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Providing a wider perspective on cultural issues, PEN speaks to Professor Peter Aronsson, Co-ordinator of EuNaMus, on the role of national museums

A cultural asset

Europe's national museums are places of learning, places to engage with the past. Importantly they are custodians of cultural history, playing a role in the stories told that inform national identity. When visiting a national museum, Europe's citizens have the chance to engage in their cultural heritage. Yet behind the scenes, there are complex and contested political and cultural processes with, invariably, the national museum being wrapped up in the political process.

Museums not only catalogue and nurture our national identity, but provide a space in which to engage with our cultural heritage. Undeniably, the cultural undercurrents that inform our sense of belonging to a national group are informed by the key institution of the national museum.

EuNaMus, 'European National Museums: identity politics, the uses of the past and the European citizen' is a European Union-funded project dedicated to understanding the complex relationship with national museums. Co-ordinator of the project, Professor Peter Aronsson, speaks to Pan European Networks, shedding light on these essential cultural institutions.

In terms of identity and value creation, the true importance of the national museum goes beyond previously assumed levels.

While of course much academic and media attention revolves around the emergence (or rejection) of a pan European identity, Aronsson is quick to point out that the museums have been playing a part in the creation of a common western civilisation for centuries.

"They played a part in that for a couple of hundred years. The idea of a western civilisation has been pursued through cultural organisations, through democracy as an institution, classical art, putting up aesthetic norms for beauty; there is very fundamental understanding that there is a pan European understanding."

Since the trauma of the Lisbon Treaty, and the challenges posed by the financial crisis and subsequent eurozone crisis, there has been an apparent pushing back against the European project in some quarters.

To better understand this phenomenon, the European Commission has been more engaged in the processes:

“This made the European policy makers aware that the cultural dimension might have been ignored somehow, or left alone, or devolved to the nations in a manner that is not compatible with a continuing growth of a pan European dimension of European policy.”

The project has found national museums to have a far more complex political background than once thought. Differences abound between institutions across the region, yet a common theme unites them.

“There is a tension between the enlightenment vision of the museum that embraces the whole of humanity. Indeed, this is one of the positions of all museums; they are for the general benefit and good of everyone. On the other hand, they may have a specific or targeted goal of defending or legitimising the community that they represent.”

Aronsson continues: “So we see the tension between the fact that the national museums do represent a political community, but they are also an ambition to go beyond that to the pan European level and to embrace inclusive universal, enlightenment values.”

Cultural constitutions

As a result of the EuNaMus project, a number of observations about national museums have been unearthed. Crucially, these institutions continually negotiate contradictory values.

“These values could be national identity, but they are also the idea of knowledge versus politics, the idea of unity and diversity, and how difference is being created. Who is the enemy and who is the friend? What are the values to strive for in contemporary society?” This, says Aronsson, is common to all European national museums.

As a result of the study, Aronsson explains: “Following that, we can go on to map these differences and they also show that there is also space for political choice.”

Inevitably, the complex processes shaping the evolution of national museums, develop slowly. Despite the universal values, museums are national institutions, left ‘vulnerable’ to political demands. Many receive their mandate from national parliaments, tasked with articulating the meaning of the nation they represent.



Professor Peter Aronsson, Co-ordinator of EuNaMus



The Hungarian National Museum

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“On the other hand,” adds Aronsson, “they are complex long standing organisations that you cannot alter so easily. That is why we feel they are an important back bone of a cultural constitution that corresponds to the political constitution in a very interesting way.”

Alongside the political constitution, Aronsson describes the existence of a cultural constitution: “The cultural constitution moves much more slowly, it is renegotiated in much more complex ways than the political constitution. But it provides certain stability to the cultural representation of the nation.”

Indeed, a backbone of the cultural constitution is the national museum.

“That survives even political revolutions, for example in Germany you will find this in Nuremberg. The Germanisches National Museum was founded in the 1850s and it survived the Kaiserreich, and the Nazis, and all the eruptions, not without adjusting to these of course, but there is not a radical change with what it means to be German. There is a certain stability that is made up by the museum, that is why they are so important in cultural policy, and that is why countries do invest in their national museums.”

Beyond forming the national identity, the national museum is in many ways akin to a lens in which a country can view other European countries. Museums with a universal scope in their collections present interesting cases: “When the British Museum collects and brings the whole world into England it becomes a lens where they both look outside and mirror their own self-identity through the images of the world.”

Aronsson continues, “Other museums are much more inward looking, if you go to the national museum in Budapest who mainly produce an image of Hungary, or in Finland, where the national museum in Helsinki produces an image of the Finnish nation. The important thing is not to have an outlook, but rather to have an ‘in look’ to define the nation as much older than it really is.”

In fact, a common feature of the national museum is the ability to promote a self-serving myth. For instance, the Finnish national museum makes Finland a much longer standing nation than it really is while the British Museum suggests it is more universalistic than it actually is.

In the cultural policy sector there is a debate over the political choices in respect to the practical choices facing these museums. Aronsson details

some of the questions: “There is a choice of how centralised the system is. There is a choice of how pronounced the representation of unity is being presented. Is it historically founded? Is it argued in a more multicultural way?”

Evidently these remain contentious and debated questions in many quarters.

Threatened places

While valuing the contribution culture requires a mindful outlook, “In a way, politicians are recognising the power and impact of culture, but as it is difficult to assess exactly how that impact is being made, it is easy to retract from these wider perspectives.”

In these economically troubling times, with austerity increasingly the order of the day, culture presents a soft target for politicians fearful of cutting the budgets of schools, hospitals and more high profile services.

“But I think it is very dangerous,” says Aronsson. “It is a matter of investing for the future and it is not only a cultural future, but it’s an important part of the experience economy. People visit Europe from all over the world and take part in the European heritage and that is a growing part of the economy, actually, and needs to be taken care of and invested in.”

Indeed, many rising powers outside Europe are investing heavily in their cultural heritage, which, explains Aronsson, poses a challenge to ‘old Europe’. Today Europe is left struggling to defend its image as an outstanding knowledge, cultural and political community.

Compounding the problem, Aronsson is quick to underscore that those who work in the cultural sector often fail to explain the ‘value production’ of the activities they are involved in.

“That is a shortcoming from our side. It is a double responsibility that we might perform less well than we could. If we could better communicate the values contributed and the politicians were better at appreciating or looked a little bit longer to see what these kinds of infrastructure really contribute.”

At the European level at least, the existence of EuNaMus demonstrates that the EU is interested in these issues. The same question PEN asks Aronsson is often posed by the European Commission: “‘What are the main findings and how do they influence the various stake holders, not just cultural policy makers, museum professionals, regional planners, how do you contribute to their ability to make wiser decision in the future?’ I am regularly asked this question.”

These questions, Aronsson clearly greets with great enthusiasm, “To me, that is a stimulating challenge, I think it’s important that we really become stronger at expressing the multi-dimensional value of research.”

Perhaps nowhere is the national museum more important is in eastern Europe. With the legacy of the collapse of communism and the ‘return to Europe’ still being felt today in central and eastern Europe. Here, national museums played a key part in keeping the national identity alive during years of communist rule.

The British Museum



Fascinatingly, Aronsson details the recent history of national museums in former Soviet countries such as Estonia and Poland. And the example of Hungary’s national museum, founded in the 1820s, presents an interesting example.

“Today, you can still visit the national museum in Hungary, so that shows the stability of the institution. It is taken that it is an asset by any new conqueror, by any new government to enhance and work with. That being said, of course they change the label, they change the narrative of the museum to fit the policies of the day.”

When the Soviet Empire occupied the eastern European countries, they wouldn’t do away with the past, rather they would extend the museum to demonstrate a break with what came before and the start of work towards the communist future.

“It would not destroy the story of the national history of the people itself, on the contrary rather, they strengthen the central organisation of the museum, as museums were seen as core keys to educating people and representing national identity was a core part to represent difference in a way that is not politically dangerous.”

In representing the cultural history of the people, the museum enforced the ideal that it was part of the past history. In contrast, the politics of today is about creating the socialist society. While Aronsson underlies that all national museums partly dictate what belongs

to the past and what belongs to today, it was particularly felt in Soviet countries.

The rupture of 1989 and 1991 then made museums cultural battlegrounds once more. “The buildings are still there, the collections are still there, the reshaping is more about changing labels, from the republic to the nation; to change the labels of who is the villain and who is the hero. The players and drama were very much the same. The old history was there, but now the old villains, the old kings and feudal lords became once again heroes of the national collection in the eastern European countries.” Aronsson adds.

“A new set of museums came up about the atrocities and about the occupation. So you find occupation museums, you find museums of genocide, which is not about the holocaust but more about the Gulag archipelago.”

Indeed, there was a dramatic shift in the framing of the museum by surprisingly promoting a continuity of the institutional heritage of museums in the Soviet era. Museums were even strengthened by the Soviet occupation which centralised and put lots of resources into the museum structures.

Today, these museums carry an ambiguous heritage. It is important that things are not completely forgotten. However, this reworking of cultural interpretation is ‘very much hidden from causal audiences’.

“As the museum always speaks in an authoritative voice so you cannot see the dynamics, so one of the values of this research is that it shows that while museums identify with dust and heavy houses, heavy collections, they are really a very sensitive arena for negotiating contradictory values. It is much more exciting really than how it presents itself,” explains Aronsson.

Exhibiting things differently

When asked about whether any thematic differences can be found in Europe today, Aronsson draws a distinction between Europe’s old empires (with Britain being a key example, this also explains in part the lack of a museum on the English nation).

“So it’s not about small or bigger countries, it’s about new and challenged countries who need to explain their self-identity explicitly. While the

The National Museum of the Netherlands



other, richer, colonial centres, might encompass the other artistic richness of their collections as proof of their power or taste. That’s what you have with the Louvre, or British Museum.”

Another key difference is the overt choice in where to site national museums. Italy, as a young country would be expected to site its national museum in Rome as a nation building tool. However, this is not the case.

“It can be explained by the lack of central government and a multitude of heritage institutions in all major Italian cities. So you find national ambitions in Turin, or Bologna and Naples. Rome does not have the power to represent the nation culturally in the capital and you can see how that corresponds to the political culture of the country.”

Yet despite the differences across Europe, Aronsson explains that the most burning political issue with national museums today is how to represent ‘unity’.

“If national unity is going to be representative, much like the European level promotion of unity in diversity, encompass all kinds of migrant groups and regions in the country in a more multi-cultural narrative, or if it should be represented by a strong story of a core value of an ethnic, historical origin, is a debate taking place across Europe.”

While Aronsson lists the Netherlands and Denmark as two countries with national museums contributing to a newly resurgent national ethnic narrative, other countries are finding that it becomes impossible to integrate new citizens if the ‘story of ethnic origin is too strong.’

National museums continue to be complex creatures with a fascinating past and future. By uncovering their hidden negotiation of values we can reveal the role they play in our political and cultural life.

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