

Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: Human Remains and Privacy - A Contemporary Bias? – Presentation by Nicole Crescenzi (IMT School for Advanced Studies, Italy)

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode we will hear the presentation "Human Remains and Privacy - A Contemporary Bias?" by Nicole Crescenzi of the IMT School for Advanced Studies in Lucca, Italy.

Okay, so first of all, what I'm going to present to you today is a very small part, a very small extract of my PhD thesis on which I'm currently still working. So I also beg you of mercy. And I am actually a PhD student at IMT School for Advanced Studies in Lucca. I'm at the end of my fourth year, actually. And I'm currently also a visiting student and guest researcher at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden.

So first of all, a small warning, trigger warning, let's say so. So in the presentation, there are pictures of human skeletal remains. If someone is particularly sensitive to seeing these kind of pictures, please let me know so that we can work out a way to avoid any disturbances.

So I wanted to start with this sentence by Goethe in his notebooks about his Italian trips. And the sentence is: "Many disasters have befallen the world, but few have brought posterity so much joy." I don't know if any of you know this sentence or may imagine to which disaster he is referring. So the disaster he's referring to is Pompeii. The explosion of the Vesuvian volcano. Now, this picture is actually an Instagram post of the archaeological park in Pompeii. And the sentence, the quote that you find next to it, it's a comment to this picture. And the comment reads: "how distressing to see the remains of these two men who were crushed by a wall during the earthquake". Because, I mean, I don't know if you're familiar, but there was, there was the explosion of the volcano, but it was accompanied, preceded by also an earthquake and all kind of problems that can follow. So why have I decided to show you this picture? And why Pompeii to start with? First of all, Pompeii, because Pompeii, it is true, as Goethe said, that it is a huge, huge disaster, which resonated over the years. And it's not the first time that the archaeological park shows on his Instagram account or on his social in general. The picture of the remains is not the first time that they're advertised. And it's not the only place that does that, but we are starting to perceive that this showing, this kind of display is not actually okay for everybody. People actually do feel distressed and they express this distressing.

So why am I saying all that? Because my PhD thesis focuses on, in general, on the exhibition of human remains in museums. And I try to tackle this debate from different perspectives. Now, I didn't know if you were aware of the debate or at what point you were aware of it. So I decided to put a small resume of it. The debate, we may say that it started somehow around 1864, when with the treatment of the Dakota Man in the United States, we started finding the so-called bone rooms, which are these rooms used for collection and study of human skeletal remains, particularly of Native Americans, to try and

give scientific ground to racist theories. Of course, as one can easily imagine, I guess, indigenous people at some point started reacting to this treatment and we're around 1930s. And this reaction, brought to another reaction from government, for example. So in some cases, we do have legislation that try to tackle this issue. For example, the first one we find is in 1984, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act from Australia, which protects specifically the indigenous population of Australia. We have in the 1989, the World Archaeological Congress with the Vermillion Accords on Human Remains. So this time we have not a specific, a country-related legislation, but we have an accord on a as much as possible global scale. In 1990, we have the probably most renowned, at least in the field of this legislation, which is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, also called the NAPFRA, in the US, which covers, which protects the graves of the Native Americans from federal recognized tribes. In 2002, we have, let's say, a fundamental moment for the discussion about repatriation and the display of human remains with the case of Sartre-Bartman in France, in particular, which brought to the legislation, the Loi des Musées in France, which covers, tries to cover at least, the issue that rise with the request of repatriation, the ethical issue, and also the issue of the propriety of human bodies. In 2004, we talked about it a little bit this morning, it was at least named, the Human Tissue Act in the UK, excluding Scotland, which had its own Human Tissue Act later in 2006. In 2009, the ICOM finally proclaimed his Code of Ethics, and in 2013, we have the Recommendation for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections in Germany. Now, why I decided to stop with this one, even if it's not the last step, it's not the last regulation we have, but it's the first one that kind of enlarged, finally, the debate to the whole Europe, and not only to the anglophone countries, or the countries which had direct requests for repatriation, as it was the case of France with Sartre-Bartman.

So this was mainly to give you a little bit the idea of the existence of the debate, and what the debate is about. But now, let's take a step back, maybe somehow, and let's talk about why archaeologists used, and think about, this thing, for example, human remains. So to start, the archaeology is the study of human past, using mainly the human materials, like in the terms of materials produced by humans. And for many years, they were mainly artifacts, so objects. And these objects were used to tell the stories of past populations and to try to understand these past populations. At some point, the objects were not the only instruments of the archaeology, but archaeologists started to work also with anthropologists, and therefore that's when also human remains entered the narrative. We also had, this was also helped through the advancement in technology. Which allowed us to discover the people's story, even without exactly knowing their identities. So now we have a way to know, for example, what a person used to eat, or if they had some kind of illness in life. We may even understand how they died in some cases. And that's apart from knowing their sex, their biological sex, the age, more or less when they died, and so on and so forth. And we can understand all of that, even without the writing, the written sources, or all those archaeological materials, the objects that we're so used to work with. But now the question is, do we have the right to tell these stories? We don't have certainties as archaeologists that the stories we're telling are actually true unless it's, I don't know, some kind of king, or someone specific, someone particularly important for which tons of books have been written, and even in that case, we're not sure that the stories are true. Because, I don't know, maybe it was a king who lose a battle, who lose a war, therefore his story, for example, is the story that the winners told us, maybe. So as present-time archaeologists, the question is, are we invading their privacy by telling their stories? Is it fair to tell their stories?

So now, I wanted to present some very brief results from a survey, which is part of my thesis. The survey collected 1,250 replies; it was an online survey, trying to understand what people in general think about the display of human remains in museums. There were different questions, and I didn't have a specific target. The purpose was exactly to try to see as many, to collect as many opinions as possible. And these are some of the answers. Unfortunately, I cannot share too much of the data at the current moment, because I still have to finish my thesis, finish the data collection and the analysis. But these were some first data that I think can be interesting to underline here. So first of all, we have one side of the coin, that is the need that people feel to hear the stories of the human remains that they see in the museums and that's why people feel the need to have them more humanized in some way so not to perceive them like objects but like actual people. And here we can read some of the comments, for example: "it depends whether the bodies are presented in a respectful and not sensationalizing way. Seeing a bug body or oxy with their clothes and equipment and maybe indication how and why they died can teach us a lot about the way people lived and thought in the past".

Ötzi, who might.. I don't know if you're familiar with that, see sorry, it's uh this man that was found frozen and it's currently displayed in a museum in northern Italy: "so Ötzi, who I might have seen only images of during a lecture and online, in particular filled me with oh because of the vast amount of specialized and well-engineered equipment he was found with. People tend to underestimate past humans. Seeing someone like Ötzi helps us understand that people in the past were at least as smart as we are today and were able to adapt to life in sometimes very difficult environments with amazing skills."

Another comment reads: "it depends on how they are displayed in the context and condition of the human remains highlighting their cultural relevance not a surgical extraction of the human remains just to be exposed." "Yes, if they tell their stories. Exposure should not be an end in itself it is only useful if it is contextualized and if the remains serve to tell something specific. I cite as an example the Lombard Museum in Cividale, which also exhibits them to tell the physical characteristics of these populations through some showcases in which the tomb with all its objects and the skeleton is reconstructed, but only in some significant cases. Without an explanation of context and purpose exhibiting human remains is little more than shock entertainment."

So these are just few comments, to show again, so the question that we're replying to is: do you think it is ethical that museums exhibit human remains? Something like this, I don't remember right now the exact question. The answers were: yes, no, it depends. So these are the text-answers that I received for the 'it depends'-answer. So people are kind of okay with seeing human remains in the museum, but they need to tell something it cannot be just to show them just to create some kind of shock reaction in the visitors.

On the other side though, we also had some replies of people who didn't feel completely at ease with not only the display of the human remains, but sometimes even with the telling the story of the human remains. So they said, that they felt like it was a violation of their intimacy, they felt sad, sacred, a bit embarrassed to be looking at the remains of someone. I didn't put the quote. The quote were original in the comments. Fascinated and regarding for example mummies in small parts, slightly uncomfortable with the violation of their privacy. I was overwhelmed with curiosity but also a sense of shame at seeing these people how i'm sure they wouldn't have liked to have been seen. The display is designed to be private but it didn't counteract the feeling you were somehow trespassing on a

person's dignity and the effect of giving privacy in the design of the exhibit may have accentuated that. Kind of awkward, but it would feel like looking at a dead man. Light but natural embarrassment.

So we see that if on one side people actually request to know more about the people, the human remains on display, about their life, when they were alive so that they don't feel them like objects anymore. On the other side we have this intense feeling that they are still people and therefore this um this feeling of violation their privacy, their intimacy, of trespassing. I think it's very interesting especially the comment that says: that the display giving privacy kind of made them feel worse about seeing them.

So one question though, that I receive quite often is: why do we think it is a problem? Why there is a discussion especially from archaeologists, but not only?

In the antique times it was not something weird. In Greece for example, there is something which is actually called the bone policy which means using the bones of the heroes of the supposed heroes as a political stance, as a political instrument basically. The example I'm bringing here is Theseus. The temple that you see there is actually, now we know it's the temple of Hephaestus, but back then was thought to be the Theseion, therefore the place where Kimon, one of Athen's tyrants, brought Theseus' bones and after the retrieval. And why did he do that? Because the bones of Theseus were thought to be powerful for the city of Athens and a great way to protect the city itself.

On the other side we may discuss that in ancient time privacy, especially connected to death, was perceived very differently compared to how we perceive it today. So for example in Roman times, especially during the republic, it was very usual and actually it was considered an honor to have a very public procession after death, so that everybody could see you and think about you and you would not be forgotten. And we don't only see it thanks to Polybius and this description of the roman procession, that i'm not going to read now because i'm running out of time, but for example we all know, I think, the very famous passage of Petronius, when he talks about the Trimalchio buffet and Trimalchio himself says: "I want to be carried out in splendor, so that the whole crowd calls down blessings on you".

But you may tell me that I am talking about two different things and you would probably be right. So this kind of discussion moves on two different contexts. On one side we have the funerary context, which is the public procession that we talked about in the roman times. We also have the religious context, I mean the bones of Theseus were the bones of an hero and heroes are considered not gods, but in some way the intermediate between man and gods. So they can fall in a religious context. How are they different from the Christian relics for example?

On the other side, we are talking about museums and museums are par excellence the place where objects and human remains are taken out of context and they also change their purpose. It's no longer a protection purpose, it's no longer memento mori, it's no longer trying to be remembered by the people that still live after your death, but it becomes something completely different. And the other thing is that museums did not exist in the Roman times or in Greek times. So maybe what I'm proposing here is that we should actually change the question. So the question is not if we are violating their privacy. We're feeling like it because we have our concept of privacy, but I don't think that Roman people would worry about digital data after their death, honestly. So maybe, maybe we do feel like violating someone's privacy, but we're just putting our sense of privacy into them. So the question

should not be if we are violating their privacy, but if we are respecting their wishes or not? And I don't have a reply for that. And thank you.

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Thank you so much for listening.