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Memory, Identity and the Supranational History Museum: Building the House of European History

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Abstract: This paper examines the House of European History (HEH), a museum opening its doors in Brussels early 2017. It was initiated by the European Parliament to stimulate the emergence of European identity, just like national historical museums were founded all over Europe in the 19th century to develop national identity and thus contribute to national consolidation. Still today, history is seen as the malleable raw material out of which contemporary identity can be constructed. Yet, the Academic Project Team (APT), which developed the permanent exhibition, chose to replace the concept of identity with memory, stressing its potential to offer a more differentiated historical narrative. Analyzing the museological, political and historiographical aspects of the museum, I discuss whether the HEH can become the place for conflicting views and debate that the APT aspires it to be, or whether it will end up disseminating a new master narrative for the EU.

Keywords: European Identity; European cultural politics; Memory Politics; History Museums; House of European History.

In 2017 the House of European History (HEH) will open its doors in the European quarter in Brussels. Almost a decade earlier, the newly-elected President of the European Parliament (EP), Hans-Gert Pöttering, had pleaded that the EP should establish a museum about European history. He said the HEH should become a place «where a memory of European history and the work of European unification is jointly cultivated, and which at the same time is available as a locus of the European identity to go on being shaped by present and future citizens of the European Union»[1].

The EP's initiative to found the HEH is grounded in the same tradition of the national history museums. These were created by European nation states in the 19th century to contribute to their consolidation. The HEH could therefore easily be perceived as an instrument in the implementation of European identity politics. Yet the Academic Project Team (APT), the HEH's curatorial team, wants to avoid constructing a teleological master narrative that offers an apologia for the European Union (EU). Rather, the APT believes the HEH should become a museum that incorporates conflicting views on European history and encourages reflection and debate[2].

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[1] Committee of Experts, *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*, October 2008, p. 4.

[2] In 2013, I completed an internship with the APT, the group of 20+ historians, museologists, curators and museum educators from all over Europe, which is responsible for the HEH's

In this paper, I will present the nexus of the political, historiographical, and museological dimensions that are central to understand the project to establish the HEH. First, I will discuss the role of national history museums in nation-building in the 19th century and review how these institutions have been transformed since the 1970's. Then I will analyse the memory politics of the EU and discuss how these have led to the introduction of European narratives in history museums.

In my analysis of the HEH, I will discuss the plans for its permanent exhibition and examine how the museum functions in the context of European history politics. I will consider the extent to which the HEH can become the place for conflicting views and debate that the APT aspires it to be, and through which strategies this could be reached, or whether it will end up displaying a new master narrative for the EU promoting the emergence of a European identity.

1. National History Museums in the 19th Century: Historiography and Nation-Building

Historiography's birth as an academic discipline was immediately connected to the objective of consolidating the new nation states in the 19th century[3]. Influenced by the Hegelian identification of nation-formation with history itself, historians considered the nation state as the natural spatial framework for historical research[4] The new discipline was institutionalized within the nation state, to which it attached itself entirely. Historians contributed to the political project by writing national master narratives and thus constructed a scientific apologia for the nation state.

The radical break in society, with the end of the Ancien Régime, implied that the new nation states were to a certain extent dependent on the citizens' sense of belonging to the 'imagined community' of the nation[5]. Historians presented national histories in a teleological scheme to legitimize the present political order and elite. The ancient roots of the young nation states were evoked to make an argument for them as essentialist communities, based on the continuity of their roots to the present. National myths and heroic figures were a central part of the narrative. His-

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curatorial concept, the permanent exhibition, the educational program, and the collection policy. Therefore, I not only had an opportunity to get to know the HEH before its official opening, but also to get an inside view in the process of negotiation that the establishment of the museum within the political structure of the EU entails.

[3] The research program «Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe», by the European Science Foundation, was fundamental in this respect.

[4] S. Berger and C. Lorenz, *National Narratives and Their: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and the Gendering of National Histories*, in «Storia della Storiografia», n. 50, 2006, pp. 59-98.

[5] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.

torians would often rewrite medieval and early-modern myths, or even invent some, and attempt to create a scientific basis for them[6].

It was foremost in museums that the historical master narratives were presented to the national public. Their close ties with the state made the national history museums the main locus to represent the dominant institutional and symbolic memory[7]. Museums were a necessary instrument in the consolidation of the nation state. Ilaria Porciani has described them as the «crucial workshops for the construction of the historical master narratives»[8]. National history museums did not only reach larger audiences than history books or academic publications[9], but through their presentation of objects, they could also visualize national mythologies and make the national past tangible for wide audiences.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the urge to establish national history museums was a pan-European phenomenon. Older scientific, royal, and aristocratic collections were appropriated and reinterpreted to underline their national significance. These collections were enriched with objects that were donated by citizens who wanted to show their loyalty to the nation state[10].

The temporal assumptions of the historical master narratives were reflected in the pedagogical displays. Narratives of continuous progress and development were dominant, presenting a chronological story that was deeply influenced by the logic of historicity[11]. Described as «backtelling» by Tony Bennett, teleology was an integral part of the 19th century museum's narrative machinery[12]. Visitors were guided along a prescribed path, which contributed to the conveying of a linear interpretation of history, excluding historical ruptures and discontinuities[13]. Bennett even draws a parallel between Michel Foucault's analysis of the incarceration system and the institution of the museum, as both prisons and museums were created to transform general norms of societal behaviour, to «organise a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry»[14].

[6] E. Hobsbawm, T.O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto Classics, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[7] What we call national history museums today, would in the 19th century have been called national museums. Many of the national museums with a distinct historical approach have later been renamed to national history museums. Following Ilaria Porciani, national museums with a historical approach are called national history museums in this article.

[8] I. Porciani, *Nations on Display: History Museums in Europe*, in *Setting the Standards. Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography*, eds. by I. Porciani and J. Tollebeek, Palgrave, 2012, p. 132.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] P. Aronsson, *National Museums Negotiating National Identity*, in «*National Identity and Hegemonic Memory*», 21st International Congress of Historical Science, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 1.

[11] Ivi, p. 3.

[12] T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London, Routledge, 1995, pp. 179-181.

[13] C. Cadot, *Can Museums Help Build a European Memory? The Example of the Musée de l'Europe in Brussels and in the Light of the 'New World' Museums' Experience*, in «International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society», vol. 23, n. 2, 2012, p. 131.

[14] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, cit., p. 63.

2. National History Museums from the 1970's: Reflexivity, Memory, and Identity

The fundamental values of the 19th century museum model continued to be dominant well into the 20th century. Yet a significant change was apparent in museums from the 1970's onwards. At the General Conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1971, an active role for museums and responsiveness to questions in society was promoted in the resolution «The Museum in the Service of Man»[15].

The 'new museology'[16] movement introduced new museum concepts such as the community museum and the eco-museum[17]. However, the legitimacy of national history museums was also put into question. The paradigm shift in historiography had led to a crisis of representation in history museums. The fact that national history museums had played a significant role in the consolidation of the nation state was deemed problematic. Museum professionals refuted the old construct of history museums and were seeking to replace the monolithic vision of history by a 'plurality of pasts'[18]. The authoritative position of the curator as a custodian of history and culture was deliberately diminished. Fiona McLean has argued that since the 1970's «the museum has shifted from the continuity of 'Tradition' to facing its responsibilities in an era of 'Translation'»[19]. Museums were being transformed into more democratic institutions. Exhibited objects included a wider social range of material culture, not only to represent the histories of the ruling classes, but also history from below[20]. This was influenced by historiography's transformation through the rise of oral history, social history, the histories of minorities, and postcolonial perspectives.

The incorporation of the theme of immigration has been one of the most prominent ways to question the dominance of the national master narrative in national history museums. Mobility narratives have the ability to show that borders are political decisions, rather than fixed geographical boundaries[21].

Max Ross has characterized as the transformation of museum work since the 1970's as the rise of a «climate of institutional reflexivity»[22]. It has not only led to more reflection in curatorial work, but it has also increased the recognition of the

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[15] «Grenoble 1971», *ICOM - International Council of Museums*: icom.museum/the-governance/general-assembly/resolutions-adopted-by-icoms-general-assemblies-1946-to-date/grenoble-1971 (last accessed on 5 January 2013).
[16] P. Vergo, *The New Museology*, London, Reaktion Books, 1989.
[17] P. van Mensch, *Nieuwe Museologie. Identiteit of Erfgoed?*, in *Bezeten van Vroeger. Erfgoed, Identiteit En Musealisering*, Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 2005, p. 177.
[18] M. Ross, *Interpreting the New Museology*, in «Museum and Society», vol. 2, n. 2, 2004, p. 85.
[19] F. McLean, *Museums and the Representation of Identity*, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. B.J. Graham and P. Howard, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008, p. 284.
[20] Ross, *Interpreting the New Museology*, cit., p. 85.
[21] S. Krankenhagen and K. Poehls, *Exhibiting Europe*, 22nd General Conference of ICOM, Shangai, 2010, p. 6.
[22] Ross, *Interpreting the New Museology*, cit., p. 84.

need for transparency about the museum's agenda and about the constructed character of historiography and its museal representation.

The last two decades have been marked by the emergence of the presentist history regime, a concept that François Hartog developed to characterize the permanence of the past into the present. It is radically different from the modern historicity regime that had dominated historiography since its professionalization until 1990. The museum visitors' wish to experience history in the present has somehow diminished the presentation of objects of 'sacred' character or of great historical significance, and made place for re-enactments of historical events[23]. Furthermore, the inclusion of eyewitnesses in historical museums has grown rapidly[24]. Their testimonies – usually meticulously selected by the curators – have the potential to make a direct emotional appeal to visitors and encourages them to identify with an otherwise perhaps abstract history[25].

The new scholarship on the importance of the past for communities in their imagining of the present and future realities, and especially the role of national museums in representing the national past, has of course not been overlooked by political entities looking for legitimacy today. In the 21st century, various European countries have initiated projects to establish new national museums. They should provide the national audience with a historical canon of the most important historical events and thus foster the cultural identity of the nation, especially in the face of multiculturalism and globalization. Many of these projects have been heavily contested and finally cancelled, such as the *Nationaal Historisch Museum* in the Netherlands and the *Maison de l'Histoire de France*.

3. European Identity and Memory Politics

Just as European nations lean on historical master narratives to increase their legitimacy and to contribute to social cohesion, in European politics and EU-friendly scholarship it has become a common belief that a shared history is equally important for the cohesion of a supranational community, such as the EU. Since the 1970's, the idea that the lack of a European identity would challenge the legitimacy of the European institutions has grown. In 1973 the «Declaration of European Identity» was adopted at the Copenhagen Summit, which proclaimed culture as a fundamental element of European identity. In the same year, the concept of cultural heritage was introduced on a European level. It was conceived as a «tangible representation of a glorious European past capable of arousing positive identification»[26].

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[23] Porciani, *Nations on Display: History Museums in Europe*, cit., p. 130.

[24] W. Kaiser, *Narrating Contemporary European History*, 9, p. 190: goo.gl/sPxMsa.

[25] S. de Jong, *Is This Us? The Construction of European Woman/Man in the Exhibition It's Our History!*, in «Culture Unbound», vol. 3, n. 24, 2011, p. 374.

[26] O. Calligaro, *From "European Cultural Heritage" to "Cultural Diversity"? The Changing Concepts of European Cultural Policy*, n.d., p. 1.

The 1985 «Adonnino Reports on a People's Europe» led to the introduction of symbols of Europe, such as a European flag and a European anthem, for which the «Ode to Joy» from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was appropriated[27].

In 1992 the Treaty of Maastricht established the EU in its current form. Article 128 (now Article 155, but also called the «Culture Article»), was introduced to «bring Europe's common cultural heritage to the fore»[28]. It gave European action in the cultural field – and in the field of public history – a legal basis. Jan Figel, former EU Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, stated that «the preservation, appreciation and promotion of cultural heritage is one the best means we have available to promote a sense of belonging to Europe»[29].

Yet forging a European collective memory has proven to be extremely challenging, in the first place because transnational European memory competes with a variety of national memory constellations[30]. National historical narratives still strongly prevail as the belief in a specific national historical identity and a national cultural legacy, under the name of national heritage[31]. Moreover, identifying common European points of reference in the past has proven to be difficult. To recount a unitary history of Europe means to discuss internal conflicts, war, and bloodshed[32]. History itself has impeded the emergence of a shared European memory. Some have even argued that it is in fact the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust, probably the most divisive memory for Europe, that forms the core of European historical identity[33].

A number of historians have provided European politicians with supporting material in their search for a unifying European historical narrative. This was partly evoked by the transnational turn in historiography. In their quest to challenge the national paradigm, many historians have turned to writing European histories, focusing on the contacts, conflicts, and alliances that have always been particularly strong on the European continent.

The Europeanisation of historiography has received substantial support from European funding programs, for instance, through the Jean Monnet chairs that promote the teaching of European integration history[34]. Furthermore, as Cris Shore has

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[27] C.C. Gialdino, *I simboli dell'Unione Europea: bandiera, inno, motto, moneta, giornata*, Roma, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 2005.

[28] CEC: Treaty on European Union Signed at Maastricht on 7 February, Luxembourg, OOPEC, 1992.

[29] Figel expressed this in a speech at the Europa Nostra Awards Ceremony in Madrid, on the 27 June 2006.

[30] A. Assmann, *Europe: A Community of Memory?*, in «Bulletin of the German Historical Institute», n. 40, 2007, p. 14.

[31] M. Kopellou, C. Paliadeli, *The Role of National Museums in the European Integration*, in «EuNaMus Report No. 9 - Entering the Minefields: The Creation of New History Museums in Europe», EuNaMus, Identity Politics, the Use of the Past and the European Citizen, Brussels, Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012, p. 33.

[32] Porciani, *Nations on Display: History Museums in Europe*, cit., p. 134.

[33] Assmann, *Europe: A Community of Memory?*, cit., p. 12.

[34] O. Calligaro, *Negotiating Europe. EU Promotion of Europeanness Since the 1950s*, New York, Palgrave, 2013, pp. 15-37.

noted, a strikingly large number of publications on European Integration History have been produced by authors who are strongly connected to the European institutions, either as recipients of EU funding or as former or even current employees of the European institutions, producing a particularly EU-friendly scholarship[35].

Monica Sassetelli has observed that the earliest attempts by the European institutions to define a historical canon for Europe stressed the common roots of an overarching European civilization[36]. Peter Bugge has summarised the implicit European meta-narrative as follows: «after an Oriental prehistory, European civilization began in earnest in Ancient Greece and Rome, finding new vigour in Christianity. After the Middle Ages, it blossomed in the Renaissance and developed through the Enlightenment to reach a crescendo in our modern era»[37].

During the 1980's, a new conception of European identity has been developed[38], which is crystallized in the «United in Diversity» rhetoric that was introduced as the official slogan for the EU in 2000. It suggests an approach that values regional and national differences, and that brings the plurality and the cultural variety of the European continent to the fore.

Yet the aspiration to define an all-encompassing and monolithic European heritage persists. Roel During has observed that EU politicians tend to frame identity in a «Matrushka» model, with regional, national, and European identity as different layers and they believe that an increase in one identity layer necessarily causes a decline of another[39]. In fact, national diversity is only celebrated within a context that emphasises the way the national specificity fits into the European picture. Many national cultural icons are reinterpreted as icons of a unified European history[40].

Although Shore has characterized EU cultural politics and Europeanisation as a top-down process[41], more recent research reveals that the promotion of European identity is in fact undertaken by a large number of actors with varying interests. The EU's cultural policy «did not remain the vehicle for a centralized European cultural policy. [...] It quickly became an instrument in the hands of different actors who decided to promote their own vision of Europeanness»[42]. Hundreds of organizations

[35] C. Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration*, Routledge, 2000, p. 28.
[36] M. Sassatelli, *Narratives on European Cultural Identity*, in *Identifying with Europe Reflections on a Historical and Cultural Canon in European*, ed. I. van Hamersveld, A. Sonnen, Amsterdam, EUNIC Netherlands, 2009, pp. 38-39.
[37] P. Bugge, A European Cultural Heritage? Reflections on a Concept and a Programme, in *Rethinking Heritage: Cultures and Politics in Europe*, ed. R.S. Peckham, I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 64.
[38] Sassatelli, *Narratives on European Cultural Identity*, cit., pp. 40-42.
[39] R. During, *European Heritage Discourses, a Matter of Identity Construction?*, in «Cultural Heritage and Identity Politics», ed. R. During, Wageningen, Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2011, pp. 20-21.
[40] Shore, *Building Europe*, cit., p. 45.
[41] Ivi, p. 27.
[42] Calligaro, *From "European Cultural Heritage" to "Cultural Diversity"? The Changing Concepts of European Cultural Policy*, cit., p. 1.

are contributing to European cultural heritage discourses alone[43], and it is often used to promote local cultures.

Museum professionals too consider themselves as important actors in the process of cultural Europeanisation: «museums must be in the forefront of interpreting we Europeans to ourselves»[44], wrote Susan Pearce in 1992, at the beginning of a new era of European cooperation for museal institutions.

4. The Introduction of European Narratives in History Museums

Many curators in history museums have been keen to incorporate a European perspective into their exhibitions, to mitigate national history museums' close relationship to the nation state, to combat their nationalistic bias, and thereby provide a more inclusive way of remembering the past.

Yet Europeanising the museal presentation of history is by no means an innocent or politically neutral cultural practice. In fact, the introduction of European integration history in museums has become central to the cultural politics of the EU[45]. Museums have become instruments to form an imagined European community, a method which is strikingly similar to the praxis in the 19th century nation-building processes[46].

While in the 19th century the creation of national history museums was a novel development, the musealization of the history of European integration emerged in nation states with an extensive museum landscape. Different EU funding schemes were developed to encourage existing museums to include the history of Europe and EU integration into their displays. At the end of the 1970's, the European Commission (EC) expressed the wish to make «European rooms» in history museums[47].

A number of national historical and ethnographic museums were converted into European museums: the *Museum für Volkskunde* in Berlin adopted the European collection of the *Ethnologisches Museum* and was consequently transformed into the *Museum für Europäische Kulturen* in 1999; the collections of the *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* and the European department of the *Musée de l'Homme* were moved from Paris to Marseille, and have since been exhibited in the *Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MuCEM).

Projects for the musealization of European history have also been created *ex nihilo.* Since the end of the 1980's, museums have been created to specifically rep-

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[43] During, *European Heritage Discourses, a Matter of Identity Construction?*, cit., p. 18.
[44] *Museums and Europe 1992*, ed. S.M. Pearce, Bloomsbury, 1992, p. 2.
[45] Krankenhagen, Poehls, *Exhibiting Europe*, cit., pp. 2-3.
[46] W. Kaiser, S. Krankenhagen and K. Poehls, *Exhibiting Europe in Museums: Transnational Networks, Collections, Narratives, and Representations*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2014.
[47] V. Charléty, *L'invention Du Musée de l'Europe*, in «Regards Sociologiques», n. 27/28, 2004, p. 154.

resent the history of Europe and the history of European integration. Camille Mazé has pointed out that in the last thirty years there have been at least ten different initiatives to «put Europe in the museum»[48]. Many museum projects have not, or at least not fully, been realized. The *Bauhaus Europa*, an initiative by the city of Aachen, was rejected by a referendum in 2006. The plans for the *Museion per l'Europa*, to be erected in Turin and the *Musée de l'Union*, to open in Luxembourg, were also cancelled. The failure of these projects shows that the musealization of European history can be considered a contested field. There is a gap between the ambition and the reality of the emergence of museums representing the history of Europe[49].

One of the most significant attempts to musealize the history of Europe is undoubtedly the *Musée de l'Europe*, a project that was initiated in 1997, and which had the aim to establish a new museum on the history of Europe in Brussels. The project has encountered various setbacks over the years and up until now it has only resulted in four temporary exhibitions. The most prominent exhibition, entitled «It's our history! 50 years of European adventure»*, opened in October 2007 in the Tour & Taxis venue in Brussels and has also been exhibited in Poland.

For initiator Benoît Remiche, it was clear that creating this museum would be very much a political act: «Faire un musée, ce n'est pas commettre un livre, c'est essentiellement un acte politique, surtout lorsqu'il s'agit d'un musée identitaire»[50]. The aim of the museum was to show that «the Union is the culmination of a millenary process led by the Greco-Roman civilization and thwarted for ages by the construction of nation states»[51], and to convey this story in an emotional way. The mission statement of the exhibition reads as follows:

> From the devastated Europe of 1945 to the challenges that are today facing our continent, visitors will come face to face with History with a capital H but also with their own more personal history. As you will realise as you make your way around the exhibition, we are all protagonists in this incredible adventure, this ongoing quest to unify Europe[52].

The exhibition's teleological account of European history and the European integration process was denounced by historians and museologists alike as being heavily biased. Rather than promoting an open, reflected view on history, the exhibition offered a very one-sided interpretation of the continent's past and future. The estab-

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[48] C. Mazé, *Des usages politiques du musée à l'échelle européene*, in «L'Hartmattan, Politique Européene», vol. 2, n. 39, 2012, p. 74. My own translation from French.

[49] Krankenhagen, Poehls, *Exhibiting Europe*, cit., p. 4.

[50] Speech by Benoît Rémiche at the conference «L'Europe sans histoire?», in Paris on the 8th of March 2010. Cited in V. Charléty, *L'invention Du Musée de l'Europe*, in «Regards Sociologiques», n. 27/28, 2004, p. 149.

[51] Declaration of the Association du Musée de l'Europe, 1997. Cited in Cadot, *Can Museums Help Build a European Memory? The Example of the Musée de l'Europe in Brussels and in the Light of the "New World' Museums" Experience*, p. 129.

[52] «It's Our History! - Expo Europe»: www.expo-europe.be/component/option,com_frontpage/Itemid,1/lang,en (last accessed on 28 December 2016).

lishing of a permanent museum has not been realized for various reasons, not in the least because the *Musée de l'Europe* has now been supplanted by the HEH.

5. Building a House of European History

In December 2007, a Committee of Experts (CE) for the HEH was assembled with nine renowned European historians and museum experts, led by the director of the German *Haus der Geschichte*, Hans Walter Hütter. The CE developed a *Conceptual Basis for the House of European History*, which included details of the principles and institutional structure for the museum, as well as a list of important historic developments to be included in the permanent exhibition[53].

In January 2011, the first members of the APT started working on the permanent exhibition and all other museological aspects of the HEH. The APT is led by Taja Vovk van Gaal, previously director of the *City Museum of Ljubljana* and Head of Support at the European Cultural Foundation. Andrea Mork, previously at the *Haus der Geschichte* in Bonn, is the curatorial coordinator[54].

An Academic Committee (AC) with eleven European historians and museum experts (some of them former members of the CE), chaired by the Polish historian Włodzimierz Borodziej, supervises the development of the museum. The AC is the only body that has the official authority to assess and comment on the content of the permanent exhibition, but only gets a rather restricted insight into the development of the permanent exhibition and its advice is not binding[55].

In June 2009, it was decided that the Eastman building, a former dental clinic sponsored by Kodak-inventor George Eastman, located in the Leopold Park in the European Quarter in Brussels, will house the HEH. This building, originating from the 1930's, will be enlarged by a glass structure in the courtyard that rises up over the roof.

From its very conception, the HEH has been a controversial project. One major point of critique has been the high cost of the project, estimated at € 56,15 million[56], especially against the backdrop of the economic crisis that started in 2008 and which resulted in budget cuts in the cultural sector across Europe. Unsurprisingly,

[53] Committee of Experts, *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*.
[54] When the project to establish the HEH was initiated, the APT was working directly under the Secretariat-General of the EP. Later the APT became part of the EP's Directorate-General for Communication, the Directorate C, Communication with Citizens.
[55] A Board of Trustees, consisting of representatives of the political groups in the EP and from its Parliamentary Committee for Culture, from the EC and the Brussels authorities, is in charge of the general management of the project.
[56] The House of European History, *Official Website of the European Parliament*: www.europarl.europa.eu/visiting/en/visits/historyhouse.html (last accessed on 26 April 2016).

the harshest critique came from British eurosceptics, with Members of European Parliament calling it «scandalous»[57] and a «grossly narcissistic project»[58].

6. Museological Principles of the HEH

The Conceptual Basis stipulated that «the House of European History should be a place in which the European idea comes alive (and) [...] should equally illustrate both the diversity of the history of Europe and the commonality of its roots»[59], and that «the multifaceted and impartial presentation of historical facts and processes is vital if visitors are to be put in a position to form their own judgments and encouraged to discuss the issues dealt with in the exhibition»[60].

At the beginning of 2011, the first members of the APT decided to take a certain distance from the Conceptual Basis and to perceive this document as a non-binding guideline. It was decided that identity should not be adopted as a guiding concept. Although identity had been central to the speech given by Pöttering, the members of the APT considered it to be a problematic concept, because of its restrictive nature. The APT does not believe the complex issue of European identity could or should be defined within the museum, especially considering the museum's authoritative position:

> There is no truly general, universally accepted definition of what European identity is supposed to be. Attempts to describe it are so general that they lose all concrete meaning. A clear-cut definition of European identity is too simplistic and reductionist. European culture cannot be described as a homogeneous entity. [...] Having the *House of European History* define a European identity would be an authoritarian step that would block rather than foster the necessary social debate on this highly meaningful question. So our answer had to be this: the concept of identity is unsuited for the laying of a theoretical basis. The *House of European History* cannot be a stage for the presentation of a pre-defined European identity[61].

Instead of identity, the concept of collective memory was proposed, as it was thought to be less reductionist than identity and to offer a more fluid model: «instead of defining an identity 'from the top down', it seems more appropriate to us to single out the idea of 'collective memory'. [...] For our theoretical concept, the definition

[57] J. Slack, *A £7m TV Channel in 22 Languages and the Second World War Airbrushed from European History at a £44m Museum... Eurocrats Are Spending like Never before*, in «Mail Online»: goo.gl/lxgogh (last accessed on 1 December 2013).

[58] B. Waterfield, *"House of European History" Cost Estimates Double to £137 Million,* in «Telegraph.co.uk», 3 April 3 2011, sec. worldnews: goo.gl/sRLA2D.

[59] Committee of Experts, *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*, p. 5.

[60] Ivi, p. 7.

[61] A. Mork, Presentation of the House of European History, *European Network Remembrance and Solidarity*, August 17, 2013: goo.gl/f6U9RY.

expressed by the Swiss writer Adolf Muschg, is defining our route: 'What binds Europe together and what divides it, is quintessential: the common memory...'»[62] Memory was favoured by the APT because it is not fixed, but rather subject to change and renegotiation throughout history. It also has the interesting potential to portray both what unites and what divides Europe. The potential of memory to tell a history from below and to go beyond the heroic history model of the nation state is praised by the APT. In discussions with the AC, the term collective memory was criticized for its connotation of being a top-down concept and for the word's association with the communist past of large parts of Europe. Finally, it was decided instead that *shared* memory would become the central concept of the HEH.

The permanent exhibition will only discuss those events and processes that are distinctly European, rather than just an addition to national histories. Conditions have been formulated to determine what aspects a historical topic should have to be considered as European. The HEH will «focus on historical processes and events which have originated in Europe, which expanded across Europe, and which are relevant up to nowadays»[63]. The HEH wants to narrate the history of the European continent from a bird's eye perspective, rather than focusing on the specific events in the different nation states, or as the APT puts it on the HEH's website: «From myths and discoveries to the chaos and cohesion of the 20th century, the House of European History will take visitors on a journey along the path of Europe's history and challenge them to contemplate its future»[64].

Through a discussion of the diverging histories and diversity of interpretations of the past, the APT hopes the HEH will lead to a critical, multi-perspective understanding of the history of Europe, allowing different viewpoints and at times conflicting interpretations of history[65]. Essential to the concept of the HEH is communicating to the visitor that any presentation of history is a construct defined by individual values and perceptions.

A public debate with European citizens about what a shared European memory entails for them barely took place in the development of the HEH and its permanent exhibition. This has been avoided deliberately, as the public discussion of museum projects such as the *Maison de l'Histoire* had led to their cancellation[66].

The members of the APT believe that the lack of public debate can be battled by the political plurality of the EP[67], and especially by its own self-critical and reflexive approach.

The necessary debate surrounding such a project begins inside the project itself. The constant discussion among the members of the Academic Project Team provides a first layer of fruitful exchanges on the contents of the HEH, enriched by the different back-

[62] *Ibid.*
[63] van Gaal and Dupont, *The House of European History*, cit., p. 49.
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] van Gaal and Dupont, *The House of European History*, cit., p. 46.
[66] Ivi, p. 48.
[67] Ivi, p. 47.

grounds and experiences but sometimes also by conflicting ideas. The debate is further progressed in the AC meetings, which offer a useful ground for further deepening of the contents[68].

The APT envisions the HEH to become an inclusive institution, which welcomes visitors from all walks of life and from different geographical, generational, and socio-cultural provenance[69]. Entry to the museum will be free of charge so that the museum's content will be accessible to all. A comprehensive knowledge of European history will not be required to understand the exhibition. In fact, due to the limited amount of time visitors usually spend in museums, a simple and clear message on the first level should help the visitor to grasp the basic meaning of every topic. Additional content will be offered on the second and third level to engage people who are interested in learning more and to add nuance to the main message. Another way to guarantee the HEH's accessibility is that visitors will be able to access all exhibitions texts in the 24 official languages of the EU. Furthermore, an educational program for school children aged 10 to 18 has been developed and tested with an international group of teachers with the collaboration of EUROCLIO, the European Association of History Educators[70]. This learning program is also available in digital format for teachers to use in their classrooms.

7. The Permanent Exhibition

Although the APT was to a certain extent free to deviate from the Conceptual Basis for the development of the permanent exhibition, it was clearly determined that the majority of the exhibition space should be dedicated to the 20th century, with a particular focus on the history of European integration. The Conceptual Basis also specified that the historical narrative should be presented chronologically, as the CE believed it «will help the likely target group to understand historical events and processes, [...] to place events and developments geographically and in their correct periods»[71]. The Conceptual Basis also offered an extensive list of historical phenomena, presented in eighty-six points, in three chapters: «the origins and development of Europe until the end of the 19th century», «Europe and the World Wars», and «Europe since the Second World War»[72].

   The APT did not base the historical narrative of the HEH on the list that was prepared by the CE. One of the APT's decisions was not to take as a historical starting point the civilizations which existed along the trading routes near the east-

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[68] *Ibid.*
[69] Ivi, p. 45.
[70] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators: euroclio.eu (last accessed on 28 December 2016).
[71] Committee of Experts, *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*, cit., p. 7.
[72] Ivi, pp. 11-27.

ern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the first «forms of higher culture which can already be described as 'European'»[73]. Rather, the APT decided to commence the historical narrative with the beginning of the 19th century. Furthermore, the APT decided to start and end the permanent exhibition with a thematic chapter (themes 1 and 5), which will offer reflections on European memory and European heritage. The historical narrative is divided in four chronological historical chapters (themes 2a to 4), which narrate European history from approximately 1800 until 2012. The permanent exhibition will be shown on an exhibition surface of around 2000 m², with an additional 800 m² dedicated to temporary exhibitions.

Nearly half of the objects that are displayed in the permanent exhibition will be on loan from museums from all over Europe. In this way, the HEH will be exhibiting those objects that normally never leave the storage units and thus encourage a practice of loans in Europe, while avoiding the copying of national collections. To this end, the curators have been in contact with over 300 museums in a total of 37 countries. At the same time, the HEH is building up its own collection, that has a distinct European focus.

The permanent exhibition will be an object-based and multi-media exhibition. The complexity of narrating the history of Europe in a coherent exhibition asks that the broadest possible range of modern museological tools and methods be used. The exhibited objects will date mainly from the 20th century. They will be complemented by audio-visual installations that aim to help the visitors understand different viewpoints and perspectives of history. A large sculpture in the middle of the staircase, a 'tornado' of citations, composed of words that represents the «Europe of Ideas», will make a visual link between the topics explored on the different floors of the museum.

'Shaping Europe' (Theme 1) aims to establish the main museological principles of the HEH and introduces the visitor to the topic of European history and memory. It presents the HEH as a reservoir of European memory which transcends national perspectives toward a shared past. It states that Europe cannot be considered a clearly defined geographical space. It is a reflexive chapter that endeavours to convey the fact that the ideas, images, and concepts of Europe have changed over time. It is the intention of 'Shaping Europe' to help the visitor to understand that history is a construction per se, by challenging what he or she would consider as Europe and its history rather than confirming or defining it. The topics presented in Theme 1 are 'The Myth of Europa,' 'Mapping Europe', and 'Memory and European Heritage'.

'Europe Ascendant' (Theme 2a) gives an account of the history of the European continent in the 19th century. It represents Europe as it enters in the era of modernity, in the political, economic, social, and cultural sphere. It presents human and civil rights, self-determination, industrialisation, and liberal market economy as the leading factors in this period of radical change. It shows that with these changes, social tensions, and international rivalries built up to an enormous potential of conflict.

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[73] Ivi, p. 11.

These messages are explored in the topic 'Politics', 'Economic and Social Order', and 'Belief in Progress and Superiority'.

In 'Europe Eclipsed' (Theme 2b), the first half of the 20th century is presented as an 'Age of Destruction', with two World Wars, economic crisis, the decline of liberal democracy, and the rise of totalitarianism. The interwar period is discussed as the rivalry between the three social systems of fascism, communism, and parliamentary democracy. Theme 2b seeks to convey that the dialectics of modernity led to a turn from extreme rationality into extreme irrationality, leading to different scenarios of mass war and totalitarian terror. World War II is interpreted as the beginning of the definitive decline of Europe in the world. The memory of the Shoah is presented as the negative reference point of European self-consciousness. The topics in Theme 2b are 'First World War', 'Europe between Democracy and Totalitarianism', 'Second World War', and 'Harvest of Destruction'.

'A House Divided' (Theme 3) presents Europe as 'a field with ruins', disempowered as the scene of the Cold War between two antagonistic political systems. It also makes clear that on both sides of the Iron Curtain, the continent was marked with unexpected economic growth. The beginning of the project of European integration is presented as a turning point in European history, as it introduced the principle of supranational cooperation. The topics of Theme 3 are 'Rebuilding Europe', 'Cold War', 'Social Security and Prosperity', 'European Integration', and the 'Memory of the Shoah'.

'Breaking Boundaries' (Theme 4) discusses the 1970's as the end of the postwar era when Western Europe entered into a period of economic transformation and political and social diversification, while the socialist countries were confronted with systemic problems and declining legitimacy. It also further discusses the process of Europeanisation, which accelerated with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and could be observed in more areas of daily life. The topics discussed in Theme 4 are 'End of the Boom', 'Democratisation of the West', 'Socialist countries between Frustration and Opposition' and, finally, 'Europeanisation I' and 'Europeanisation II'.

'Looking Ahead' (Theme 5) is another reflexive chapter. For the topic 'The Archive of History', museums from *outside* of Europe were contacted to loan objects from their collections that reflect their countries' relationship with Europe. In 'Brussels', a 2-minute video, the different sides of the city's present and history are discussed – it is presented as the European capital it is today, but also as the home of a human zoo in Tervuren at the 1897 International Exposition. In the third topic, 'Looking out of History', the visitor will be asked to reflect on the future of Europe and what the role of memory can be in the future imagination of Europe. The Nobel Peace Prize medal that the European Union received in 2012 will be juxtaposed with the banners that were collected at the protests at the ceremony in Oslo. It might be in Theme 5 that the wish of the APT «that the museum can be a place of debate and understanding about the current situation, including the crisis itself, from the perspective of its historical roots,'»[74] could be realized, as here the visitor is asked about his or her ideas about Europe and its past.

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[74] van Gaal and Dupont, *The House of European History*, cit., p. 46.

8. A Place for Reflection and Debate or for Building a European Master Narrative?

The Conceptual Basis for the HEH states that «academic independence and the objective portrayal of history have top priority. The Committee of Experts is adamant that scientifically proven findings and methods are the basis for the work of the House of European History»[75]. The members of the APT have asserted that they can work free from political pressure, without restrictions to their academic freedom and that the autonomy of the APT is effective in its daily work[76]. The APT has been able to retain much of its independence in the development of the contents of the permanent exhibition, as the curators have been very strict in the application of their role as interpreters of history. Even if the role of a museum's staff has not been immediately recognized in scholarship on museums, the character of the museum is often determined by key individuals such as the curators, rather than by its political patrons[77], and this also seems to be the case for the HEH.

Nevertheless, the political goal of the museum is clear: to supply the EU citizens with a shared European memory and thereby stimulate their self-identification as Europeans. Even if the APT does not feel any direct political pressure, the idea that it could completely disregard politics in the development of the museums narrative is false. The close connection to the European Institutions – the APT works within the EP – cannot be underestimated, be it only as a pressure to self-censure.

Furthermore, while the Conceptual Basis had clearly set out that the HEH should become an independent institution and that the «institutional independence of the body responsible for running the House of European History is fundamental to the success and credibility of the concept»[78], it has now also become clear that after its opening, the museum will be working under the auspices of European institutions. Furthermore, the location of the HEH, right next to the EP, gives the institution an aura of authority. Erik Barton Christiansen has made a similar point about the Smithsonian being located between the Washington Monument, the White House, and the Capitol[79].

From my experience working with the APT in 2013, I noted that the general attitude of its members is one of exchange, reflection, and self-questioning. The highest historiographical and museological standards are respected. The introduction of concepts such as memory and multi-perspectivity, and the rejection of teleological accounts of history, increases the HEH's potential of becoming a place for reflection and debate.

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[75] Committee of Experts, *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*, cit., p. 7.
[76] van Gaal and Dupont, *The House of European History*, cit., p. 47.
[77] McLean, *Museums and the Representation of Identity*, cit.
[78] Committee of Experts, *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*, cit., p. 7.
[79] E.B. Christiansen, *History Limited: The Hidden Politics of Postwar Popular Histories*, University of Maryland, 2009, p. 361.

On the other hand, one can ask how much of the rhetoric of the APT will actually be apparent in the permanent exhibition. In Theme 1 and Theme 5, the HEH takes on a rather bold approach towards the presentation of history, memory, and the future of Europe. Theme 1 shows that history-writing and memory are always changing and therefore are essentially a construction. In Theme 5, the visitors are asked to reflect on what European history and memory means for them, after having seen what the HEH proposes as a European narrative. Yet, as soon as the chronological historical narrative starts, rather than offering an innovative historical and museological interpretation of European history, the HEH's permanent exhibition does not differ much from that of a traditional national history museum.

The HEH wants to bring a comprehensible narrative, where the coherence in the historical narrative is ensured, for instance by chronology, and which might actually be endangered by the inclusion of too much multi-perspectivity. Thus, the question remains as to how much of the reflexivity the APT propagates will be included in the exhibition and how the potentially contesting power of memory will be played out. Another question is to what extent this message will be absorbed by the visitor. In fact, the nuances in the historical narrative will mostly be offered at the second or third level of information, which will be entirely missed by visitors who do not engage with these layers.

As Kaiser notes, it is especially through the practice of participative narrating, sifting through memories without following a particular normative agenda, that history can be told «from below»[80]. However, the APT does not seem keen on making participative narrating an inherent part of the exhibition. This is especially striking, as the planned digital tablets could enable visitors to give feedback to the museum's content and historical interpretations through personal contributions, memories, thoughts, remarks or even pictures, that either converge with or contest the proposed narrative. New multimedia technology in museums offers many exciting possibilities but they are not fully utilized by the HEH. In the topic 'Looking out of History', one of the most important places where visitors are asked to contribute their own reflections on Europe, they will be able to do so in individual booths, after which their statements will be shown on a big screen, not necessarily the most stimulating solution for debate.

I wrote this paper just months before the HEH is scheduled to open. My research is based on the process of the establishment of the museum, but further analysis of the permanent exhibition will be necessary after the HEH has opened its doors. It will be especially interesting to analyse the temporary exhibitions and the programme of events and lectures that the HEH will offer. These will probably give more opportunity for discursive debates on Europe's shared memory. Further research could examine how the messages that are developed by the APT are internalised by the public and how the visitors respond to the presented narrative.

It is important to note that a new team will be hired to work in the HEH once the museum has opened. In fact, the members of the APT who wanted their tempo-

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[80] Kaiser, *Narrating Contemporary European History*, cit., p. 5.

rary jobs to become permanent had to apply and take part in an open competition to which citizens of every EU country could apply. The choice of the new director of the HEH and his or her background – whether it will be an EU administrator or rather someone from the museological field – will deeply influence the narrative of the museum.

Considering the unprecedented challenges the EU is facing today, with rising nationalism and the first member state leaving the union following Brexit, the HEH could be fundamental in offering a unifying narrative for Europe. It is important that this narrative is continually challenged, both by the curators and the public. Only then can the HEH become a forum for debate on Europe and a place for meaningful reflection on the past, present, and future of the continent.

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