In an interview conducted by Ian Beamish, Ibrahima Seck, Director of Research at the Whitney Plantation museum, notes the potential for truthful narratives grounded in place and objects to change minds and worldviews. Glenn Sutter meanwhile offers thoughtful reflections on 25 years of curatorial practice focused on climate change and sustainability at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum in the Canadian prairies. Finally, Clara Vlessing reviews the exhibition

Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990 (Tate Britain, 8 November 2023 to 7 April 2024), a powerful reminder of the legacies of resistance and revolution that may yet contain the seeds of future social – and museological – transformation.

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