The Role of National Museums in the European Integration

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Abstract

National museums are institutionalized spaces where the past is being used through collections and objects in order to display, narrate, and negotiate ideas of values, of belonging, and most of all of identity. Today a big discussion is being held about their capacity to create and reinforce concepts such as social cohesion, unity, mutual understanding and tolerance among the nations and cultures of Europe. Reformulating in a sense this scholarly question, this paper focus on the crucial role that European National Museums may play in the struggle for European integration, in European completion.

In terms of cultural policy, EU policy makers and officials have developed the notion of European integration – the creation of a closer Union among people of Europe – by promoting the communality of Europe’s past, by establishing a common European history and cultural heritage, on which a European identity will be based on. However, this challenge seems to be facing serious obstacles. Among them, the strength of the belief in a specific national identity and in a specific national heritage, seems to be the most vital. According to the annual Eurobarometer, most of people of Europe consider themselves primarily nationals of the countries of their origin and only secondly Europeans, if not at all. If this is the case, is there any possibility to transform the traditionally ethnic people of Europe into Europeans?

How difficult that it could be, testifies an increasing tendency for creating new national museums in the beginning of the 21th century. It is true that anyone hardly could doubt the demand of the European nations to represent their past, especially when this is done as an inlook process that leads to self-consciousness. However, it is equal important to consider that this kind of tendencies can easily be used as a perfect excuse for the rising of an already existing eurosceptism, especially in the turmoil of the economic crisis, but also for the strengthening of neonationalistic movements, as a result of poverty and unemployment.

In these difficult times for the people of Europe, when the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity can rekindle well-hidden extreme nationalistic feelings, it is crucial that the sense of national identity is represented through a critical historical perspective rather as an essential value that could be used as a vehicle of separatism. Perhaps now, more than ever national histories, national memories and national idiosyncrasies are conceived as small but significant parts of a common European multifaceted tradition, and be accordingly cherished as vital features of a common European future.
Introduction

This paper addresses the crucial role that European national museums may play in the struggle for European cohesion and integration. It is a topic that actually derives from the central idea of the Eunamus project itself, "the understanding of the conditions for using the past in negotiations that recreate citizenship, as well as the layers of territorial belonging beyond the actual nation-state" (Aronsson 2011); a statement which indicates the necessity to explore in depth the new role that the national museums of Europe need to take in times when the idea of belonging to a territory expanding “beyond the nation-state”, coincides with the idea of belonging to a union of nation-states which is still under construction.

Defining European national museums as institutionalized spaces where the past of a certain state is being reflected through collections and objects which are selected in order to display, to narrate, to create, to interpret and to negotiate ideas of values, of belonging, and most of all of identity, connects Eunamus to an ongoing discussion on national museum’s capacity to create and reinforce concepts such as social cohesion, unity, mutual understanding and tolerance among nations and cultures of Europe. It is in fact a part of a broader discussion on whether we can reach higher levels of integration, meaning “creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe” either by emphasizing their cultural diversities and differences or by fostering the idea of a common cultural base, a common European civilization.

Towards this social dilemma, that Europe in general is facing today, the role of its national museums, as the main displayers and promoters of the diversity of European heritage, seems to become much more difficult or even controversial to the role they used to play when they first appeared in Europe. Although generalizations about the process of the construction of national museums cannot be made, the concept underlying their creation was never irrelevant to the need for the formation of a national feeling, based on common origin and propagating common achievements. Especially in periods when historical procedures, such as the ethno-genesis, the search for cultural roots, via history and archaeology, and the shaping of historical scenarios, would legitimate the political formation of a newly born-nation-state or state-to-be. After all, the interpretation of the past for the creation of a nation is a point of view that has been largely developed by most of the theorists of nationalism (Anderson 1983, Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1990).

On exactly the same idea, that of the “imagined community”, to quote Benedict Anderson (1983), is the creation of a feeling of belonging to the post-national community of EU based on. Since the introduction of the so-called Culture Article in the Maastrict Treaty, which set out to “bring Europe’s common cultural heritage to the fore” (CEC 1992), EU policy makers and officials, with the support of EU-friendly scholarship on European culture and heritage, have tried to promote the communality of Europe’s past, or in other words to establish a European identity. However, this attempt has faced, and is still facing so many obstacles, that their transcendence seems really difficult to achieve.

In the present paper we will continue to discuss only one of the obstacles, which may be proved to be the most significant and the most relevant to the issue that we are dealing with, the contemporary role of national museums in European integration. We will deal with the strength of the belief in a specific national identity, in a specific national heritage. It is a concept that not only has been constantly expressed by the historical scholarship, but it is also a common
conclusion that someone can easily get to empirically, just by reading the results of today’s Eurobarometer that come up every year. According to it, it is true that most Europeans consider themselves primarily as nationals of the country of their origin and only secondly as Europeans, if not at all. To these current results, conclusions as those of Antony Smith (1992), and before him of Ernest Gellner (1983), seem to have found an absolute correspondence:

Of course one can forge supranational institutions and create political and economic unions, as Bismarck did for the German states. But this frequently cited parallel contains an obvious flaw. Languages and historical memories, as well as myths of ethnic descent, united the population of the German states; the same factors divided the people of Europe (Smith 1992).

A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears. All this seems obvious, though, alas, it is no true. But that it should have come to seem so very obvious is indeed an aspect, perhaps the very core, of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity but it has now come to appear as such (Gellner 1983).

Despite the differences between the two scholars, they present quite clearly the challenge that EU is facing today. Is it possible to transform the traditionally ethnic people of Europe into Europeans? And if this is possible, how can someone achieve it?

In terms of contemporary musealization processes, this challenging question seems to be facing multiple and contradictory answers. On one hand, the European Union and its officials are working on a significant unique museum project, the House of the European History, an initiative which according to its initiator and former President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering “will bring Europe’s history alive for everyone, but especially young people, and will thereby help to promote an awareness of European Identity” (EP Bureau 2008). On the other hand, the beginning of the 21th century demonstrates an increasing tendency of the creation of new national museums. This last tendency testifies to a reluctant reaction of the Member States towards the creation of an overarching European identity.

Indeed, the creation of national – mostly history – museums as an initiative for the construction of cultural unity in relation to the nation continues to be a part of the political agendas for a lot of European states. In countries like France, Poland, Netherlands plans have been recently developed for the creation of new national history museums. It was in 2009 for instance, the former President of France Nicolas Sarkozy expressed his proposal to create a national history museum as a tool of reinforcing national identity (Sarkozy 2009). Three years earlier, the German History Museum (Deutsches Historisches Museum) in Berlin had opened its doors to the public in order to present, through its permanent collection, “from where the Germans have come, who they are in the European context” (DHM 2012).

Taking into consideration these tendencies, it is true that one could hardly doubt the demand of the European nations to represent their past and their special features either as an in-look process that leads to self-consciousness or even as a compensation for post-national and post-modern insecurities (Krankenhagen 2011). However, it is really important to consider the possibility that, especially nowadays, this kind of tendencies may be dangerously misconceived by the European people themselves. They may be a perfect excuse not only for the rising of an already existed euro-skepticism among the people of Europe, especially in the turmoil of the economic crisis, but also for the strengthening of neo-nationalistic movements, as a result of
poverty and unemployment, especially among the young generations, and the inability of their leaders to decisively overcome their state-focused, short-termed interests, and work for a peaceful and prosperous European United States.

In these times, when confidence has been replaced by uncertainty, it is constantly fomented by territorial conflicts and economic threat, extreme nationalistic feelings have not been forgotten, but are easily rekindled. Taking into serious account their presence, and if national museums are to exist, then museum professionals, history researchers and cultural policy makers should reconsider and re-examine the ways in which state-historical – a more accurate term perhaps to refer to national – museums should be conceived and realized. It is crucial that the sense of national identity is represented through a critical historical perspective rather than an essential value that could be used as a vehicle of separatism. Perhaps now, more than ever national histories, national memories and national idiosyncrasies are conceived as small but significant parts of a common European multifaceted tradition, and accordingly may be cherished as vital features of a common European future.

**Bibliography**


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