National Museums in Nineteenth-Century Europe
Between Antagonistic and Cosmopolitan Memory?

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Museums were major sites for national identity-building in nineteenth-century Europe.[1] The space of the nation in that century was a highly complex one, however. It was really, as Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out, more a century of empires than of nation-states and, one could say by extension, more a century of nations aspiring to become states.[2] The nation, therefore, was by no means the only reference point for the collections and strategies of museums in this period. In Western Europe, many states had been building empires since the sixteenth century. They were often more dynastic than national, and, with varying success, they attempted to accommodate and adapt the 'new' national ideas that had been spreading like wildfire through Europe since the late eighteenth century, frequently in association with the fervour of the French Revolution of 1789 – something to be very wary of, in the eyes of the dynastic rulers of Europe. As Eugen Weber famously put it for France, the nineteenth century was about "turning peasants into Frenchmen".[3] Such nationalizing strategies from above had to contend with strong regional and local identities across Europe. Similarly, preceding national museums were those that promoted feelings of belonging to one's locality or region. The nation had to be inserted into these existing institutions, or rather, the "small fatherlands"[4] had to be reconfigured as important building blocks of the larger national fatherland. Museums negotiated the complex demands of locality, region, nation, empire, and sometimes also ideas about belonging to larger transnational entities, i.e. in Scandinavia, that of the 'north'[5]; in Eastern Europe, that of the community of all Slavs[6]; or that of the Occident or of Europe.[7]

National museums, in attempting to negotiate these different conceptions of identity, acted as memorial institutions, constructing and promoting a particular notion of

1 Aronsson and Elgenius 2014.
2 Osterhammel 2014.
3 Weber 1976.
4 Green 2001.
5 Sorensen and Stråth 2008.
6 Snyder 1984.
7 Pasture 2015.

the past that upheld the museum's role as mediator of spatial identities. In this chapter, I would like to use the theory of agonistic memory in order to explore to what extent these constructions of nations were based on the three memory regimes identified by theories of agonistic memory, i.e. antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic memory.[8] Countering a long-held assumption that such constructions were based on a perceived antagonism between the nation and internal and external forces, I will argue that many museums followed a more complex strategy. Indeed, in their displays and their curatorial practices, they constantly oscillated between antagonistic memory strategies and cosmopolitan ones seeking to appeal to universal values that were often linked to ideas about the character and mission of the nation. Largely absent in the nineteenth century, however, were agonistic interventions capable of unsettling dominant constructs of nation and keeping open the horizon of identification with spatial constructions of identity. In the first section, I review the different types of national museums and the corresponding national identities promoted therein. In the second section, I discuss how the museums used both antagonistic and cosmopolitan memory regimes to underpin their respective nationalizing strategies. In the concluding part of the article, I ask how we might explain the absence of agonistic perspectives in nineteenth-century national museums.

National Museums and National Identities

There is a direct correlation between the rise of modern nationalism in the nineteenth century and the creation of national museums. This is particularly notable where nationalizing empire-states put their full weight behind the establishment of such museums. A good example is the *Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum* (Hungarian National History Museum) in Budapest, founded in 1802. After 1867, within the Habsburg Empire, the Hungarian half of the dual monarchy actively promoted policies of the Magyarization of its part of the empire. Attempts to fashion a 'greater' Hungary led to the creation of many institutions that could underpin this policy aim, and the national museum was part and parcel of this development.[9] As the Danish antiquarian Rasmus Nyerup put it, the national museum should be seen as "an asylum for slowly disappearing ancient national monuments […] [and] a temple for the remains of the spirit, language, art and power of our past, where every patriot can study the successive advances of the nation's culture and customs".[10] Following this logic, it is not surprising that, almost everywhere, the archaeological museum became the archetypal such institution of the nineteenth century.[11] In Europe this development was, however, particularly strong in Italy and Greece, where powerful national movements sought to connect their ambitions for an independent nation-state with the proud memory of ancient cultures.[12]

8 Cento Bull and Hansen 2016.
9 Rampley, Prokopovych, and Veszeprémi 2021.
10 Cited in Bligaard 2000, 288.
11 Díaz-Andreu 2007.
12 Erskine 2012.

In the German lands, where likewise national movements sought to create a nation-state out of a disparate aggregate of highly independent states and statelets, the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* (Germanic National Museum) in Nuremberg, founded in 1852, became a political statement popularizing the notion of nationalization in the German lands.[13] Many national museums combined an antiquarian concern with collecting remnants from an allegedly national past with erudition and patriotic sentiment. In this way, they contributed to the forging of historicizing master narratives across Europe.[14]

Sometimes museums also became sites for politics. The Hungarian National History Museum, for example, witnessed the Revolutions of 1848 beginning on its steps, and the upper house of the Hungarian parliament held its sessions at the museum. If national museums came to underpin demands for statehood, the question often was on what historical grounds to rest such demands, especially in cases where, in lieu of the continuation of an existing state, an alleged national territory became integrated into another state (empire). In this situation, nationalizing master narratives tended to fall back on notions of the 'people', which retained the characteristics of nationhood despite any perceived 'foreign yoke' that might prevent the building of the nation-state.[15] For example, in Ireland, Norway, Finland, and Bulgaria the most important national museums were folk museums, documenting customs linked to the retention of an allegedly unchanging national character and presenting – including through the display of folk costumes – culture in endless local and regional varieties that were nevertheless seen as part of a larger whole.[16]

Continuity was key for all national museums. This includes national art museums. Indeed, the nationalization of art continues apace throughout the nineteenth century, neatly delineating art into Germanic, Spanish, Italian, French, etc. As has been pointed out, such nationalization ignored the many parallels and connections that were all too visible among different 'national' schools.[17] The *Alte Nationalgalerie* (Old National Gallery) in Berlin bore the inscription on its portico, "To German art, 1871", thereby directly referring to art's task of contributing to the national unification of the country in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871.[18] In the sphere of the national museum, empire-nations were likely to create a landscape that reflected their imperial ambitions. By an act of parliament, the British Museum in London, founded in 1753, collected and displayed artefacts not just from the multinational state of the United Kingdom but also from across its colonies.[19]

The strong connection between warfare and nation-building was reflected in the establishment of national war museums in many European nation-states. [▸ Beck] Nine-

13 Crane 2000; Wolbring 2009.

14 Berger with Conrad 2015.

15 On Ireland, see Ó Giolláin 2000, 60.

16 Dewhurst and MacDowell 1981.

17 The Prado Museum in Madrid held a temporary exhibition on Dutch and Spanish paintings aimed at revealing how superficial the division of art into national schools is and indeed how close a relationship existed among artists, often even transcending national borders. See the catalogue for the exhibition, entitled "Velazques, Rembrandt, Vermeer: Parallel Visions" 2019.

18 "*Der deutschen Kunst MDCCCLXXI*". Forster-Hahn 1994.

19 Caygill 1981.

teenth-century unification nationalisms, like the German or the Italian ones, could not be achieved without warfare; colonial warfare was vital to the creation of empire-states. Wars between empire-nations resulted in new power constellations, rendering the belligerents either 'great' or in decline. Wars to establish nation-states from territories previously incorporated into empires were also common. As we can see, there is no shortage of wars variously pertaining to forms of nation-building.[20]

A wide range of other museum types that boomed in the nineteenth century also had strong connections to nation-building exercises. Technical museums, for instance, often had the ambition to display and promote the scientific and technical achievements of the nation and thereby to strengthen feelings of national pride in their visitors. The *Deutsche Museum von Meisterwerken der Naturwissenschaft und Technik* (German Museum of Masterpieces of Science and Technology), founded in Munich in 1903, is a good example.[21] Technology and science epitomized the modern nation, whereas nature and landscape stood for the eternal nation.

Natural history museums became popular venues for celebrating national landscapes and flora and fauna, advocating the uniqueness of the physical features of the nation.[22] The manifestation of the nationalizing agendas of the nineteenth century in various types of museums was actualized from above and below – both by states and by national movements, usually in conjunction with each other. In manifold combinations, they linked notions of national history to memory and, through memory, forged powerful national identities.

Memory Regimes for National Museums

What kind of memory regimes were established through national museums? We can differentiate among three types of memory regimes: antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic.[23] Antagonistic memory is based on a clear differentiation between friend and enemy. Set within such a stark binary construction, it is entirely monologic and monoperspectival, directed towards the 'insider' (friend) and against the 'outsider' (enemy). Mobilizing the passions of belonging (in our case, to the nation), for the insider antagonistic memory equals nationalist memory.

Cosmopolitan memory, by contrast, is rooted in the presumption of shared universal values, such as human rights and freedom of speech. It also adheres to strong binaries, namely, between various totalitarianisms that would threaten these values, on the one hand, and a liberal democracy that defends them, on the other. Unlike antagonistic forms of memory, it is, however, multi-perspectival and dialogic. In Habermasian fashion, it advocates a power-free dialogue between different positions within a liberal-democratic

20 Berger 2021.

21 Mayr 1990.

22 Köstering 2005.

23 Cento Bull, Hansen, and Colom González 2021. Cento Bull and Hansen developed the theory of agonistic memory on the basis of Mouffe 2013 and her notion of 'agonistic politics', see Cento Bull and Hansen 2016.

framework – often referred to as 'deliberative democracy' – out of which emerges a consensus.[24] Cosmopolitan memory is largely directed towards the victims of various totalitarianisms. Indeed, mobilizing passions for the victims of totalitarianism is one way of strengthening the universal values championed by this memory regime.

In contrast to the antagonistic and cosmopolitan frameworks, agonistic memory seeks to overcome all binary constructions and amounts to a radical historicization. Equally interested in the memory of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, it seeks to arrive at a historical understanding of these respective positionalities. Such a radical multi-perspectivity is not geared towards closing political debates through consensus. Rather, it politicizes memory by pointing to unbridgeable political differences that can only be decided within a liberal democratic context. Both agonistic and cosmopolitan memory share their commitment to the liberal-democratic process, wherein different political positions must accept one another as adversaries rather than as antagonistic enemies, thus allowing for the functions of multi-perspectivity. Rather than aiming for closure, the debates within agonistic memory frameworks are open-ended. Memory conflicts are understood as political conflicts. Largely committed to solidarity, social justice, and equality, agonistic forms of memory seek to activate passions that coincide with these values.

Unsurprisingly, antagonistic forms of memory were prevalent in nineteenth-century national museums, as evident in constructions of 'others' against which the nation defined itself. That 'other' could be internal to the nation (e.g. socialists, Jews, regionalists, etc.) or external (e.g. other nations, empires, transnational entities, etc.) and could shift over time. Thus, for example, the *Kansallismuseo* (Finnish National Museum) in Helsinki, founded in 1916, underwent a gradual move from an anti-Swedish bias in the first half of the nineteenth century to an anti-Russian bias by the end of the nineteenth century.[25] In another case, the Hungarian National History Museum reflected an emphatic orientation against the Habsburg Empire, while at the same time celebrating its own sub-empire, at the heart of which stood the Hungarian nation.[26] The Bulgarian *Naroden muzei* (People's Museum) in Sofia, opened in 1905, constructed as its main enemy the Ottoman Empire, which was seen as having oppressed the Bulgarian nation for centuries. As in this instance, such antagonistic memories were often strong forces within nationalist movements. Such movements from below came to support constructs of antagonistic memory from above, including in and through museums.[27]

The same is true for the powerful individuals who often stood behind the creation of museums. Mihalache Ghica, for example, amassed a huge collection of national antiquities in Romania and opened a private museum in 1834. Along with its promotion of antagonistic national memory, the institution was taken over by the state in 1864, forming the foundation of the *Muzeul Naţional de Antichităţi* (National Museum of Antiquities).[28]

24 Lafont 2020.
25 Pettersson 2011.
26 Apor 2011.
27 Vukov 2011.
28 Bădică 2011.

Intriguingly, we also find in the nineteenth century a number of unfulfilled aspirations to become a nation-state. Whereas some, like Scotland, still today – at least in part – struggle to achieve that ambition, others, such as Bavaria, have forgotten such desires, which only remain visible in the designation of certain institutions, including museums, as 'national'. [▸ Breward] The *Bayerisches Nationalmuseum* (Bavarian National Museum) in Munich, founded in 1855, was strongly anti-Prussian before 1866. However, first under Prussian occupation following the German civil war of 1866, and later within the newly founded German Empire, it toned down that antagonism and found a role for Bavaria – albeit sometimes still not quite a comfortable one – in the greater German nation-state that came into being in 1871.[29] [▸ Beuing, Weniger]

Overall, the 'regional' museum landscape in the German Empire was very effectively nationalized, and the museums that had once championed Bavarian, Badenese, Prussian, Hamburger, etc., identities now located these comfortably within a grander national historical narrative that legitimated the unification. In fact, the regional museums strengthened the conception of the regions as building blocks of the nation, and reciprocally, national museums portrayed the variety of the regions as enriching the national unity. The German Empire witnessed a veritable boom in museums, and many of these newly founded institutions promoted just this cosmopolitan and multi-perspectival notion of a unified nation based on a harmonious multitude of regional differences.[30]

In Italy, the nationalization process was not quite so effective. After the unification of Italy, an endless number of *musei nazionali* (national museums) sprang up across the country. However, looking at those in greater detail, we observe that most had been local or regional museums and were only reclassified as national museums. [▸ Marini Clarelli] Even more crucially, they often continued to put forth a strong regionalist narrative that was difficult to integrate with a national master narrative. The antagonism between region and nation was thus retained to a far greater degree in Italy than was the case in the German Empire before 1914.[31]

If many German museums, in their attempts to forge a powerful unity between regional and national memory, employed cosmopolitan memory strategies as a means of overcoming previous antagonisms, similar attempts to use cosmopolitan memory in the service of the nationalizing state can be observed elsewhere. Archaeological museums certainly played an important role in uniting discrete parts of the nation, bringing separate ethnic and cultural identities into a larger unitary framework. In addition, many regional history museums throughout Europe championed cosmopolitan multi-perspectivity in order to facilitate the integration of different spatial perspectives, both sub- and transnational, into their nationalizing agendas. Time and again this led to strong forms of cooperation between regional and national museums, as Nikolai Vukov has demonstrated for Bulgaria.[32]

Furthermore, all those national movements that sought to construct the nation against an existing empire could appeal to cosmopolitan forms of memory as they

29 Glaser 1992.

30 Hein 2009, 155.

31 De Caro 2003.

32 Vukov 2011.

narrated the nation's story as one of victimhood in the face of the imperial oppressor. Indeed, the victim orientation of cosmopolitanism could be employed in service of those national movements. This worked particularly well in cases where the memory of oppression and victimhood was not too antagonistic. Thus, for example, the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff was established on notions of civic pride that sought to write the cultural nation of Wales into a British liberal cosmopolitanism.[33] Likewise, the Cambrian Archaeological Association, founded in 1846, employed cosmopolitan memory to incorporate Wales into a multinational United Kingdom while celebrating within this framework the distinctiveness of Welsh culture.[34] Cosmopolitanism bolstered not only those national ambitions directed against empire but also those of empire-nations. National museums displaying the art of the world, such as the *Musée du Louvre* (Louvre Museum), simultaneously exhibited their cosmopolitan values and their imperial ambitions.[35] Similar forms of imperial cosmopolitanism could be found in natural history museums, such as the *Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales* (Royal Cabinet of Natural History) in Madrid, founded in 1771, which depicted the natural history of Spain as well as of its empire in various corners of the world.[36]

Last but not least, newly founded nation-states could also marshal cosmopolitan forms of memory to inscribe, via universal values and ideals, their specific nation into a cosmopolitan canon. Thus, for example, the *Nasjonalgalleriet* (National Gallery) in Norway decided around 1850 to focus its collecting strategy on national art in a desire to put Norway on the map of international art, attaching the nation to universal values within the fine arts.[37] Even colonial museums that appealed to universal civilizing ambitions could operate within cosmopolitan memory frameworks. The *Museum voor Midden-Afrika / Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* (Royal Museum for Central Africa), also known as the *Museum van Belgisch Congo / Musée du Congo Belge* (Museum of the Belgian Congo), founded in Tervuren in 1910, was underpinned by this type of deeply racist cosmopolitanism invoking alleged universal civilizational values.[38] Cosmopolitan universalism was deeply implicated in the justification of colonialism, imperialism, and racism, a fact that already indicates the ahistoricity and one-sidedness of its identification with human rights and liberties. A final example of the mobilization of cosmopolitanism in nineteenth-century museums can be found in the Habsburg Empire. In its German-speaking parts, this empire was barred from nationalizing itself through the exclusion of Austria from the German nation in 1866. Many museums in the German-dominated part of the empire opted for a celebration of diversity and difference. The art and natural history museums located on the *Ringstrasse* in Vienna emphasized such diversity both within the Habsburg Empire and within a wider European history.[39] Even the *Heeresmuseum* (Army Museum), opened in 1891, depicted the military successes of the Habsburgs

33 Morgan 2007.
34 Edwards and Gould 2013.
35 McClellan 1994.
36 Kamen 2008.
37 Amundsen 2011.
38 Cornelis 2000.
39 Kriller 2000.

not as a national storyline but as a European one – thus superseding nationalist principles in favour of a continental outlook.[40] [▸ Beck] If cosmopolitanism was visible in the storylines of nineteenth-century national museums, it was also written into the very fabric of these institutions, including into the bricks and stones of the buildings that housed them. The nineteenth-century museum world was a deeply transnational one, championing universal models. Thus, for much of the nineteenth century, the French national museum was widely seen as an exemplar for all of Europe.[41] The architectural styles in which museums were built were deeply transnational, spanning from classicism to romanticism to historicism. Museum pioneers, like Artur Hazelius, who put his stamp on the *Nordiska museet* (Nordic Museum) in Stockholm, became influential transnational figures.[42] [▸ Olin]

Why is There No Space for Agonism in Nineteenth-Century National Museums?

I have argued in this chapter that nineteenth-century national museums were strongly influenced by antagonistic memory regimes, clearly delineating 'us' versus 'them' ideas of belonging; such notions aided the creation national identities that defined themselves contra an enemy.[43] What is a bit more surprising than this predictable result is the fact that many national museums adhered to cosmopolitan memory regimes. This had much to do with the complicated ways in which the nation had to be negotiated with a range of other spatial identities, such as local, regional, imperial, and transnational identities. Empire-nations, or "nationalizing empires",[44] were more likely to adopt a mixture of antagonistic and cosmopolitan memory regimes in order to underpin their specific governmentalisms. Similarly, where nations had to be built on older regional and local identities, the negotiations of those diversities often led to the adoption of cosmopolitan memory strategies that could integrate such diversity better than any other memory regime. However, the cosmopolitanism that we detected in many nineteenth-century national museums was sometimes connected to racism and constructions of national superiority and of hierarchies, and this reveals a problematic underbelly of cosmopolitanism that runs contrary to its adherence to values of human rights and liberal democracy.

If we ask the question why it is so rare to identify agonistic interventions in nineteenth-century national museums, one explanation lies in the absence of powerful civil actors that shared the normative vision of agonistic memory. Of course, we see the formation of a strong labour movement in various parts of Europe, jointly committed to solidarity, social justice, and greater equality – yet, this effort remained oppositional in virtually all European countries before 1914 and, therefore, exerted little influence on the world of museums. It did, however, create an agonistic counterculture capable

40 Rauchensteiner 1997.
41 Sherman 1989.
42 Bäckström 2011.
43 Knell, Aronsson, and Amundsen 2010.
44 Berger and Miller 2015.

of influencing national museums in the twentieth century, but that story falls beyond the scope of the present article. Nineteenth-century forms of civil mobilization that did help shape national museums were nationalist in character: at best, their antagonisms could be inflected by cosmopolitan memory, whereas agonism would have necessitated a willingness to historicize their own ambitions in ways that kept open the end result of their endeavours. For nationalist memory activists, that was one step too far.[45] Hence, we can tentatively suggest that the development of agonistic memory in national museums could only happen with the emergence of social actors who, in a democratizing framework, had the room and authority to influence the national master narratives staged in such museums. An acceptance of the possibility of constructing the nation differently was the minimum precondition for the emergence of agonistic perspectives. Such self-reflexivity entailed a move away from identity and towards 'identification'.[46] Only further studies into the relationship among different memory regimes in the context of twentieth-century national museums will reveal whether this hypothesis is correct.

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45 On the concept of memory activism, see Gutman and Wüstenberg 2022.

46 Hall 1992; Berger 2022.

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