

Comparing the Role of Complex Cultural Institutions: Negotiating Museums

Peter Aronsson
Linköping University
Peter.aronsson@liu.se

Museums are the negotiated result of several logics: science and politics, universalism and particularism, difference and unity, change and continuity, materiality and narrative. At some contexts and moments in history they also become vital arenas for negotiating and consolidating new answers to these. In Europe an intensive demand for national museums followed the Napoleonic wars and the creation of nation states. Regional differences below and above the nation were rearranged for new spaces of knowledge and politics. In the Scandinavian context the cultural construction of Norden was vital to creating a peaceful environment in the midst of possible feelings of revenge and emancipation. In Europe trajectories of parallel interactions give witness to the long standing relevance of museums as components of what here will be theoretically constructed as a “cultural constitution” balancing nations need for continuity with handling of old and new challenged to the unity. The paper is based on research done in two projects and will also contribute to the discussion on the possibilities and limits to comparative method in culture studies.¹

¹ *European national museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European citizen* (EuNaMus), EU FP Grant Agreement No 244305 running Feb 1 2010 – Jan 31 2013. www.eunamus.eu. See also www.nordicspaces.eu, *National History – Nordic Culture. Negotiating identity in the museum*. Financed through Riksbankens Jubileumsfond 2008–2011. Peter Aronsson, "Vad är ett nationalmuseum?," *Årsbok KVHAA* (2010a); Peter Aronsson, "Explaining National Museums. Exploring comparative approaches to the study of national museums," *National Museums. New Studies from around the World*, S.J. Knell, P. Aronsson, and A. Amundsen, (eds) (London: Routledge, 2011). Peter Aronsson, "Uses of the Past; Nordic Historical Cultures in a Comparative Perspective," *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2 (2010b)

COMPARING CULTURAL PROCESSES

A comparative approach is built out of a question and the definition of a comparative object that is consistent and productive in relation to that question.

The question is here how the making of public display interacts with nation and state making over the last 250 years. National museums are chosen as a prime object and explored as processes of institutionalized negotiations where material collections and display make claims and are recognized as articulating and representing national values and realities. Many of the negotiations and conflicts behind the scene in the museums have long standing trajectories; they are indeed not mishaps but part of the value of the institutions in creating them as relevant cultural forces at play over the last two and a half centuries.

We argue that the capacity of national representation as negotiated and carried by national museums have decisive power to shape political community following there fundamental property understood as knowledge based and hence legitimate and factual representations of the world and presenting the role of the nation within a political world system.

A consequence, and a measure of their capacity to build the legitimacy of representation as both factual, relevant and urgent is the level of engagement in initiating, the societal support of upholding and the longevity of their existence across political change both within and outside the political constitution.

COMPARATIVE VARIABLES

In studying modernization, democratization, national movements and nationalism a number of comparative approaches has been developed.² None have however attempted to assess the role of central cultural institutions, like national museums. The ambitions and function may vary according to the character of state making. An empire, a stable small nation-state and those in the making through process of unification or devolution are not the same. Classic examples of 19th century unification such as Germany and Italy can be compared with those of devolution of the Austrian and Ottoman Empire. Processes of liberation and devolution in Eastern and Western Europe give new drives for national museums from 1990:s and onwards. States formerly occupied by Soviet but also processes of devolution by Scotland, Wales, Catalonia and Belgium and new entities like the EU testifies to the on-going process of nation making.

The project will make quantitative series of data and analyse of both museum and state making variables, which will then be analysed in qualitative dimensions:

State making variables: Year of established sovereignty; Type of state: Empire, conglomerate, pre-modern state, modern state; Time for establishing democratic constitution.

² An overview in Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009). See also Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1999); Miroslav Hroch, *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe: a comparative analysis of the social composition of patriotic groups among the smaller European nations* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000); Stein Rokkan & Angus Campbell, *Citizens, elections, parties : approaches to the comparative study of the processes of development* (Oslo,: 1970); Charles Tilly, (ed.), *The formation of national states in Western Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1975); Tilly, ; Charles Tilly, *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984); Tilly, *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons* ; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990-1990* (Oxford ; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990); Tilly, *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990-1990* ; Charles Tilly, *Contention and democracy in Europe, 1650-2000* (London ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Tilly, *Contention and democracy in Europe, 1650-2000* .

Possible expansions from literature are manifold: Types of nationalism/state "contract"; Percentage minorities; World Value studies: trust, religious culture, traditional vs individual values.

Museum variables: Initiative and implementation; Year of inauguration; Type of museums carrying national function (art, history, etc); A few or several institutions; Epochs referred to; Type of Architecture (classic, national, post-modern).³ Let us just make a brief expansion on these latter variables.

INITIATIVES

Who wants a national museum and is able to establish one? Realities pushing towards initiatives are inherited ideas of a national community drowning or even better assimilating competing projects, the existence of collections assembled for Aristocratic glory or Enlightenment goals that can be reinterpreted and a perceived threat to be counteracted.

Secondly the composition of the forces active in initiating, formulating, mobilizing and negotiating is dependent on their relative strength and perceived need and responsibility of this cultural project. Typically they are elite projects and lacking access to a strong state civic groups act as representatives for the nation: liberal aristocrats, academies, and public officials more common in the early phases than capitalists.

The list of countries where former royal collections was the main source of artefacts starts of course with France where revolutionary actions moved the symbolic representation from a dynasty to a nation even if the transition did start before the political and violent overturn of the Ancien regime encompass for example Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Prussia and Bavaria. In Spain it is with the establishment of the republic that the transfer of royal collection is finished while in Denmark the transfer was made nearly a century earlier by an absolute monarch.

During later decades the state is a more central actor for most initiatives, even if the civic modes might repeat themselves in times of transitions, such as around 1989/1991.

Private initiatives should not be regarded as counter indicative to a national purpose and function. If the project and the support in numbers and ideology are massive this is in fact a stronger statement of the national nature of the project. When monuments should be erected subscription lists are not only instrumental in funding the undertaking, but also to show the broad support for the cause. In most states the prefix "national" is not protected so the word can signal an ambition from the founders or the funding of a special museum by means of the state.

CENTRAL OR MARGINAL LOCATION

National representation and communication is obviously necessary for any nation-state, but this does not make the size and centrality of national museums in the general national policy determined. Firstly there are civic services, a functionality of a nation-state that in itself is part of its legitimacy with a minimum of explicit cultural content: a national system for justice, infra-structure, military defence, welfare, schooling and health-care. Within the cultural sphere the promotion of science, learning and language skills are linked to cultural policy but only indirectly to museums. When the materiality, glory and didactics of museum are called

³ This is short presentation of what will be published in Peter Aronsson & Gabriella Elgenius, (eds.), *Building National Museums in Europe 1750–2010. Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28-30 April 2011* (Linköping: LiU E-Press, 2011) and Peter Aronsson & Gabriella Elgenius, (eds.), *A History of the National Museum in Europe 1750-2010* (In prep, 2013); Peter Aronsson & Lizette Gradén, (eds.), *Performing Nordic Heritage* (London: Ashgate, 2012, in prep).

upon they might have an emphasis on universal values or local and regional territories, which diminish the outright national message.

But for some nations national museums might be the central institution in defining and promoting the national issue, played either by one organization alone or an ensemble of museums covering different aspects in modelling the nation. The centrality of national museums might also vary over time, according to threats and other possible representations and promoters of national values and integration.

STABILITY AND CHANGE

Museums have a heavy inertia due to their materiality and claim on representing an unchanging reality. This is part of the attraction and purpose of stabilizing consensus whether it is an argument for change, for stopping reform or for adjustments in letting new centres of power be culturally represented. It is possible to make three ideal dynamics for national museums in relation to the nation-making process:

1. *Pro-active*: utopian visions could be exemplified with Hungary and Poland in 19th century; Balkan countries, Slovak, Sapmi developments in the last decades.
2. *Stabilizing*: most museums for most of the time as inclusive strategies are preferred and dominate.
3. *Reactive*: forces demanding and legitimizing restitution of land openly or implicitly as is the case with some museums in Turkey, Cyprus, Korea and China.
4. *Loss of relevance!* Which is one of the possible explanation when projects are not realized, under-financed or take very long time to establish.

Examples of loss of relevance can be read in the inability in some countries to attract both finance and visitors in certain epochs. The rather meek development in many Eastern European countries after WWI might be a case here, where old structures did not meet the demands for a modern industrial and technological society with the kind of urgency needed to support their development. This changed in many cases during Soviet rule and influence where both ideas on cultural republicanism, “democratic centralism” and mass-education supported national investment in museums. Thus the evolving structure were at hand around 1990 when states were again autonomous and in need for developing rapid symbolic representation of their nation-hood. Old style art museums that lived on the traditional ideal of Bildung had difficulties in transforming to the desires of the new citizenship in for example Latvia.

The inability can however be caused by active resistance in a way that rather make them relevant but the forces of support too weak to lead to successful establishment – Italy is a case to consider.

The balance between utopian, actor initiated, planned paths and the complexity arriving from intended and unintended actions and various logics are at the core of the ability of the museums to form a flexible, yet directed form of *cultural constitution* as a complement to the explicit, formal and more rigid political sister formulated as the fundamental law of each state.