

Peggy Levitt. *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. 268 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-28607-8.

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Published on H-Nationalism (September, 2017)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

Against a background of a “world on the move” (p. 4), in which senses of belonging, cultural identity, and national borders are being challenged, Peggy Levitt’s book, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*, sets out to understand what kinds of citizens museums are creating in this global world. Therefore, it investigates the museums’ “project of crafting cosmopolitan values ... and projects among people who also feel part of nations, regions, cities, and towns” (p. 134). Levitt wants to understand “how ... the globalization of the museum world affect[s] local institutions, and how ... the local talk[s] back” (p. 2). To ask how museums “put the nation and the world”—and their relation—on display, Levitt’s analysis focuses on the “global museum assemblage” as “contingent clusters of people, technology, objects, and knowledge which circulate through the social fields that museums inhabit [and the] changing repertoires of ways to display, look at, and organize objects and educate others” (p. 8).

Levitt offers a comparative study of museums in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Copenhagen, Boston and New York, and Doha and Singapore to comprehend how in these museums “a similar set of social processes come together ... and ... how global cultural forces and national and urban dynamics simultaneously influence their action” (p.

139). Her sample encompasses mainly blockbuster museums, entailing a—yet injudicious—confinement to metropolitan areas and a crosscut between art and ethnographic museums.

Comparing the museum landscape in Denmark/Sweden, the United States, and Doha/Singapore, Levitt unfolds the complex interactions of individual museums with cultural policies, diversity management regimes, and the “cultural armature” (p. 3) that the museum is located in and interacting with. Her elaborate reading of the specific role of the museum in its local and national community is based on a profound description of the institutions’ historical development and the national history and specific local context they are embedded in, and on a substantial body of interview material, surveyed in interviews with curators, directors, cultural politicians. This is interspersed with (excursive) delineations of individual displays and exhibitions, serving, unfortunately, as mere illustrations of the objectives of the museums as given in the experts’ statements.

Levitt’s goal is to account for the different ways in which the investigated institutions tell a national story in relation to the global world by showcasing art. She inquires how nations position themselves on the global map by making use of (art) museums, how museums produce a national identity by relating to internal and global differ-

ence, and how they create citizens who “know who they are and where they stand in the world” (p. 95). Consequently, she positions the individual museums (and the respective nations) on a “cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum” (p. 136), conceptualized loosely as an area of tension between the museums’ capacity for being open to world while fostering a national identity.

While Levitt’s book offers its reader a rich analysis of different reterritorializations of the global museum assemblage supported by a thorough reading of the sociocultural environment the museums are embedded in and interact with, her writing also shows a sound sensitivity for the vast complexity required to understand museums as utterly social sites constantly negotiating *which* society they serve (and/or create), what their place in a globalized world could be, and how to claim this place.

Alas, with high praise comes thorough criticism. *Artifacts and Allegiances* is marked by an absence of both the “artifacts” and the “display” promised in the title and subtitle. To the largest degree Levitt omits the inherent logic of artifacts on display and an in-depth reading of these: she disacknowledges their recalcitrance and capacity to tell their own story. Doing so, she reduces material objects to mere decoration of the “narrative” of the museums. Enabled also by Levitt’s failure to address the problematics of differentiating between art and artifact in a profound way, the objects on display are confused as interchangeable staffages of “allegiance” and robbed of their capacity to disrupt the museums’ narrative, the stories the curators tell her, and, fundamentally, the dichotomy between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

This is owed to Levitt’s effort to write “a book in the text and a second, more theoretical book in the footnotes” (p. 12). However, instead of reaching “beyond academic borders” (p. 12), this results in an opposition of theory and empirical data and the near cleansing of theoretical reasoning from

Levitt’s account, contradicting the assemblage approach. Not investing in the theoretical foundation of her arguments, Levitt, for the most part, relies on the statements of her responders completely. She is reluctant to dismantle the “global art speak” (p. 126) or the *multicultural speak* (my term), respectively; focusing on the global museum assemblage and its local reterritorializations, she is oblivious of the reterritorialization of another assemblage: that of mainstream multiculturalism, cultural heritage, diversity management, and the ideas of nationalism, national identity, and national culture.

Ultimately, this neglect also has consequences for the very core of Levitt’s analysis: the conceptualization of the “cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum.” Whereas she gives a moralizing, yet crude definition (in the conclusion!) of “cosmopolitanism” as the “willingness ... to engage, openly and respectfully with people who are different” (p. 136), she refuses to account for a need for clarification of what “nationalism” refers to in return. *Ex negativo*, what renders the “nation,” then, is homogeneity, closedness, and most importantly, self-evidence: Based on her strong convictions that museums “cannot help but be part of the creation of citizens” (p. 140), it is consequential that museums cannot help but tell a national story—with varying degrees of openness to the world. To Levitt, however, having a national identity, belonging to a nation, taking pride in a nation, seems a simple, and inevitable, matter of course. Therefore, the reader is left with a vast and confusing assortment of concepts such as “the city,” “the local,” “the region,” “the community,” and “traditions,” that, in her argument, all crystalize into the “nation.” For this reason, she mistakes the “Vikings” for “Denmark” (pp. 14-15) and presumes “Skansen” to be about “Sweden” (pp. 16-17), instead of trying to understand *how* the Vikings became a representation of “Danishness” (a word used without quotation marks, p. 29) or *how*

Hazeliuss's interest in folklife was translated into a nationalist stance.

Levitt sets out to find "new ways to think and talk about nations" (p. 142); however, simply replacing epistemological binaries such as "West"/"East," "we"/"they," and "local"/"global" with a continuum between nationalism and cosmopolitanism leaves the underlying structures untroubled. Yet, museums with their recalcitrant objects would have been a prime site for reworking the familiar orders of things.

While Levitt, in fact, embraces Neil MacGregor's notion of museums as "messy arenas where countries might diversify their self-portrait and re-create themselves as more cosmopolitan nations" (p. 5), she perpetuates them as "national" institutions—in *more or less* "cosmopolitan" nations. To Levitt, the globalized museum world is a reflection of coming to terms with who you are, when migration and globalization trouble your sense of belonging; admittedly, this is not false, but this view tends to materialize the "nation" as order, stability, and homogeneity, and the global world as chaos, uncertainty, and heterogeneity. This is problematic and shortsighted: Levitt insists that the "global is always refracted through the local" (p. 105); however, the "local" is not the "nation." The "nation" in Levitt's book is a cliché she leaves intact instead of dismantling. It is a trope, one "we quickly jump to ... because it allows us to feel some false sense of stability and security" (p. 119), as Levitt quotes one of her responders. It is up to Levitt's readers to decide whether that had been a response to Levitt's questions or a comment on the premise of her analysis.

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Citation: Jan Hinrichsen. Review of Levitt, Peggy. *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

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