

Comparing National Museums: Methodological Reflections

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The article sets out to define the need for comparing national museums as complex cultural processes. To do this questions are developed that concern the workings of institutions as arenas for cultural policy and identity politics in relation to central fields of knowledge. Methodological considerations for designing a comparative project are presented, and finally four fields of comparative endeavours related to different sets of state-making processes are presented:

An all-encompassing European comparison (including colonial endeavours) on the path taken by various nations to establish the place of national museums and the role they play in the creation of community.

An in-depth study of how the national display in a selection of countries creates visions of cultural community. How do they deal with differences and belongings on a super-national level and how do they relate to regional differences?

From a citizens' perspective the intentions of cultural policy or institutional ambitions might be of little importance. This part will simulate visitor experience of national narratives in a comparative selection of capitals from project one, in order to develop an understanding of how citizen experience relates to the more structural findings in the other sub-projects and hence map in what directions citizenship and community are moving through contemporary displays of national community.

The place of national museums in changing knowledge regimes.

National Cultural Heritage

Rather surprisingly, reflections on public historical culture have not been de-nationalized by comparative approaches to the same extent as research on nationalism. Partly this is due to the fact that Cultural Heritage, as a field, is one of the complex responses to contemporary challenges producing more or less open constructions of collective identity with a new frenzy from the 1990s onwards. Furthermore, the competence for analysing public history culture is multidisciplinary, yet fragmented. Therefore, the need for and benefit of trans-national, trans-disciplinary action to connect research and knowledge is extraordinary. Fields of knowledge already in practice in the present re-activation of national museums and with the potential to create active research, reflexivity and training environment do exist also in different multi-disciplinary settings: public history (USA), history culture (Germany) and museum and heritage studies in several countries adding to all disciplinary islands of research relevant to the topic. They often focus on one major national institution for public history in order to (re)construct its history, use it as a case in a theoretical argument in a post-colonial, Foucauldian or educational context, to criticise or to facilitate the current development. By bringing disciplinary and multi-disciplinary fields together with a sharp and comparative focus on national museums the NaMu program forms a new departure for understanding and analysing European diversity in this central institution.

Ambitions of NaMu

A comparative strategy has to be instrumental to a set of research questions. For NaMu these are broad but not all encompassing:

1. As an organisation a national museum may be a single building hosting something labelled National Museum or perhaps a cluster of National Museums of culture, art and natural histories. *The different ways of organising the form and content of national public display is in itself the first of the comparative questions raised: What forces and intentions are materialised in the institutional form and division of labour between national museums?*

2. *The second question is related to the content of the narratives presented by the national museums: what political order and what values are legitimised? Who are presented as actors (bad and good) in the formation of the nation, what “we” in terms of territory, class, gender, ethnicity etc, forms the proper national community? What is the destiny of the people? Towards what does the narrative point in terms of ethical and utopian dimension in the future? On what levels and with what analytical tools is it possible and fruitful to read the messages and the negotiations that the national museums are part of?*

3. *The third question has to do with the results: What is the place of the national museum in culture at large?* The question could be answered in terms of visitor figures, by analysing its place 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? Does it correspond with old dominant traditions stabilising and legitimising the present order? Does it 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? What are the more powerful and successful narratives in terms of reaching various goals defined scientifically, politically, culturally and economically? This is of course one of the hardest questions to answer, and to find applicable methods for answering. The need for theory is obvious. Museums do express hope and an urge to act upon people and society, but does it work the way people hope or fear?

National Museums: A Four Dimensional Object of Research

What defines a national museum needs some elaboration to balance the need for clarity with the demand for flexibility to work across two centuries and a continent. It is not only the question of finding a working definition for an analytical concept. The concept is in itself part of the cultural process, defined and contested by historical actors. As an analytical concept it can be preliminary delimited by the overlapping of the two defining concepts the heading contains. It brings the moulding of public museum traditions together with nation-states and especially the making of national master-narratives. As an organisation a national museum may be a single building hosting something labelled National Museum or perhaps a cluster of national museums of culture, art and natural histories. *The different ways of organising the form and content of national public display is in itself the first of the comparative questions raised: What forces and intentions are materialised in the institutional form and division of labour between national museums?*

There are several ways to meet the question of defining the national museum. The *methodological* way chosen in NaMu is to view the creation of the concept and the institutions as historical processes 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. Initiatives for building national museums were often a response to the challenges the Napoleonic wars, and the simultaneous museum acquisitions and exhibition ideals developed in France.¹

This means the definition must be dynamic enough to host an array of questions raised and also to allow for historical change – and yet be able to discriminate cases outside the comparative scope. The proposed dimension is not stipulating a definite shape of a National Museum, but rather a model of how to specify the considerations necessary to deal with in defining more precise comparative tasks within the broader framework. This is not an easy task and I propose a four dimensional definition to be able to discuss what kind of cases we do or do not compare.

1. *Ownership*. The nature of stakeholders, formal owners and financiers is one obvious defining dimension. It could be comprehensibly presented with a scale from state to national, overlapped by an axis where judicial forms move to more subtle forms of ideological and cultural legitimate claims. State ownership is clear-cut enough but not entirely so: the state owns other things than national museums. A national ownership can be organized in various ways, as foundations or even as private, if accepted in the public sphere as speaking of or about national commonalities. Usually this recognition takes the form of at least some legal protection and state funding.

2. *Field*. There is a great abundance of enclosure of the type of collections designated with national importance. I suggest that the basic varieties can be separated into four groups: art (aesthetic objects), cultural/historical (us), ethnographic (them) and natural (facts of the natural world). A fifth group is comprised of all the museums that are recognized as nationally specific according to national historiography and self-understanding: a maritime museum in Lisbon might be one case. They can be grouped into the four types mentioned above, but would in another national setting not be regarded as national since their special meaning is so closely knit to national historiography.

1 Various approaches are illustrated and discussed already in the first NaMu meeting and published in Aronsson, Peter. "Making National Museums: comparing institutional arrangements, narrative scope and cultural integration." In *NaMu, making national museums program, setting the frames, 26–28 February, Norrköping, Sweden [Elektronisk resurs] Linköping electronic conference proceedings (Online)*, 22, edited by Peter Aronsson and Magdalena Hillström, (eds.), pp. 5–12. Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2007..

Those are the aspects that we discuss the most, but the following ones are even more important as they are of a more theoretical nature and important to keep track of in order to know if we are really discussing the same type of instances when comparing.

3. *Process/dynamics*. In a linear model the establishment of a museum or the communication of a message might be modelled as a series of events from creating an idea, an institution, a house and collection, exhibiting and surrounding the dissemination with a program for visitors who acquire the message (or not) reusing it making a functional footprint of the activities. Even if this model is too linear – there is feedback all along the line, or turned upside down for theoretical reasons, the point here is to know where in this process our arguments come in: do we study the institutional dynamics or museum utopias – and use them as argument for how they work through visitors? Can this be justified through theoretical arrangement or even enhanced with comparative approach? In either case certain clarity in this dimension is often revealing since many of us do investigate on one level and draw arguments on another.

4. *Articulation*. In the last dimension it is of importance to make clear on what level of articulation the object of comparison is constructed. At the most articulated level we find theoretical arguments: coherent and explicit systems of thought explaining the idea of the museum. At the next step downwards to silent and implicit statements we find clear but fragmented statements, like propaganda, which might well be contradictory to the ones used tomorrow or for another audience. Next we have open action (on the dimensions above) defining another level of interpretation. All these can be used to read more implicit levels of mentalities, attitudes, values, forgetting, repression etc.

Defining the national museum by these criteria is obviously a methodological groundwork of great importance to the possible impact of any comparative argument. The idea is not to include too many arguments on the actual workings of the museum in the defining process, separating the explanans from explanandum at some distance even though the hermeneutics of the approach is evident. Hence different logics of ideology, economy, pleasure, entertainment and education will be treated later on under theoretical considerations rather than using them in order to define the object. Obviously an object in an art museum could have all of these effects, depending on situation and context.

Comparative Methodology

Systematic comparison might be done for different reasons:

a) In order to *generalize*: by comparing several processes of creation and the functions 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 those communal forces, but perhaps also other negotiable factors might be worth exploring comparatively: gender, regional, class, traumatic conflicts or tensions due to rapid change. In its strongest universalising form it would produce a covering law predicting under what circumstances a certain phenomenon appears, for example the establishment of national museums or a post-modern challenge of traditional narratives. The ambition is to cover all instances with a single theoretical statement.

b) To *explore variation* and to nuance generalizations and stereotypical images of national museums. This can of course be done through singular counter-examples in a critical mode, but it would be more productive and refined if several examples are used not only to question the general truths but also to qualify them. Then the ambition would again be to make a complete mapping, but not in order to cover all empirical instances by one theoretical statement but rather with a set of categories. Any attempt to describe various strategies or paths for developing national museums dependent on the trajectory of state-making, allowing for politics and skills of active patrons, would fall into this category.

c) If the variation is related to an *encompassing unitary context*, this is a third perspective on the comparative task. This could be exemplified by discussing how the ensemble of various museums play orchestrated roles in a national system in order to produce a national scientific or ideological part on the whole.

d) To *individualize and contrast*. Even if the main concern for the researcher is not comparative there is in fact always an implicit comparison made, 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 studies, and a more careful contextualisation, bordering on a comparative approach, would in many ways 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.

e) The main object of comparative exploration may also, with Marc Bloch as a prominent forerunner, be to develop new questions that do not appear when the object under scrutiny is analyzed in only one context. The whole NaMu project is in fact working mainly under this condition to heuristically, stimulated by questions arising from a multitude of perspectives, to form rejuvenated research platforms for individual and joint ventures. A platform for comparative research is developed step by step.²

A more rigorous scientific comparison would demand at least as many cases as there are variables to consider, and the ability to hold other parameters fixed while they vary. This is not possible in most cases where a complex cultural phenomenon is studied, too many parameters are part of the theoretical background or not known well enough to be given a proper position in the theoretical framework. However, it is necessary to let go of some complexity in order to be able to make some of the possible gains of comparative reflection. Basically there are two quite opposite ways to go about the selection of a comparative sample.

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

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 with similar cultural, political and economical environments, like Wales and Scotland, or Finland and Norway, England and France

There is a diversity of worldwide surveys to draw inspiration from for the comparative design: state-making, democratization, community-building, modernization, values and attitudes and historiographical narration are among the relevant processes that have been mapped in large scale investigations. Some examples are the broad studies done by political scientists on political culture: Barrington Moore, Sidney & Verba, and Stein Rokkan. But also more recent social scientists like Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Mann, Manuel Castells and Charles Tilly would be possible to draw on, especially for large scale but “thin” comparative

2 There is a huge amount of literature, circulating around similar appreciations of the possibilities, mainly differing regarding hopes for universality and the urge to explain versus the ambition to understand and heuristically develop perspectives at the issues at hand. Skocpol, Theda, and Margaret Somers. “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry.” *Comparative studies in society and history* (1980): pp. 174–97; Tilly, Charles. *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984; Bloch, Marc. “Toward a Comparative History of European Societies.” In *Enterprise and Secular Change*, edited by Fredric C Lane, (ed.). London, 1953; Landman, Todd. *Issues and methods in comparative politics : an introduction*. 3rd ed. 1 vols. London: Routledge, 2007; Ragin, Charles C. *The comparative method : moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; Denk, Thomas. *Komparativ metod. Förståelse genom jämförelse*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2002..

approaches of certain aspects.³ I will dwell somewhat on the state-making perspective, which I think is a powerful actor, and only mention briefly some additional dimensions that might be fruitfully adopted in order to connect issues of national logic to visitor attraction and citizen perspectives.

Nation-Building and Museum Strategies

As the creation of national museums here is focused as a major player in the nation-making process, this is one of the contextualizing comparative contexts that needs to be addressed. Two major research traditions of relevance to the creation of the modern state exist. The first one deals with the establishment of the early modern state, and the second is oriented towards the modernization-period dealing with nation-building. They discern quite different forces of dynamics where, simplified no doubt, the emphasis on early state-making is on the power of war. The precise negotiation of social forces to achieve military potential to survive determines the variety of forms for early modern state making and the creation of a modern bureaucracy. For the later phase the ideological investments are given more space in the well-known approach of nationalism research. Often the modernization approach is connected to the development of a market-economy and sometimes more critical credit is given to the evolving global World system of unequal exchange.⁴

There are some major comparative projects in the late 1990's that give us reason to believe that power analyzes of the early modern period underestimate the level of ideological investment in religious structures but also in political dialogue (though not necessarily in the political theory of absolutism, always a prerequisite for legitimate rule on a longer term and with reasonable costs). Some have argued that absolutist rhetoric discloses a lack of control and that parliamentary rhetoric discloses a firmer grip on society, already in early modern times.⁵ Further more it seems that propaganda for the masses was part and parcel of the governmental practice also in the 17th and 18th Centuries. The transformation of the Louvre is put forward as a typical nationalization created by Napoleon but the fact is that the Versailles was visited from its opening, and directions were given through guide-books. Already in the early modern period artefacts were gradually perceived as pieces of art in their own right, in addition to their role as representations of religion and power. Similar observations can be made in the European periphery of Sweden. The contemporaries perceived this transformation from allegoric classicism to more secular modernism as a crisis of representation already in the 17th Century.⁶ The radicality of the Napoleonic Louvre was its claim to liberate art from

3 Berger, Stefan. "National Historiographies in Transnational Perspective: Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Storia della Storiografia*, no. 50 (2006): pp. 3–26; Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. *The civic culture: political attitudes and democracy in five nations: an analytical study*. 2. ed, The Little, Brown series in comparative politics,. Boston,, 1965; Moore, Barrington. *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy : lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.

4 Leading work for the first approach are: Tilly, Charles (ed.). *The formation of national states in Western Europe*, Studies in political development, 8. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1975.

5 An excellent overview, unfortunately not provided by the large scale ESF program itself is accessible in Swedish. Gustafsson, Harald. "Den gamla staten på nya äventyr. Synpunkter på nyare statsbildningsforskning." *Scandia* 72, no. 1 (2006): s. 93–117; Blickle, Peter, (ed.). *Resistance, representation and community*, The origins of the modern state in Europe, 13th-18th centuries,. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997.

6 Burke, Peter. *The Demise of Royal Mythologies*, Iconography, propaganda, and legitimation. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

history and free it from its historic boundedness. In this, and in its state centred organization, it was a completely different project than the British Museum.⁷

Scholars have pushed the question of how negotiation of identity on various arenas is essential for understanding the formation of nations, already before the 19th Century.⁸ This research presents a more fruitful line of research than the reified positions between primordialists and constructivists often structuring debates on the nature of nationalism. In particular it presents a background for the importance of reflecting on the negotiation of identities, also when dealing with such seemingly scientific and obscure matters as museums of geology and fossils.⁹ When that happens, around 1800, it opens a new arena where the more general process of negotiation of power and knowledge can take place. It is not new in nature but presents a general dynamic of political/cultural negotiation creating the context of knowledge, worldview and legitimacy urgent for any society to agree upon.

Systematic collection did start out from a more general desire to order the world, grasp the unknown and to share splendour and knowledge with peers, if expanded from an early modern treasury museum, to a cabinet of curiosity. Successive opening and redirection to a national audience occurred already in the ancient regime, but was concluded by the transformation into nation-state. The successive spread of the model went, on a macro-historical scale and in accordance with regular models of colonialism and globalization, almost simultaneously to the white colonies in Charleston (1773), Rio de Janeiro (1815), Sydney (1821), Cape Town (1825). The first global boom was in the decades after 1870, also the high-tide of imperial expansionism and the second wave has been in the phase of post-colonial nationalism after the Second World War.¹⁰ The need for national display to complement the political process seems, from then on, to be a strong driving-force over-determining the desire for knowledge. Enhancing popular education by a national museum might have been the political target in Scotland and India, or just the possible argument to get imperial support for such a potential disruptive investment in the peripheries. An ambiguous dimension is always present if there is an ongoing negotiation rather than just a dissemination of propaganda or monolithical discourse.¹¹ Ordering the political frames determines the doxa of the museums, at least on the signifying level of national public.

For the later development there is an interesting argument by Janet Coleman on the relationship between the simultaneous development of a strong state and the development of an increasingly viable individual. Though the relationship might not be a necessary one, and

7 Déotte, Jean-Louise. "Rome, the Archetypal Museum, and the Louvre, the Negation of Division." In *Art in museums, New research in museum studies*, 5, edited by Susan Pearce, (ed.), x, 292 s. London: Athlone Press, 1995. In Preziosi, Donald, and Claire J. Farago, (Eds.). *Grasping the world: the idea of the museum*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

8 Kidd, Colin. *British identities before nationalism : ethnicity and nationhood in the Atlantic world, 1600–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999.

9 Knell, Simon J. "Museums, fossils and the cultural revolution of science: mapping change in the politics of knowledge in early nineteenth-century museums." In *Museum revolutions: how museums and change and are changed*, edited by Simon J. Knell, Suzanne Macleod and Sheila E. R. Watson, (eds.), xxvi, 385 s. London ; New York: Routledge, 2007..

10 Robertson and Lewis, from Prösler, Martin. "Museums and globalization." In *Theorizing museums: representing identity and diversity in a changing world*, edited by Sharon Macdonald, Gordon Fyfe and (eds.), 236. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

11 Nair, Savithri Preetha. "Economic logic versus Enlightenment rationality: evolution of the museum-zoo-garden complex and the modern Indian city, 1843–1900." In *Museum revolutions: how museums and change and are changed*, edited by Simon J. Knell, Suzanne Macleod and Sheila E. R. Watson, (eds.), xxvi, 385 s. London ; New York: Routledge, 2007.. Wales and Scotland by Rhiannon Mason, Andrew Newby and Linda Andersson Burnett at *Comparing National Museums: Nordic Culture - National History*. Panel at ESHC, Lisbon, 080301.

this might be a very important observation to prohibit a linear tendency present in so much of the modernization strand of macro-sociological theory, as argued by Antony Black: The early development of Greek individuality did not have a modern state to support its expressions; Islam is an individualistic religion which do not implicate a western state development at the early modern period. The modern nation-state did not erase the old bonds but established a new one to a citizenry.¹² We might add that the formal power to transform Royal collections to national exhibitions is more readily at hand during absolute rule, than through parliamentary negotiations: a more rapid change in France than in the UK, in Denmark than in Sweden – more complex mobilization of civil society was an essential part of the creation of national museums.

One of the important links between individual desire and community building in political forms is trust. The ability to transform and negotiate cultural capital from *bonding* to *bridging* forms is crucial for the capacity to open communities for lasting and dynamic integration. Here the category of *linking* social capital is crucial for understanding the role of institutions in the process.¹³ The general question on the relationship between the working of national museums and democratic development is of course more complicated than just to assess the specific contribution of this cultural phenomenon in relation to the strength of the state, its capacity to develop security, welfare and economic development and its constitutional structure and practice.

The more restricted question of the quality of the relationship itself is however in need for consideration and many of the complex issues can be boiled down to the question whether the net effect of national museum representation is an expression and viable part of developing existing community trust – or if it is a persuasive move to create something that does not exist, or even a futile construction in reality contrary to existing structures. In either case they do matter and play a role, but have to be analyzed differently: footprints of an existing nation and state of knowledge or a project, more or less viable, for a future to appear.

Further steps could be taken to connect these collective processes to individual appreciations of trust and well-being and correlate this to variations in representations and workings of museum institutions. This perspective opens for the possibility to see the development of modern individuality and its relationship to community as a much more open-ended process, hence the product of negotiations between formation of corporations, individual desire and contemporary challenges. They could and can be met differently. The national museum is part of the arena where the forces are negotiated, no doubt with a certain tendency to articulate the communality and the virtue of the national community, but at the same time hinting at what the desired virtues of individual citizens ought to be, giving a broad audience an ambitious possibility to participate in the making of individuality and community

12 Coleman, Janet. "Preface." In *The individual in political theory and practice*. , edited by Janet Coleman, (ed.), xxv, 395 s. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.

13 Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992; Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2001. Florida, Richard L. *The flight of the creative class. The new global competition for talent*. New York: HarperBusiness, 2005. Woolcock, Micheal. "Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework", *Theory and Society* 27 (1998); Szreter, Simon. "The state of social capital. Bringing back in power in politics and history." *Theory and Society* (2003). in Sandén, Annika. *Stadsgemenskapens resurser och villkor. Samhällssyn och välfärdsstrategier i Linköping 1600–1620*, Linköping studies in arts and science, 330. Linköping: Enheten för historia, ISAK, Univ., 2005..

by the practice of making the museum: discussing, projecting, building, visiting, used as narrative and metaphor for self-understanding.¹⁴

This overview does not however answer more detailed questions regarding major differences in the place and structure of establishing national museums over the world, but it does provide us with a complex theoretical framework of an external dynamic of museum foundation. Exactly how this negotiation of knowledge, community, individualization and globalization is handled is not only a matter of different resources or local adjustments but feeds political strife with a variety of strategies chosen by the compound of elites making national museums become real. Today the old political strategic exposure of the grandeur of a country has turned into an economic resource of highest carat for attracting a good portion of the rapidly growing visiting industry.¹⁵

With this background we might suspect a certain pattern of institutional action to be grouped roughly according to 1) the chronology of the establishment of an independent state 2) the relation between state and nation(s): conglomerate, empire, nation-state 3) the challenges met from external/internal enemies. The actual narrative relates to these realities in the making of what knowledge ought to be collected and exhibited, shaped as national exhibits, but also with the democratization process and more subtle definitions of citizens, regional diversity, class divisions.

Facts and Representations

National museums differ fundamentally from written history, where a multiplicity of voices are possible, challenges raised to dominant interpretations, even if a methodological nationalism is often shared also among combatants. Museums differ from this practice in several ways since for most of them the national historiography is not an explicit frame of reference and the resulting effect of the compound reading of historical layers of one institution and several museums together could be much less homogenous than expected for state sanctioned and overtly negotiated institutions. But in principal we expect less of open contradictions in a location labelled national museum than on the printed scene.

The important and ambitious investigation taking form through NHIST (Representation of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries) provides a stimulating point of inspiration. Comparing two comparative projects both on the level of methodologies and the results might be rewarding. They are looking at two different complexes for dealing with the past, two parts of the historical culture: professional historians on the one hand and national museums on the other. The role of museum narratives in relation to the professional historians and their master narratives in all the European countries will now be possible to compare due to the efforts of the NHIST project. No doubt there are questions of transfer and linked histories here, but also various

14 Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: the human development sequence*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Killerby, Paul. "“Trust Me, I’m From the Government”: The Complex Relationship between Trust in Government and Quality of Governance.” *Cultural Policy Journal of New Zealand*, no. 25 (2005): pp. 1–15. R.Inglehart and H-D. Klingemann, "Genes, Culture and Happiness," MIT. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com/> and <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> provide two large reservoirs of comparative source material to tap comparative facts on diverse attitudes and inspiration from.

15 Löfgren, Orvar. *On holiday: a history of vacationing*, California studies in critical human geography, 6. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1999. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination culture. Tourism, museums, and heritage*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998. Dicks, Bella. *Culture on display : the production of contemporary visitability*, Issues in cultural and media studies. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003. Mason, Rhiannon. *Museums, Nations, Identities. Wales and its National Museums*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007..

differences in logic. To what extent are the strategies of successful national narratives similar and how do they differ in national historiography and national museums?¹⁶

Parallel to the scientific revolution of Leopold von Ranke and his demands for objectivity and source criticism in the exploration of national history, ambitious state oriented museums relied on the scientific discourse to give credit, legitimacy and power to their presentation. Quite often, both by adherents and critics, those are understood as oppositional programs, as in the long-standing debate on new museology around the turn of the century 1900, and in its new clothes as a campaign against the Heritage industry led by David Lowenthal in the 1980's.¹⁷

I would argue, and this is a general argument of how scientific use of history and ideological uses relates, that a simple falsification or openly pronounced ideology just does not do the job properly. The more ideological the program was and is, the greater the necessity to give it a scientific shape, to make it legitimate, based on knowledge of the world and not on opinions about it. This could be drawn one step further into an argument of great relevance to museums. The more important and shaky the history of the nation is, the more important those stories of national decent, pride and territorial belonging are factually represented, produced not only by history museums proper, but by natural, technological and art museums. And it does work. Museums are among the more trustworthy carriers of explanations of the world, much more so than schools or television.¹⁸ They are also an intensively used form of mediation approaching a billion visitors only in the USA at the turn of the Millennium.¹⁹

The observation of simultaneous ideals of universal objectivity and claims on absolute uniqueness also shows the double need for a comparative perspective as an analytical approach, and an open mind to the fact that ideas and ideals do travel: transfer and "histoire croissant" are not opposite poles but have to be observed as such so that the methodology of comparing national entities does not become a major tool for constructing them, but rather historicising their existence as part of certain typical vehicles for modernization through national integration.²⁰

Programme

If we were to make a grand selection for a project on world scale, how would such a selection be made to catch the dynamic elements in the most rewarding way? Current knowledge of paths to nationhood would of course be central, but also the timing of that path. We are dealing with different contexts if the state and national museum are set up in mid 19th or early 21st Century. Into the more nuanced block it is also reasonable to count the process and structure of democratic culture, disciplinary structure and historical narratives.

Taken crudely we might deal with three groups of states and expect different approaches in the construction of national museums:

16 Porciani, Ilaria. "Mapping Institutions, Comparing Historiographies: the Making of a European Atlas." *Storia della Storiografia*, no. 50 (2006): pp. 27–58; Berger. "National Historiographies in Transnational Perspective: Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries."

17 Lowenthal, David. *Possessed by the past: the heritage crusade and the spoils of history*. New York: Free Press, 1996..

18 Rosenzweig, Roy, and David P. Thelen. *The presence of the past: popular uses of history in American life*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998.

19 Luke, Timothy W. *Museum politics. Power plays at the exhibition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

20 Berger. "National Historiographies in Transnational Perspective: Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries."

A) Empires and conglomerate states. Large and ambitious enough to view themselves as universal Homo sapiens, multi-cultural enough to give credit to diversity. England, France, Habsburg, Spain. Corresponding forms of National museums would be early royal assets together and/or a thriving civil society would produce a rich and diverse jungle of museums, well illustrated by the museum-scape of London.

B) Smaller states with a long history: Sweden, Denmark, Portugal and Switzerland. The first two without doubt with early imperial ambitions but steadily in decline in the 19th Century. The self confidence and long trajectory give less impetus to nation-making through National museums, but threats from abroad, societal change and a need for cohesion gives ample opportunity for building institutions gradually and to define the nation far back in history.

C) New emerging nation-states with a great need to produce a national narrative. All former colonies and nations evolving from the devolution of empires: USA, Finland, Norway, Hungary, Germany, Italy and Turkey. More recent violent examples are South Africa and the Balkans and peaceful secessions like Czechoslovakia to Czech and Slovakia. Here we would presumably find the most conscious and explicit plans, and we would need to actually produce a coherent story of a long trajectory – exactly because of the short actual history. Below this group is of course the failed or not yet successful: Basque, Catalan etc.

States do move between these, hence giving fuel to new uses of national museums and simultaneously bound to some extent by their earlier history by path-dependencies or a necessity to contrast with a revolutionary agenda. The trajectories of earlier institutional investments become important either as an asset or as a problem. Austria's main assets were formed in the situation of an Empire. Turkey relates after 1923 to overcome the greater Ottoman past of decline and Muslim culture. USA was a liberated colony building the Mall as a major and explicit investment in national pride, but is now an empire. Soviet union the other way around, like the Habsburg in devolution. Less pronounced but still in the same direction is the UK heading for a diversity of National museums in Wales and Scotland, challenging England to define the scope of the division of labour. The negotiation of national community of course plays different roles in these very different settings. A major question is to delineate how important the historical narrative and the various symbolic representations of these are compared to other sources of legitimacy, as a democratic system, effective economy and welfare provisions. The power of historical representation has a tendency to increase in periods of crises, and it happens that observers interpret this as a product of “too much history”.²¹

A more intriguing, challenging and acute question is to address the actual contributions that the establishment and workings of a national museum make to democratization and de-democratization processes. Structurally oriented comparative historical sociologists, like Charles Tilly, see three mechanisms feeding the process: integration of trust networks, minimising categorical inequality and dissolution of other autonomous power centers competing with the state. Democratization depends on the process where large groups of people are drawn into consultations with elites, and conversely democracy retreat when elites withdraw from these consultations.²² The institutional form of those consultations might vary, but it seems clear to me that they both need to be founded on a broad local practice and have to be given a strong public representation on the level where national political negotiations are taking place. A strong and internalized idea of shared culture and history is part of a structure making withdrawal from consultations harder since that affects the identity of participants. To

21 Ibid., p. 26

22 Tilly, Charles. *Democracy*. Cambridge, [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007., p. 195, 197.

assess the role of national museum in this process needs not only an appreciation of when and where institutions are established, but also an analysis of the actual narrative and the viability of the knowledge and imagery represented and immersed in the national society by them.

A rough chronology of democratization to discuss in relation to this could be:

1850–1899 Western Europe and Latin America

1900–1959 Australia, New Zealand, Japan

1950–1979 Southern Europe, Latin America + Pacific, Egypt, Morocco, Zambia

1979–2005 Eastern Europe, Latin America, African regimes, Asia Pacific.²³

The role of museum institutions in relation to societal change at this level can theoretically be put on a scale and hypothetically be related to the epistemic approach advocated as suggested below. The scale is not a chronological one, but rather a spectrum of possible political approaches to link knowledge regimes and political directions to museum politics.

Categorical relationships between museum and nation-making policy

	Modern scientific museum	Democratic	Reformist	Revolutionary
Reference to society	Representing	Developing	Projecting	Utopia/propaganda
Epistemic approach	Knowledge	Dialogue	Education	Prophetic

However the urge to order and arrange must not hamper the creativity and ability to unmask irregularities where the legitimising stories might have produced too much order. The misfits coming out of a structured comparison might be even more productive to the understanding of the workings of national museums than those that fit neatly into the patterns that we expect to find. The messy landscapes of collectors, commerce, politics and science, transfer the conflicts between tourism, art, kitsch, ideology and knowledge. This is perhaps what excites even more – and creates the type of institutional uncertainty and creativity in the institutions themselves – opening for reorientation and reflexivity.

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

On this background I see at least four possible frameworks that would benefit from systematic comparative research: politics, knowledge and identity.

1. An all-encompassing European comparison (including colonial endeavours) on the path taken by various nations to establish the place of national museums and the role they play in the creation of political legitimacy. Allowance will be given to policy choices, disciplinary structures and they will be related to structural variation in state-making paths as former empires, old and emerging nation-states.

2. An in-depth study of how the national display in a selection of countries creates a vision of culture community. How do they deal with differences and belongings on a super-national level and how do they relate to regional differences? How has national emphasis dealt with other identities and how is this changing?

23 Ibid., p. 199.

3. From a citizens' perspective the intentions of cultural policy or institutional ambitions might be of little importance. Most museums are visited briefly by visitors from the countryside, foreigners or more ambitiously for an hour or so by schoolchildren. In addition many of them will not restrict their experience to only one institution. This project will simulate visitor experience of national narratives in capitals of a comparative selection from project one, in order to develop an understanding of how citizen experience relates to the more structural findings in the other sub-projects and hence map in what directions citizenship and community are moving through contemporary display of national community.

4. The place of national museums in changing knowledge regimes. It will give an account of relationships between museums and academic disciplines, their role in the rise of enlightenment, the role of objects as carriers of knowledge and as transferrers of ideals, but it has also forcefully been transformed by Foucauldian research to an even more ambitious placement of the exhibitionary complex as a decisive place for disciplinary action on body and soul of modern man, demanding adherence not only to national interpretation but also to evolutionary, gendered and class related doxa of contemporary society

The first one is the most obvious context for most of the published research with comparative ambitions, often with a critical account of the role of the institutions as carriers of hegemonic, nationalist narratives. There is still room for a systematic approach at world level to understand the spread and reuse of the national museum as a cultural model of representation. The second phase will contextualize the findings more carefully by picking a selection of countries to deepen the understanding of the variety of roles museums do and can play. In turn this is connected to the third approach answering contemporary claims that museums do give opportunity for empowerment and inclusion to counteract threats of fragmentarization. Uses of museums as tools for democratic reuse and integration of various groups are foreseen or advocated. It is the space for hopes for democratic integration put on museums all over the world, which could be seen very much as a continuing renegotiation of what it means to be a citizen. At the same time museums are more left to finance their activities through the ticket office and it is regarded as equally important to attract visitors for business and leisure. What is the range of visitor experience produced in these settings?

The fourth framework develops in several directions and connects to earlier museological research on the formation of an exhibitionary complex and the relationship with academic disciplines. It has however also repercussions to the other proposed studies since claims on knowledge aesthetics are decisive and formative carriers of the possible frames of references for negotiating community and citizenship.

I consider it possible to place most of the comparative approaches developed so far within these frameworks. All are indeed valuable and possible to explore further. Mapping the system of national museums on national level, as regards the functional and institutional division of labour, and to interpret the meaning of this, is largely undone. The same applies for mapping and understanding the international transfer and spread of museum practices, even though this has been at least sketched by earlier research and on a normative or discursive level.

Finally I would like to argue for the benefits of dwelling a bit more on the development of the third approach instead of the former. In spite of (or perhaps because) the fact that more theoretical and generalizing approaches are available there and attract most of the scholarly attention at present, I argue that there is a need for learning a more multi vocal and multi layered mode for analyses also on the historical material and hence the processes of change. There is a need not only to focus on the articulated, normative and explicit but also on practice, the implicit and practical use of the institutions in their real complex setting in a fluent city-scape.

Conclusion

Explanations tend to follow levels of investigation. Actor oriented perspectives or discursive focus explain the role of museums differently. The failure in Sweden to establish a National museum early in the 19th Century might be ascribed to the parliamentary situation where the government commission to strengthen cultural heritage institutions was blocked in the 1820's, in spite of similar traumatic loss of Finland in 1809. Also proposals to build a national museum were blocked due to the strength of "parsimonious" farmers.²⁴

There is also arguably a more stable trajectory established through openly conservative and revanchist epochs, since still no forceful explicit and united manifestation of Swedish national heritage is institutionalized. It is to a substantial degree left to civil society to create. Both the long chronological grasp and the comparative outlook opens for other combinations in interpreting differences and similarities. The early establishment of national museums in Denmark could be attributed to legendary museum directors and scholars like C J Thomsen, as a reaction to Napoleonic wars or the power of absolute rule. It seems also to set a track, create a path-dependency, which is followed suit rather consequently up until our own days as part of the overarching historical culture. The country has more chairs in specific Danish topics than other academic communities.²⁵ Cultural heritage is thought of in definite singular and the government decides on a cultural canon with academic collaboration as the best tool for integration in a multi-cultural society. Explanations need to take into account the trajectory itself, setting up a specific heritage of institutions, forming a historical culture with implications for political solutions to contemporary problems.

Widening the comparative scope would add more complexities to the agenda. Why the lack of a strong National museum in a young and nationalist country as Italy and even in a country with a strong tradition of state interventionism as Turkey? Has this got to do with historical specificities like the fascist heritage or strong regionalist and city state structure for Italy, and the survival of a Muslim scepticism to visual representation of devotion for Turkey? Or is it due to the choice of writing a rather short Turkish national story encompassing the older civilisations in the concept of Anatolia and all its successive civilisations, so contrary to Italy where Rome seems to imply a city that is at the same time a capital and an open-air museum of Western civilisation? How important is the fact that there are distinct minorities and languages almost impossible to write into an image of a happy family in both cases (North/South divide in Italy; Armenian and Kurd issues in Turkey)?

The comparative approach does not solve all problems. To start with, an array of interesting issues arise, not least from the interesting misfits in regard to the crude theoretical assumptions of what could be expected if state-making was a coherent and universal process. New questions do arise and well-established canons become less evident. A fresh start for a comparative endeavour.

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24 Jensen in Alzén, Annika, and Peter Aronsson, (red.). *Demokratiskt kulturarv? Nationella institutioner, universella värden, lokala praktiker*, Tema Q Skriftserie. Norrköping: Linköpings universitet, 2006. Kulturministerium, Danmarks. *Kulturkanon*. Köbenhavn, 2006.

25 Porciani. "2Mapping Institutions, Comparing Historiographies: the Making of a European Atlas." p. 48.

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