

## **Making National Museums: Comparing Institutional Arrangements, Narrative Scope and Cultural Integration**

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The purpose of NaMu is to develop the tools, concepts and organisational resources necessary for investigating and comparing the major public structure of National Museums, as created historically and responding to contemporary challenges of globalisation, European integration, and new media. What are the forces and values of traditional national display in dealing with challenges to national, cultural and political discourse? This will be achieved by a series of conferences providing a venue for younger scholars and eminent researcher to gather and develop the multi-disciplinary competence necessary to understand and compare the dynamics of national museums in a framework of a broadly understood historical culture and identity politics.

The opening address present the aim and intellectual challenges of the entire program and outline the question of definitions and performance made by national museums and the possibilities of the comparative and multi-disciplinary scope.

## Setting the Frames

The opening conference Setting the frames invites a discussion that will be relevant for the whole series. Its scope is not in-depth inquiry as much as to map the terrain, to explore the most productive way to develop the path to follow and generate research questions. This means to put into work knowledge from several disciplines and countries, instead of leaving them to their respective internal dynamics. In the background of this approach a thorough reflection on the structure of knowledge (contemporary and optimal) corresponds to the idea of investigating how the structure and anatomy of the National museums are working. Under scrutiny is not only an ensemble of museums of various kinds looked upon as part of a more or less concerted negotiation, but on the academic side a likewise concerted variety of disciplines. To know to what extent different knowledge structures are compared or if the differences are due to institutional and historical variation is of course vital – and difficult since these two systems do interact.

For the first conference was 60 researchers from 17 countries and 22 disciplines with 43 papers attending. The diversity is challenging, and proved to be rewarding. Some dominance for art history and museology presents two well-developed clusters of disciplinary background but also within them a variety of perspectives are presented in the papers.

There is no paper that explicitly deals with the structure of knowledge, but of course several starts out with an image of earlier research and propose not only addition of new facts but also changing perspectives. Some of the papers do explicitly deal with a critical approach to the overwhelming structural and cognitive approach developed in the study of national museums and propose changing focus and more diverse approaches from within, from the active visitor, or from the periphery. These suggestions are important to keep a productive instability and an open reflexive mode for the program and future conferences and create a platform for assessing the potential for various approaches, but it is also a question in need for some future attendance and confrontation: are art museums best studied by art historians, archaeological by archaeologists? My own multi-disciplinary department constantly assess both benefits, losses and damages by developing these manoeuvres. What happens if we would swap positions, not only as we have examples from post-colonial re-interpretation but also as a generalised disciplinary strategy?

Further more the interaction between individual actors, internal processes of professionalisation and the wider historical culture that is the setting needs to be not only explored but the theories and methodology to go about such a vast territory needs to be broken down into sequences, perspectives and particularities – in order to be able to bring them together again in the end, to be arguments for how to understand the broadest issues and not in the end be lost in details and explanations close to either an unreflecting catalogue of events or apologetic defence for the institution or community under scrutiny. To fulfil the plan above it is both an individual learning process for the participants in the NaMu program, which this collection of papers will make accessible for more readers, but also the promising possibility of establishing a more longstanding research collaboration for developing some of the ideas that becomes visible thorough the workshops into more elaborated comparative approaches.

Many of the papers are addressing several of the questions addressed in NaMu. This made for manifold possibilities of combining them into sessions. There was not one session for one question but rather they became settings for discussing all the general questions at every session, giving them a new angle at each turn.

The discussions were fed by circulated papers through the site [www.namu.se](http://www.namu.se), very short oral presentation, and a commentator for each session. For each half day an appropriate keynote speaker introduced a central theme for the program: professor Stefan Berger, Manchester

University who also is leading an ESF project: *Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe* gave important insights from that wide-ranging comparative research program on historiography in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century ([www.uni-leipzig.de/zhsesf/](http://www.uni-leipzig.de/zhsesf/)).

Professor Tony Bennett, Open University and also director of ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, CRESC ([www.cresc.ac.uk](http://www.cresc.ac.uk)) gave a lecture on *Museums of Conflicted Histories in Postcolonial Contexts*, also visualized through a television program on the construction of the new Australian National museum in Canberra.

Esther Shalev-Gerz, Paris, is a visiting professor at Linköping University and an artist working with themes on memory and the past in public spaces: *Reflecting spaces / deflecting spaces* gave new aspects on spatial, esthetical and political aspects of art in dealing with historical traumas in Europe.

In the concluding discussion professor Svante Beckman, Linköpings University, summarized the discussions and dealt especially with the aspect of defining the National museum.

## Defining National Museum

There are several ways to meet the question of defining the national museum. The *methodology* chosen in NaMu is to view the creation of the concept and the institutions as a historical process to be studied: concepts and institutions in the making in close interaction with knowledge regimes and politics. The concept is in itself part of the cultural process, defined and contested by historical actors. Suggestions for building national museums were common as a response to challenges of the Napoleonic wars, and of the museum acquisitions and exhibition ideals developed in France simultaneously. Two processes can be localised at the heart of the matter: nation-making and the performance of national master-narratives is the prime mover brought together with museum traditions and moulded to form part of an evolving public sphere. Ideas of what constituted an up to date national museum was formulated as norms to strive for: openness, accessibility, professional leadership and state stewardship were among these (Debora Meijers).

Another road of investigation is taken by Rhiannon Mason in setting up a minimal definition of state responsibility and naming and study the logic of that structure. Small nations struggling for state acknowledgment seems to bring together their actions to a centralised National museum with more emphasis then older states, with a wider range of collection and imperial realities or dreams to house. Nations with states and without states, within or post-colonial relations develop different strategies trying to utilise the idea of national museum for political purposes.

A third way is to identify theoretically an essential feature to be monitored for qualifying as national museum, and that might be to the extent the museum participate in the making of national narrative through their program, exhibition and existence argued by Tony Benett. Most museums would then be part of that process but some actors might be more central then others. A scale could then be developed to grade the impact since the definition is relational to the effect and not only the ambition of the museum.

As an effect of different definitions a national museum may be a single building hosting something labelled National Museum or perhaps more often a cluster of National Museums of history, culture, art and natural histories or museums that have central functions for the making of national identity – even if it is a private foundation and not called national museum at all. In this phase of developing the research the most fruitful approach is to stick to the methodological approach and use the three different ways of defining national museum as analytical tools for making observation of how *research* and historical actors have been working with the question of definition and allow for the full range of attempts.

## Negotiating Community in Institutions

Definition are always to be instrumental for a purpose. The reason for choosing the broad historical perspective is that the history of the institution itself is not the main target for the program, but the question of *what forces and intentions are materialised in the institutional creation and division of labour between national museums?* The different ways of organising the form, content and aspiration of national public display is in itself the first of the comparative questions raised. The respective viability of different approaches, perspectives and methodologies are of course related to what more precise research questions that are applied – and we do not share all of them, even if we acknowledged a common terrain to tread in these workshops.

## Narrating

The second question is related to the performance and content of the narratives presented by the national museums (by, in and about). This theme is explicitly targeted at the second workshop in Leicester in 2007, focusing on how to put the narrative methodologies at hand to work at London museum in a more laboratory workshop in order to answer questions like: Who are presented as actors (bad and good) in the formation of the nation? What “we” in terms of territory, class, gender and ethnicity forms the proper national community? What is the destiny of the people? Where does the narrative point towards in terms of an ethical and utopian dimension? What political order and what values are legitimised?

On what levels and with what analytical tools is it possible and fruitful to read the messages and the negotiations that national museums are parts of? Most of the papers have something to suggest and add here explicitly or by example: the vehicle of narration is expanded from the exhibition to all arrangements and modalities of the museums physicality, its presentation through texts and visibility in the wider culture. But important questions are also asked about the strength of different actors and the coherence of possible narrations. Is the decisive power a formidable museum director’s ability to address major historical changes and make them accessible for personal experience? Or is it, at the other end of the spectrum, the individual visitor that rather uses the museum as raw material for a personal and unique self-transformation of her individual identity? Or are both in the hands of hegemonical discourses? Are the late-modern narratives fundamentally different from the national – or just a renegotiating the integrative function creating proper legitimacy for the present order and state?

## Combining

Obviously a researcher is in the position to choose between these approaches. When brought together it is also possible to ask if any of these are more fruitful and effective than the other? Or what would happen if one used all of them on one National museum – or one of the perspectives on several Museums? Would that challenge the truth produced by the perspective and theory chosen?

Many of the papers are engaged in an argument of the good museum and the beneficial relation to research, openly or implicitly. This can be regarded as a meta-narrative produced by the activity of the program itself as it evolves. This is one intriguing facet of cultural research – we are not only professionals but also citizens involved in the production of the culture we study.

To read the message of the museum, it is necessary to know how the narrated landscape is situated in the wider historical culture: what is being emphasised by the invocation of the museum, and what alternative voices are openly or implicitly being downplayed.

## Working in a Historical Culture

The third question has to do with this interaction or if you like, the results: What is the place of the national museum in the culture at large. The question can be answered in a variety of ways: in terms of visitor figures, by analysing the place of the museum in the public sphere and by assessing how exhibitions work at a reception level. To what extent is the narrative working its way successfully in the public sphere and to what extent is the production of meaning an autonomous prerogative of the visitor? Do anyone care about the national museums? Except for us and the professionals?

What is the production of meaning in museums worth compared to American film, television, the force of family and friends in civil society and commercial culture? This is of course one of the hardest question to answer and to find methods to develop. The need for theory is obvious. Museums do express hope and an urge to act upon people and society, but does it work?

If they do matter in some sense, how do they relate to historical change at different moments in time: Do they resonate in old dominant traditions stabilising and legitimising the present (or even yesterdays) order? Do they present new programs trying to invoke a specific agenda and a yet not established viewpoint of the past in order to create a new future? How are they acting or counteracting societal change?

There seems to be little doubt about the fact that national museums do express nation-building ambitions dealing with integration and handling of historical change: if it is going from industrial society to something else as newly opened museum of Work and industry in Sweden might indicate, or pays homage to a stable peasants society as displayed by the Nordic Museum a traditional cultural history museum in Stockholm. New Occupation museums in the Baltics negotiate political oppression and private nostalgia. Other deal with tensions of long duration, institutions with regional – national balancing as in Switzerland or the new national museum of American Indian constructing a continental as well as tribalised narrative in a Washington national setting.

The marks of National museums in popular culture are not overwhelming, suggesting they are not all that important in the overall historical culture after all. When they are brought in it is in one out of two ways: as the imprint of dust, boredom and immobility or as the guardian of dangerous and valuable secrets in the Indiana Jones way. Bringing the collection alive is the comedy horror theme of the movie since early *Frankenstein*. For museum professionals the opposite is the horror theme of absent visitors, which creates the interminable drive for new techniques, progression, new approaches. Death and oblivion is always threatening and needs counteraction.

*The night at the museum* (2006) is in fact a very revealing story of popular stereotypes of the museum guarding its treasures, which could be destroyed if put outside of the walls exposed to daylight (or the market), but are in need of regenerative energy to draw new audiences. American Natural history museum hosts not only dinosaurs but also ancient Indians, Romans, Attila the Hun and the Wild West. A past history which unlocked are violent and childish, in desperate need of the heroic actions of the not to clever (k)night watch to keep the peace in the world and guard against the evil which threatens the order of the museum and the world. All this of course to show his son that he is worthy of his respect as a responsible hero and father.

Instead it seems like civil society itself produces museums as never before: an explosion of museums, perhaps more true to 19<sup>th</sup> Century mix of civic /commercial initiation and influences, even more in line with a romantic view of an active nation, then initiated by state actions. This leads scholars and museum professionals to gate-keeping reactions – and the public to another type of scepticism – not for the pompous but for the trivial. One of the few songs on museums puts them in a rather sarcastic context of ridiculous and vane strivings in

“It’s a hit” from 2004: “Any asshole can open up a museum, put all the things he love on display so everyone could see them...” (Rilo Kiley)

## Comparing

Through the program is the idea of gains coming from a comparative outline, methodology and scope: by bringing scholars from a multitude of disciplines and states together it will be possible to ask new questions and give vitalising answers to research on national museum scattered over the world. These is challenging task in need for its own attention in order to be brought forward.

### ***Why Compare?***

Systematic comparison might be done for different reasons:

- a) In order to *generalise*: by comparing several processes of creation and function of museums we might be able to see similarities between institutions and nations that would be hidden when confined within a more monographic context. The context of nationalism is one of these communal forces, but perhaps also other negotiation topics might be worth exploring comparatively: gender, regional, class, trauma, rapid change.
- b) To *explore variation* and nuance generalisation and stereotypical images of national museums. This can of course be done by singular counter-examples in a critical mode, but is more productive and refined if several are used not only to doubt the general truths but to qualify them.
- c) To individualise and contrast. Even if the main concern for the researcher is not comparative there is in fact always an implicit comparison made out, usually emphasising the uniqueness or the typicality. A more carefully performed contextualisation of a case is in effect utilizing a comparative approach. I think this is often at hand in case study and a more careful contextualisation, bordering to a comparative approach, would in many case strengthen the case and make clear what explanatory power different dimensions brought forward and naturalised within a national paradigm might have when confronted with other nations.

### ***What to Compare?***

There is or ought to be a problem under investigation. In the case of NaMu there is a formulation focusing on National Museums and the kind of performances they stand for in a societal context. We have an idea of focusing formative moments connected with the creation of a nationally legitimate state and compared this with the structure around year 2000 when public discourse of global challenge was becoming dominant in the academy and outside. This does however not happen at the same time for all countries or institutions. State-making is in fact as viable as a process today in many parts of the world, but in a different global setting then in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Different countries, similar types of museums, similar negotiations, differing experiences and actors – all of these are possibilities to be considered also according to the capacity of the comparative approach chosen.

### ***Comparative Strategies***

Basically there are two quite different ways to go about the selection.

A. *Most different selection*. If we have a very good idea and theory of what to investigate this might be optimal: post-colonial settings and nation-making theory predict certain similarities that can be explored in quite different cultural or epochal settings.

B. *Most similar selection*. If we are at a more exploratory stage or with very complex cases it might be better to choose this strategy, exploring for example two new states in a similar

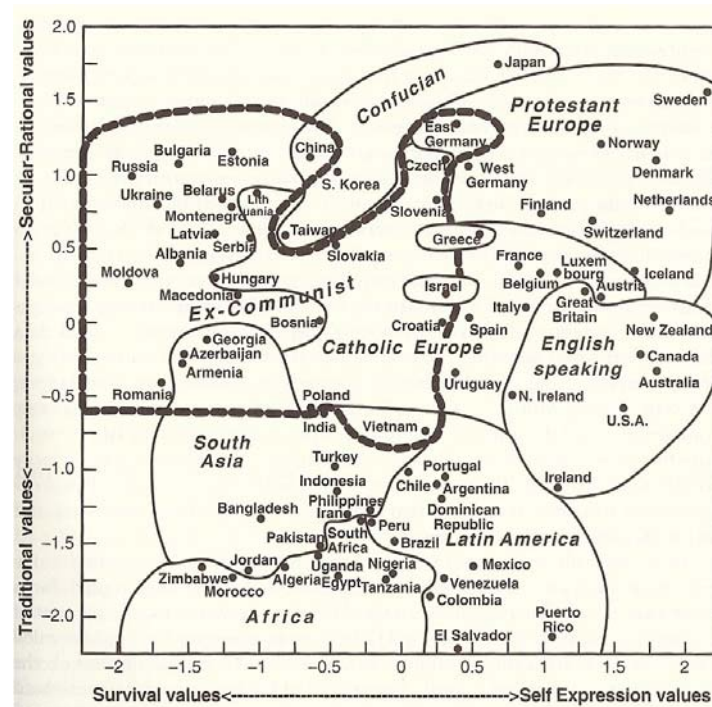
cultural, political and economical environment, like Wales and Scotland, or Finland and Norway, England and France.

If we were to make a grand selection for a project on world scale, how should the selection be made? Current knowledge of paths to nationhood would of course be central, but also the timing of that path. It is a different context if the state and National museum is set up in mid 19<sup>th</sup> or early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is also reasonable to count the process and structure of both democratic culture, disciplinary structure and historical narratives into the more nuanced block.

There are some interesting world wide surveys to draw upon. One example are the broad studies done by political scientists on political culture: Barrington Moore, Sidney & Verba, Stein Rokkan. But also more recent social scientists like Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Mann and Charles Tilly et al would be possible to draw on especially for large scale but “thin” comparative approaches of certain aspects.

Ronald Inglehart has led one of the largest comparative projects called world value studies that might help to place observations onto a map of contemporary differences in value preferences. Combining this with varying trajectories in nation-making is one way to see how determined national museums are by these societal processes – compared to other dynamics of important individuals who are often prominent in museums history, or to power struggles of academic and institutional divisions. Or it might, just as I mentioned be a tool for contextualizing the individual case more in depth.

Sweden is an extremist country, in case you have not noticed: the most individualized in terms of values, and the highest degree of generalized trust, also towards state-responsibility. Here it is a scheme comparing traditional /secular values with survival/self-expression values. A lot of us and our examples can be placed here and raise questions such as: India and USA are on par on the traditional/secular scale: Germany, Spain and Greece on the survival secular – does this generate possible hypotheses on the working of national museums?



Source: Inglehart, Ronald & Christian Welzel. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: the human development sequence*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 63.



However this drive to order and sort must not hamper the creativity and ability to unmask irregularities where the legitimizing stories might have produced too much order. The messy landscapes of collectors, commerce, politics and science, transfer and conflicts between tourism, art, kitsch, ideology and knowledge is perhaps what excites even more – and creates the type of institutional uncertainty and creativity in the institutions themselves which opens for reorientation and reflexivity.

The comparative drive must not overshadow similarities and transfers that are at play since creating national museum is a communicative endeavour where the consciousness of what neighbours and “the other” are doing are not new to the late-modern experience economy.

## Nordic National Museums

In a Nordic setting we are setting up a project to compare the use of Nordic images in the National museums in the Nordic countries to negotiate both a broader cultural community changing national borders and also perhaps remnants of a Germanic ideology.

Within this region we find an old community of struggling empires (Sweden and Denmark), States forming in the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Finland and Norway. The Baltics taking form through 20<sup>th</sup> Century wars, dissolution of Soviet Empire just recently and Iceland dissociated from Denmark during the second WW.

Denmark and Finland with a proper National museum telling the long story while Norway is more pluralistic in spite of a very definite nationalist approach on other arenas? Sweden is an old empire with a constant loss of territory but no close encounter with war for two hundred years.

The possibility to expand this comparison with one of “second grade” is one of the challenges of the program: how are the Antiquity, the Celts or Slavs used in other regions to negotiate conflicts and possibilities of changing borders and integration?

The NaMu program rests on the hypotheses that national museums are not trivial, that there are secrets to be unravelled. It is however not the treasures guarded by the museums itself that are to be unlocked, but the synergetic power of connecting knowledge about the museum institutions to often locked up within specific disciplines and national paradigms that will be untangled.