



## **Reflections on Policy Relevance and Research in EuNaMus, “European National Museums: Identity politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen”**

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### **Abstract**

There is general increase on demand for research to be useful. This is more pronounced in the European funding than in traditional academic research. This paper problematizes and discusses the ways critical research can respond to these demands. The tendency is towards both specific calls driven by policy goals, and more diverse demands to formulate and communicate relevant knowledge to various stakeholders. There is a tension between unfettered critical research and the urgent contemporary quest for instrumental knowledge that needs to be respected, *but also* bridged. The positive dimension of EU:s call for research to be useful is accepting the need to share arguments, to stimulate dialogue, but the goal is not to produce consent but rather to trigger further investigation and disclosure of hitherto unknown or unobserved realms of culture.

## Introduction

Museums rank high on the policy agenda today. Great hopes are being expressed for their ability to create cohesion and community, creativity and tolerance. At the same time they are to serve as market places, presenting regions and metropolises for various audiences: citizens, tourists, entrepreneurs and investors. They are simultaneously supposed to provide a secure sanctuary for historic relics, scientific truths, shared values and a guide to the future.

These contradictory goals and high hopes have a long European trajectory. As early as 16<sup>th</sup> century grandeur of the Uffizi in Florence created an early and powerful urban trademark with the help of art, negotiating raw power and republican tradition through the conspicuous use of art.

The British Museum opened in 1759 and announced its intentions to serve both the Enlightenment and reason, but it became political in its selection of the parliamentary past and the Magna Charta as the most prominent representation of bygone eras. Later, to meet post-colonial claims for retribution, the spoils from the empire were declared treasures for all mankind.

All European nation-states learned lessons from the Napoleonic Wars, not only gleaned contributions to their political constitutions and adopting the use of national mobilization through war and taxation, but also from the transformation of the Louvre from a royal to a national institution with international ambitions. Art, seized and later reclaimed, gained higher value as part of the national heritage, reinforced with archaeology and cultural history, and placed in a context of ethnographic collections from around the world. Europe moulded itself through museums, and nations benchmarked their achievements there.

Today, some of the many tasks and hopes remain, but new challenges have been added to the agenda of museums. They are regarded as places for re-enacting communities and values in contemporary society. While the European Union adds to the transnational dimension as part of a standing legacy, globalization contributes not only new regional tensions and migration, but also a multi-cultural reality to be negotiated and transformed. Economic vitality is ever more dependent upon cultural dimensions of beauty, design, experience and creativity and is entrusted with transforming challenges into advantages.

National museums have a crucial role to play. To better understand the possibilities, knowledge of how they work needs to be extracted from existing monographs that highlight the excellence of individual directors and the unique qualities of each nation. There are many similarities among nations, both in their desires and hopes, but also in their trajectories. However, there is also room for politics, since the making of museums and nations does not exactly follow the same path. Nations with different kinds of constitutions choose different modes of understanding their heritage – with repercussions on their future actions.

The research project *European National Museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European citizen* (EuNaMus, [www.eunamus.eu](http://www.eunamus.eu)) has been designed to explore the societal role of national museums and the power of the heritages they create and present. The project defines and explores national museums as processes of institutionalized negotiations where material collections and displays make claims and are recognized as articulating and representing national values and realities.

This project is one of the few humanistic projects supported by the Seventh Framework Programme run by the European Commission. The research is pursued through multi-disciplinary collaboration among eight leading institutions. It includes a series of sub-projects studying institutional path dependencies, the handling of conflicts, modes of representation, cultural policy and visitors' experiences in national museums. Understanding the cultural force of national museums will provide citizens, professionals and policy makers with reflective tools to better communicate and create an understanding of diversity and community in developing cultural underpinnings for democratic governance.

### **The quest for policy relevance**

Our project defines museums as arenas for negotiating a variety of contradictory logics, including the logic governing the relationship between political demands and the scientific ideals of critique and dis-interested autonomy. In practice they also react more or less consciously to social conflicts, and, increasingly, as a means of reaching economic goals. Museums define themes, create frameworks and unite differences based on territories, gender, class, affluence, taste and knowledge. Hence, if they work out the balance well, they are able to tread the thin line between becoming outright propaganda tools or entertainment parks, on the one hand, and rather uninteresting repositories of old things with only archival value for a distant future, on the other.

The demands made on us by the EU pose a similar challenge; we must articulate the relevance of our research for various stakeholders and situations at the risk of becoming simple tools for a political project or producing results of little value outside a limited academic context.

In fact, I think this challenge is a general one faced by cultural research and is very real. The dominant discourses and research policies marginalize research that seeks to define ideal types that can present themselves as solutions to the challenges facing contemporary society. This is obviously the case with the current work in Horizon 2020, but is equally relevant in a series of European countries. The economic crises induce even more desperate measures aimed at culture and cultural research, which is perceived as a luxury. Simultaneously there are strong calls for *more* cultural context in research as a necessity in effectively addressing issues of war and peace, climate change and sustainability, and innovation and well-being.

The clue to the seemingly contradictory stands in contemporary politics is that cultural research needs both to argue and act better in performing several societal roles. I will now address the question of how work with the Eunamus project has challenged the traditional academic role and moved us a bit outside the comfort zone, but also how great the need is to use a wider view on the impact to both develop and assess progress in this dimension.

### **Calls for policy relevant research**

Within the long term Framework Programme distinct calls are made to meet specific challenges. Only in the most recent programmes have cultural research and the humanities been explicitly addressed, which is, of course, a step forward. I will take the short and specific call that our team answered as a starting-point for some reflections:

### **SSH-2009 - 5.2.2. Interrelation between collective representations and uses of history and cultural evolution in an enlarged Europe**

Research should address how the collective representations and uses of history in Europe shaped and continue to shape the image of Europe for its citizens. Themes to be addressed include the role of different collective memories as they have been shaped by the past and its interpretation, for example by historians, writers and artists, in the perception of Europe by its citizens. Research must develop ideas on how the dialogue between European citizens can be strengthened in the light of the different memories and how a shared view on the past, present and future of Europe can emerge. (Work programme 2009, Cooperation, theme 8, Socio-economic sciences and humanities, (European Commission C(2008)4598 of 28 August 2008) ([ftp://ftp.cordis.europa.eu/pub/fp7/docs/wp/cooperation/ssh/h\\_wp\\_200901\\_en.pdf](ftp://ftp.cordis.europa.eu/pub/fp7/docs/wp/cooperation/ssh/h_wp_200901_en.pdf), p. 20.)

The first passage frames a growing scholarly interest in collective memory and uses of the past in constant growth inspired by Maurice Halbwachs, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Raphael Samuel and later Jörn Rüsen and Reinhart Koselleck. The need to re-assess and reflect on the role of heritage and museums becomes central. It was not difficult to mobilize researchers to take on this challenge.

The concluding part of this statement needs more negotiation with the academic ethos because it demands a specific type of outcome: “Research must develop ideas on how the dialogue between European citizens can be strengthened in the light of the different memories and how a shared view on the past, present and future of Europe can emerge”.

The nodes needed in the project work to frame these intentions are several:

- The general context contributes to the ambition to build a European research arena with collaboration, excellence and added European value to meet challenges.
- Answering a call within the Framework Programme establishes the mind-set and interaction with colleagues in certain defined directions.
- After a positive evaluation, negotiating the contract means promoting policy relevant issues, planning organization and interaction in more detail with objectives, tasks, milestones and deliverables well-defined for each Work Package with an appropriate budget for each post.
- The on-going interaction with Brussels during the project period includes regular contact with the project officer (for deliverables, Policy Briefs, cross-project participation and conferences).
- A well-defined communication strategy is part of the contract: identifying stakeholders and adopting relevant means of communication.
- Finalising the deliverables includes organizing and holding conferences, creating and updating the home-page, producing newsletters, writing Policy Briefs, organizing public events and developing open access publications and dissemination activities.

The impact and the tools created by the demands for policy relevance thus interact with the academic formulation of the research task in several ways, posing new questions for consideration. In the context of the specific theme of Eunamus these questions can be specified:

1. What are the means by which a research project may strengthen dialogues?
2. What constitutes legitimacy and which routes are open for academic actors to promote a shared view of the history of Europe?
3. Is the establishment of shared views on history consistent with strengthened dialogues? Are they related as means to an end; are they correlated or do they have separate goals?
4. Is it at all acceptable for university research to approve the moulding of political goals out of its research?

Answers to these questions have evolved during the work. They need to be deliberated further in order to professionalize the urgent need for cultural research to maintain its quality, while at the same time meeting legitimate demands for added value by and for society.

To enhance the capacity for dialogue we provided the project with an ambitious communication plan. Identifying different groups of stakeholders was a first step, and pinpointing channels for communicating the next. Multi-disciplinary academic communities need to be addressed and are so by means of conferences and a set of open access publications. Both these are also open to museum professionals as a second set of stakeholders, but they are also connected through communication and involvement with reference groups, organisations such as NEMO and ICOM, and through newsletters. Even policy makers are part of this, but they are directly focused through the specific instrument of Policy Briefs as defined by the EC and constructed with the help of experienced journalistic competence. The most difficult group to reach systematically is “the public”. Press coverage, web and radio broadcasting will to some extent share findings with a very broad national audience, but there are language issues.

Cultural research might be prone to share certain theoretical inspiration broadly. Constructivism, discourse analyses and actor-network-theory are examples of this. But generally research is driven by the need to demonstrate originality and progress in relation to a more narrow disciplinary logic and is steered rather by polemic arguments, by the urge to demonstrate methodological and theoretical proliferation and by the ability to communicate successfully only with academic peers.

The positive dimension of this ethos is accepting the need to share arguments, to stimulate dialogue, but the goal is not to produce consent but rather to trigger further investigation and disclosure of hitherto unknown or unobserved realms of culture. To share this view with cultural institutions would thus mean accepting a plurality of legitimate standpoints and observations, but it would also imply the need to debate the validity of these standpoints while retaining a respect for others based on the knowledge of the complexity of cultural dynamics. Confronting the realm of museums with this would mean opening the communicative tropes of their activities from sites representing final truths about the world to become arenas of enquiry. This is in fact true to the origins of many museums developed around collections at universities and academies. It only means updating and complementing the natural scientific ethos with a humanistic cultural studies approach.

The implications are that a shared view of history is not necessarily the best way to formulate a means to reach the goals of strengthened dialogue. A closed statement on the history of Europe leaves little room for discussion, while a more diverse presentation of several perspectives both

on the darker and the more progressive sides of European experiences might provide more inspiration for contemporary dialogue and future collaborative actions.

It is stimulating to be asked to contribute to policy relevant processes. For cultural research in complex matters like identity politics this means providing better knowledge for various political programmes. We know that political projects demanding simple answers from research will discredit both partners in this collaboration, but I do not think this danger is imminent in the Framework Programme. There is a clear division of responsibility. The extra challenge is to formulate policy-relevant conclusions from the findings. There is a need for a professional approach that is not a natural part of academic training and ethos.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS**

We concluded the first Policy Brief with these general recommendations:

- Recognize that national museums can serve as agents of social change. Carefully managed, they can perform many parallel functions and should not be regarded only as sanctuaries for historical relics.
- Recognize that national museums provide citizens with a connective tissue. This cultural glue is vital for social cohesion. It can also help solidify support for state actions and foster confidence in representative democracy at national and European levels.
- Invest in re-interpretations of existing collections and the development of temporary exhibitions.
- To prevent aggressive nationalism, to stimulate national museums to activate transnational connections in their collections and increase the awareness of European and global values and processes.
- Be aware that national museums may not be automatically sensitive to societal change due to their complex heritage of buildings, collections and professional knowledge.
- Activate citizen interest in museums and stimulate interactions between citizens and museum professionals.
- Balance the need for reflecting political ideology in museum spaces with respect for the institution's professional competence.

The arguments for these are based on massive and complex research but ends in very general observations which might be difficult or impossible to act upon. There is a need for more involvement to appreciate the demand of the context for wise policy action. Hence the setting up of a task force to utilize our experience of these actions in more limited settings might have greater impact.

I was personally involved with an UNESCO project led by Anthony Krause both in giving advice on the setting up of a collaborative exhibition in the Balkan Area in 2011-12, and in educating museum professionals in Belgrade National Museum together with the civic organization Heritage without Borders in how to re-assess the exhibition for the new opening. I would say that both drew on comparative knowledge from our project on how conflict resolution can work in national museums and on the comparative overview of how museums and policy-making may interact. Another successful example of dissemination has been to share Eunamus contacts and knowledge with public service radio. During the years the project has been in

operation millions of Swedish listeners have gained knowledge from partners and museums around Europe. This contributes to the establishment of an understanding of culture and cultural policy as a platform for European action among the wider public.

Researchers in the project have similarly interacted with policy processes in various ways that are more concrete and tangible than the rather abstract formulations we were able to make in framing the general results, at least after the first half of the project. Focusing less on the Policy Briefs and more on the formats for the development of interaction that suit the topic may lead participants and stakeholders to have more profound impact. Documenting and sharing these experiences are essential to the professionalization of the task of policy-relevant research.

## Conclusions

Directed calls from the Framework Programme evoke themes and suggest perspectives, but cannot command positive results. Indeed, most research on construction of European identity ends up on the negative side of the balance sheet, at least in relation to the high ambitions of conjuring a shared European identity (*The Development of a European Identity/European Identities*, [http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/development-of-european-identity-identities\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/development-of-european-identity-identities_en.pdf)). The results demonstrate the power of everyday interaction and the need for a long-term perspective on cultural investment to supplement EU strategies, as has been done in nation-states.

The tension between unfettered critical research and the urgent contemporary quest for instrumental knowledge and direction needs to be respected, *but also* bridged. Detailed supervision and communication of “deliverables” enhance the pressure of formulating instrumental conclusions, which are often easy to express on a general level, but are difficult to make succinct enough to achieve a direct impact as policy instruments. More local instruments of influence also need to be acknowledged and appreciated. Providing academics with professional skills to be able to deal with wider communicative and impact plans is an area that needs to be developed along with supporting incitement within the university system and as a part of professional identity.

Cultural research is a small and marginal part of the system that defines the role of research. We need to speak louder, more forcefully and more convincingly to demonstrate and communicate the multi-dimensional values of our work. Joint Programming Initiatives (JPI) on Heritage is trying to achieve this goal (<http://www.jpi-culturalheritage.eu>). Other initiatives to bring national research in touch with the world need to be added and connected. (See initiatives such as <http://heritageresearch.se> that regroups a fragmented field of heritage research.)

Developing tools to refine findings from culture research for the benefit of individuals and organisations throughout Europe is of vital importance and needs to be addressed systematically by first mapping the ways this can be done, assessing the quality of these diverse ways, testing the validity of their research, and then developing a system of incentive and appreciation that makes the academic community willing to work towards these ends as part of realizing their professional ethos.