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Fredrik Svanberg. *Människosamlarna. Anatomiska museer och rasvetenskap i Sverige ca 1850–1950*. Stockholm: Historiska Museet. 2015. 285 pp. ISBN 978-91-89176-56-0.

The publication of Fredrik Svanberg's *Människosamlarna. Anatomiska museer och rasvetenskap i Sverige ca 1850–1950* [The Collectors of Human Beings. Anatomical Museums and Racial Science in Sweden c. 1850–1950] is very timely. The topic of human remains in museum collections has recently been under debate in Swedish media. Early in 2015, the debate was triggered by the efforts of Karolinska Institutet's Unit for Medical History and Heritage to research its neglected historic collections of human remains, and start repatriating racialized skulls to indigenous source communities. (Disclosure: I am the director of that unit, and my own research on the history of medical museums is referenced in this book.) Svanberg, who is head of research at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, wrote an important contribution to the media debate. The old skull collections that still exist in Lund, Uppsala and Stockholm, he pointed out, have been "rediscovered" by the media at intervals of 5–7 years since the 1980s (cf. pp. 20–26). Media attention tends to cause a brief uproar, until the crania are quickly forgotten again – until the next time. Swedes don't seem to retain past understandings and constructions of race, or how these conceptions contributed to the creation of our modern, neutral and ostensibly non-racist welfare state.

But historians haven't forgotten. Research on twentieth-century racial biology and eugenics, especially, has been very thorough and widely read over the last couple of decades. It is true,

however, that there aren't as yet many published accounts of the scientific practices involved in racial discourse *before* the early 1900s when racial biology, founded on Mendelian genetics, took off. And most of the new scholarship has yet to become common knowledge, which is one reason why "news" of skull collections can still be taken to be scandalous by journalists, scientists, politicians, and the general public. This makes Fredrik Svanberg's new book important.

Svanberg frames it as a study within the cross-disciplinary field of "heritage research" (p. 7). An archaeologist by profession, he uses his training to understand cultural contexts by examining material remains and combines this perspective with impulses and inputs from museology and intellectual history. The aim is to shed light on racial science in Sweden by studying collections, collectors and the individuals whose remains were collected and displayed in Swedish anatomical museums c. 1850–1950. Svanberg also wants to develop a systematic way of studying museum collections as "*actors in and traces of* social networks and relations between people, places, and historic events" (p. 9, *italics mine*). Fortunately, Svanberg doesn't carry out the problematic idea, derived from Bruno Latour, that material objects have agency. The use of material objects to reveal traces of actions in the past, the heart of Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological/hermeneutic theory and methodology, is more productive. Svanberg is very accomplished at applying it in his analysis and interpretation of diverse source materials: museum catalogues, research notebooks, skulls, plaster casts, photographs and scientific publications.

Uppsala University's anatomy museum is the focal point of the book and Svanberg has studied its remaining collections and archives thoroughly. His narrative takes as its point

160 of departure the 1850 construction of the Anatomy Department's building, which was located at the centre of the little university town, close to the hospital. Uppsala University collections contained around 2,000 crania, which were used in early Swedish racial science, then often called "anthropology", until the coming of racial biology in the early twentieth century. According to Swedish law, departments of anatomy had the right to collect the bodies of the indigent poor who died in prisons, hospitals, or workhouses, and whose remains were not claimed by relatives. Bodies were systematically collected from these institutions and taken to medical schools for dissection. As Svanberg puts it, these individuals' bodies were de-identified, "stripped of their humanity," their names and personal histories, as they were transformed into anatomical objects. They were dissected, studied, classified and (sometimes) their body parts were preserved, catalogued and put on display in the "human collection" (Svanberg's term), which was open to students and the general public. The process of de-identification, Svanberg argues, was a crucial part of the process of creating scientific collections which did not care about individual identity or socio-cultural aspects of life, but focused solely on anatomy. Using an awkward term borrowed from Samuel Alberti, Svanberg writes that this objectifying process turns individuals into "dividuals" (p. 31).

The author does acknowledge that the study of race was not the only purpose of collecting human remains: the anatomy department was a space for knowledge production and medical education about a variety of subjects, a space where students received their basic training about the human body. This knowledge was applied in the doctor's work of easing pain and suffering, and promoting health (p. 10). Even so, and despite Svanberg's stated desire of conveying

this complex history in a balanced way, the main thrust of the argument is that the collection and classification involved in anatomical studies was a sort of exploitation, made possible by the powerful social position of the medical professors and medicine as a discipline and profession. Svanberg tries to balance this by describing anatomists, such as Karolinska Institutet professors Anders and Gustaf Retzius, as actors within a larger cultural and historical context. He tries to avoid making them heroes or villains, and shows that they were important contributors to science and to an unjust and unequal social structure (pp. 25f.). But the text often slips into the disparaging mode that often permeates historical accounts of anatomical collecting and collectors (for example, Ann Fabian's *The Skull Collectors. Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago, 2010)).

The book deals with more than the title would lead the reader to expect (it doesn't translate well into English: I'll call it *The Collectors* here). It combines a study of who the collectors of human remains were, with a study of anatomical collecting practices and institutions, as advertised by the subtitle. Plus, it deals with the people whose bodies were dissected, preserved and collected (on an individual as well as a group level). The author situates it all in a social and historical context, deriving the science-history perspective from other scholarly works, mainly by Swedish historians of science and ideas (such as Torbjörn Gustafsson-Chorell, Karin Johannisson, Olof Ljungström, and Annika Berg). The book's division into thematic chapters on collecting, museums, different kinds of actors, plus the history of racial science is ambitious, but results in some repetitions and overlaps that could have been avoided with more rigorous editing.

The Collectors is well researched, makes critical arguments, and presents new facts. I

hope that its perspectives are further developed in subsequent works to reach the wider readership that this scholarly work is unlikely to. The Swedish History Museum is to be commended for keeping Svanberg and other scholars on staff and allocating resources for them to do research and publish books (this is no. 25 in the museum's "Studies" series). But the book would have benefited from a fact check. Some errors are minor: Lars Roberg was a teacher of Carl von Linné and not his student (p. 56), and so on. Others are more consequential. For example: it is true that the cadavers that were dissected by medical students mostly came from impoverished individuals in workhouses and hospitals. Bodies and organs of dead anatomists were, however, also dissected and collected, contrary to what Svanberg states on page 200: the skeletons of anatomy professors were prepared and put on display in Turin and some other museums; brain collections often included specimens from doctors, scientists and other members of the elite. Some medical professors had pathological body parts that were deemed interesting – such as KI anatomist Anders Johan Hagströmer's arthritic pelvis – and which were dissected, studied and exhibited. These facts don't alter Svanberg's understanding of anatomical practice as structured by power relations, but they make the matter less clear-cut (and, to my mind, more interesting).

Svanberg's goal is to use museology and museum history to "complete" the picture of the history of anatomy, anthropology, medical museums, and racial science previously painted by historians of science. He does this well in some ways (e.g. his focus on collected individuals/dividuals), but some crucial aspects are left out of the story. Although he mentions colonialism as a prerequisite for the collection of non-European skulls, the international context of racial science is for the most part missing. There

are anatomical museum collections all over the world, some of them were motivated by the same craniological research agendas that led to the creation of the skull collections in Uppsala, Lund, and Stockholm (our Scandinavian neighbours have similar collections). In fact, the Swedish collections are fairly small compared to the 25,000 skulls at the Natural History Museum in London, 18,000 at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and 15,000 at the Museum of Natural History in Berlin.

This international context is crucial in order to understand Swedish anatomical museums in general and skull collections in particular. Measuring and comparing crania were central research practices for those who tried to figure out how the apparent superficial dissimilarities of individuals from different continents related to their interior anatomy. There were two different tendencies at work: an emphasis on similarities versus an emphasis on the differences between individuals or groups of human beings. One perspective tended to construct an anatomical universalism (we are all the same under the skin), and the other constructed hierarchies that explicitly or implicitly connected anatomy to a sociocultural evolutionary narrative (Western civilization is the most developed society, therefore Western Man must be the most highly evolved human being). These tendencies were, of course, highly influenced by Darwinism and, later, by Mendelian genetics. Swedish scientists were just as interested in these fashionable research questions as their peers in other countries, with whom they corresponded and exchanged research materials. The networks of exchange that Svanberg mentions were global and connected to colonial economies and structures. Just as anatomists in Australia made names for themselves within the British imperial context by having access to Tasmanian and other aboriginal crania (see the scholarship of

162 Helen McDonald), so the Scandinavians could provide their colleagues at home and abroad with Sámi skulls in exchange for the remains of North American Indians, Africans, etc.

Anatomical comparative research both depended on and resulted in a hierarchical classification of people (into races, classes, the criminal, the abnormal, etc.), which then affirmed highly unequal political-economic and social power relations (cf. p. 207). But this wasn't necessarily the anatomists' goal. Through their scientific studies they contributed to belief in natural hierarchies, but they also developed methods and a body of knowledge that allowed some of them to critique such beliefs: this is also a part of their legacy to us. There was an unfortunate tension between the ultimate goal of most medical scientists (to improve the health and well-being of individuals and populations) and the effects of some of their practices. The practice of collecting and measuring skulls against the will of the collected individuals is notoriously impossible to reconcile with today's ethical standards of research conduct. But we need to set aside our own impulse to disapprove to be able to see clearly what the skull collectors were after. At least one aspect of the non-consensual collection and display of skulls and bones is quite similar to today's mapping of population genetics: both of these research practices aim to answer questions about human variation, evolution and origin. As a historian of medicine and science, I think these questions are at the heart of the matter of racial science.

What do historians of science miss, then? Most obviously, the focus on scientists as actors tends to leave out the roles of other actors and their bodies and experiences – janitors, artists, students, and, of course, those whose bodies were made into objects of study and display. Svanberg works hard to reset this imbalance by identifying and, in some way, resurrecting a

few select individuals through careful archival triangulation. This is the most original part of *The Collectors*, something that one hopes Svanberg will develop further in future works. But the scientists/collectors still dominate the book. The collected individuals are most fully treated in the five appendices, which are full of fascinating facts derived from Uppsala university archives and which will be most useful to scholars, especially the twenty-five-page table representing the old catalogue of osteology specimens.

The many praiseworthy elements of *The Collectors* that deserve mention would make the review too long, but I want to mention a few that made a strong impression. First, the description of the relationship between skull-measuring nineteenth-century anatomists and their archaeologist colleagues. According to Svanberg, they came together as collaborators to work on understanding the origins of the people of Sweden. Even if they came at it from different angles, these two professional groups constructed, demonstrated, and displayed their views on race and nation in material form, which gave audiences a tangible manifestation of ideas to physically experience in the halls of their museums (p. 115). Second, the fascinating section on executed criminals, whose bodies were more thoroughly examined than others: up to one hundred jars could be filled with organs and tissues from a single body! (p. 122) And finally, the account of anatomy institutions as sites of "body work", where bodies of the living (male medical students and professors) and the dead (cadavers and displayed individuals) met and mingled, transforming in the process.

To conclude: *The Collectors* is an important contribution to the scholarship on racial science and medical museums, a field that continues to grow in Sweden and internationally. Remaining old collections are in the public eye, and

questions are being raised about how to deal with them. Should we discuss the changing roles of medical collections of human body parts in the form of public displays, as the Medical Museion in Copenhagen has chosen to do in its new permanent exhibition *The Body Collected. The Raw Material of Medical Science from Cadaver to DNA*? Is it a good idea to problematize historical practices of collection and display as the History Museum at Lund University recently did in an exhibition on/of human remains? Digitize skull collections and put them online, or shield and protect them from the gaze(s) of an uncontrollable public? To repatriate or not to repatriate? Do old skulls and skeletons belong to all of us as a universal, albeit troublesome heritage, or should they be considered as remains of individuals that “deserve” to be buried? In that case: how far back in time should this right extend? The Middle Ages? Ancient Egypt? Does it matter if the bones were collected by (possibly racist) scientists or (possibly racist) archaeologists? In order to examine these questions, and many more pertaining to collections of human remains, we need more knowledge about the complex history of such collections. *The Collectors* contributes some vital pieces to this big puzzle.

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