

The 'Locus' for European Identity

Deconstructing Identity Politics in the House of European History



Münninghoff, Melanie. Photograph of House of European History. 19 March. 2022. Author's personal collection.

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Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Literature Review</i>	5
Theoretical Framework	7
<i>Cosmopolitanism</i>	7
<i>Memory Studies</i>	8
Methodology	9
<i>Structure</i>	10
Chapter 1: The European Union and Cosmopolitanism	4
Chapter 2: Deconstructing The House of European History’s Narrative	16
Chapter 3: Discussion	29
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	34

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Introduction

What does it mean to be European¹? Does Europe share a European identity or European values? If the answer to the latter question is yes, how can they be defined; what connects Europe? These questions are contested in the public sphere, especially by Eurosceptics. The European Union (EU), however, works hard to establish a sense of community among the diverse nationalities that form the Union. The idea of creating 'Unity in Diversity' - the Union's motto - is closely related to the idea of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism, as David Held remarks, is "concerned to disclose the ethical, cultural and legal basis of political order in a world where political communities and states matter, but not only and exclusively" (153). The EU anticipates the formation of a supranational identity in which people of this community are equal and form a political unity beyond their moral background. The goal to generate awareness and understanding of other European nations did not develop until the mid-1980s when the European flag and anthem were introduced. Furthermore, many programs function as stepping stones in forming a European identity, such as the Erasmus program for exchange students or MEDIA Creative Europe. One of the most recent attempts to form a European identity was the House of European History (HEH) which opened its doors in 2017. HEH is located in Brussels and invites its visitors to explore European history. The project itself was initiated by the European Parliament and fits with its intention to "safeguard, develop and promote European cultural and linguistic diversity and heritage" (*Culture and Creativity*). The museum has become a manifestation of European identity and

¹ Europe(an) and European refer to two different meanings. Europe(an) refers to the people and countries that belong to the European Union. European refers solely to the people and countries that belong to the continent. This distinction is made to underline that these two words cannot be used interchangeably. The only exception made with this distinction in this paper is in quotations.

shows its visitors the commonalities among the European population. Thus, the leading question is how does HEH contribute to the narrative of Europe as a cosmopolitan community?

Literature Review

To explore the significance of an institution in actively forming and co-creating a narrative, the fields of memory studies and that of cosmopolitanism in cultural studies are important scholarly fields.

The research question already proposes the idea that the EU is aiming to become cosmopolitan. This statement, however, is embedded in an ongoing academic debate on the deconstruction of the European integration process. Thus, the focus is to create a general understanding of the relation between cosmopolitanism and the EU. For this, the essay will refer to research papers that have already established this connection. The first paper is Nick Stevenson's article "European Cosmopolitanism and Civil Society: Questions of Culture, Identity and Citizenship" (2006) which discusses the idea of European civilization and explains what European cosmopolitanism entails. The work focuses on explaining what the Union needs to do to build a genuine cosmopolitan Europe (Stevenson 57). To complement Stevenson's work, this paper also refers to Maurice Roche's chapter "Cosmopolitanism in a European Context" (2018). This chapter supplements Stevenson's article in different aspects; for one it is more recent and thus gives a fresher view on the developments of Europe as a cosmopolitan community, especially after major events such as the financial crisis of 2008 and the refugee crisis of 2015. Whereas Stevenson's article is concerned with identity, Roche focuses more on the constitutional element of the EU. Neither of these scholars is stating that Europe is already a cosmopolitan community but that the EU is promoting cosmopolitanism

(Roche 559). My research will continue from this point and explore how the EU is promoting cosmopolitanism.

The House of European History as a research object has already been subject of academic discussion. The scholarly debate is not as extensive as Europe as a cosmopolitan community as most of the discussions are concerned with the analysis of the content of the exhibitions specifically. Common discussion points are the exclusionary way of representing European History in a limited space. My aim is, however, to connect the construction of the exhibition to a broader political context and to see how the installments create a sense of belonging. A good basis for this approach is the work “Political Values in a European Museum” by Pieter Huistra, Marijn Molema and Daniel Wirt. They introduce the idea of museums as instruments of identity politics and their capacity to construct narratives. However, their research misses an analysis of the construction of the exhibitions itself which takes weight off their argument that museums are not neutral spaces (Huistra et al. 127). This thesis will expand on this research gap. This approach will be developed using Maggie Burnettes Stogner’s article “Communicating Culture in the 21st Century: The Power of Media-Enhanced Immersive Storytelling”. This article explores new storytelling techniques which can encourage affective learning. This aspect is important when considering that HEH relies heavily on technology in its exhibition – an aspect that has been paid less attention to in the general debate. Lastly, Veronika Settele’s “Including Exclusion in European Memory? Politics of Remembrance at the House of European History” and Chantal Kesteloot’s “The House of European History, Food for Thought and Reflection” contextualize the history of HEH, thus aiding the analysis on the intentions of the EU with the construction of this museum.

Theoretical Framework

Cosmopolitanism

As already touched upon in the Literature Review, the EU is striving for a cosmopolitan ideal. Cosmopolitanism or the idea of being a ‘citizen of the world’, originated in the classical era of Greek and Roman Stoic and Cynic philosophers (Roche 552). The Stoic philosophy followed a realistic but morally idealist way of life which was influenced by Hellenic and Roman versions of cross-European society and culture (Roche 552). In the twenty-first century, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been picked up many times and has developed various forms of different theories and practices. In the academic world, the concept is marked by a similar ambiguity – it can connote both positive and negative meanings (Agathocleous 456). Subjects of discussion can include “world governments, hybrid forms, the universalization of culture, human rights, and migration” (Agathocleous 454). A common approach is to critically analyze the national bias and to think through historical and contemporary nationalism (Agathocleous 453). This approach can be seen in the EU’s idea of Europeanisation. Europeanisation can be understood as a process: intervening between Europe’s nation-states and transforming them into a cosmopolitan European community (Roche 553). The positive approach of cosmopolitanism has also been picked up by academics who established the *Conceptual Basis* for HEH. This is revealed by the fact that they avoided a focus on singular histories of nation-states and have rather focused on the history of Europe/ Europe as a whole. However, critics of the term argue that cosmopolitanism can also “mask inequalities and privilege” (Agathocleous 454) or that it is “nationalism in sheep’s clothing” (Lyon qtd. in Agathocleous 454). This will be further investigated in Chapter 3.

Memory Studies

The field of memory studies allows us to flesh out the ambiguity of cosmopolitanism. For one, memory is a major aspect of HEH's permanent exhibition. Another aspect is that memory often plays a role in the consideration of national identity. Traditional forms of historiography also stated that history itself consisted of individual and collective forms of memory and the task of a historian was to discover and re-tell them in a narrative (Eyerman 22). Today, this approach is invalid because history as a discipline has become much more secular and its linkage with collective memory became problematic with the new norms of science (Eyerman 22). But, through its use by early historians, it shows that memory as a field of study is important. Jan-Werner Müller also argues that memory matters because "all consciousness is mediated through it" (Weber qtd. in Müller 1). The concept of memory is interesting here because memory is central to individual and collective identity – it functions as a cognitive map to help understand people themselves, why they are here, and where they are going (Eyerman 23). Memory is divided into different forms wherein the biggest division is between individual and collective memory. Individual memory refers to the general concept of memory, which is the recollection of lived events of a specific individual (Müller 3). Collective Memory, on the other hand, is not necessarily events the collective has experienced but rather a social framework through which collectives can organize their history (Müller 3). It is a unifying factor for a group that connects them through time and space by ongoing processes of commemoration (Eyerman 25). Moreover, it can be easily presented in a narrative and text which gives it mobility (Eyerman 25). My paper will pay close attention to how HEH organizes its exhibition and how it constructs the narrative of the European memory.

Methodology

A strong focus in my thesis is the analysis of the narrative constructed by and in the museum. Thus, the most relevant methodology is narratology. Narratology is an interdisciplinary study that focuses on analyzing stories in different forms of media – it is thus not restricted to text or the literary field (Wurth & Rigney 416). This broad use of the methods makes it easily applicable to the narrative structure of the museum which is based on visual and auditorial material. The history of this school of thought developed from the focus on the composition of narratives and the structures to also the exploration of the relationship between the narrative and the functions of the stories for the audience groups (Wurth & Rigney 417). Narratology has been also integrated as school of thought in cultural memory studies which makes it even more logical to use it as a method to deconstruct the narrative of HEH.

My research process started with the question: how does the EU imagine European identity or Europeanness and is it related to the cosmopolitan ideal? The latter part has been already widely discussed by scholars which confirmed my initial thought that the EU imagines itself as a cosmopolitan community. I selected HEH, because the museum was a project by the European Parliament which indicated to me that it must be reflecting in some form European identity. This assumption was grounded on one of their policies, described in the introduction. From that point, I prepared to visit HEH by looking through different sources. One day was to fully engage in the museum experience and collect my first impressions. Another day was to re-visit the same experience but with a clearer focus and a more analytical approach such as to focus on light and color. After visiting the museum, I settled on the theory of memory because it was the most prominent theme displayed in the museum. Considering that the main attractions that draw the audience in are not the unique artifacts, I concluded to focus on how the museum built its main attraction which was the

construction of an immersive narrative space. Finally, I started setting the museum into its broader social context.

Structure

In the first chapter, I established the EU's connection with cosmopolitanism to foreground that the EU is more than an international cooperation and to underline the importance of deconstructing the EU's attempt to construct a cosmopolitan community. Here the leading sub-question is what the connection between the EU and cosmopolitanism is.

The second chapter, on the other hand, focusses primarily on the deconstruction of the narrative created in the museum. The deconstruction of the narrative is, on the one hand, to understand how the museum and the EU are imagining European identity and, on the other hand, how they are translating that to visitors. Here the leading sub-question is how is HEH's exhibition constructed?

The last chapter critically discusses the results of the first two chapters to point out possible pitfalls of the museum by wanting to materialize European identity.

Chapter 1: The European Union and Cosmopolitanism

In the introduction, I described how this paper investigates how a museum can be instrumentalized to support the construction of the cosmopolitan community that the EU envisions. The first questions that might arise are: how is the relationship between cosmopolitanism and the EU to be conceptualized? Would it not be more natural to describe the EU as international cooperation in a globalizing world? To a certain extent, such a description is true. The EU was initially established to ensure peace among European states who had been involved in devastating wars. The intention was to “embed the practice of peaceful international co-existence in European affairs” (Roche 554). This intention further developed into an economical project by establishing a single market and introducing a European currency in 1999. However, the Union is a unique project which is not just concerned with ensuring peace, like the United Nations. The EU believes that Europeans share similar values and that there is something like a European identity. This belief is underlined in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). It seeks to reinforce “the European identity and its independence in order to promote peace, security and progress in Europe and in the world” (Treaty on European Union Preamble). Believing in a common identity and supporting it to ensure the aforementioned ideals go beyond a simple international cooperation.

The EU might be more than a simple international cooperation. However, this point does not necessarily imply that the EU is intending to become a cosmopolitan community. Therefore, the first question still remains; what is the connection between the EU and cosmopolitanism? Firstly, in a more general sense, the term cosmopolitanism means that the individual abandons the individual state and instead becomes a ‘citizen of the world’ (Roche 552). When following the cosmopolitan order, one does not deny cultural diversity and differences but rather affirms that other communities also need to be treated with equal

respect and dignity (Held 155). This concept is reaffirmed in the slogan of the EU: ‘Unity in Diversity’. This implies that there are (cultural) differences among European countries. These differences can be overcome by generating unity among the Member States. Moreover, the feeling of being a ‘citizen of the world’ is enabled by the open border policy and the single market. A European citizen is able to freely move in the European space – there is no need to own a travel passport, and one is able to work and study anywhere. Roche describes these connections between European member states as ‘hubs’ and ‘links’. Hubs are European cities and population centers. Links are elements that connect these hubs such as road, rail, and air transport which enable human interaction and mobility (557). These infrastructural connections are a literal translation of Held’s interpretation of cosmopolitanism in which borders are important but do not break the linking connections between hubs. Thus, the EU can be seen as a cosmopolitan project in which identification with others can be established through public spheres and public communication (Stevenson 49).

However, the cosmopolitan project has some flaws. In the Treaty of Maastricht, the EU states that “the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law [...] are common to the Member States” (Treaty on European Union Article 2). This assumption rests on the belief that these values have developed in European history. Rocher highlights the aspect that this European inheritance has developed through the Graeco-Roman civilization, Christian religious culture, and the culture of Enlightenment (555). The supposed European inheritance is a westernized narrative and dismisses the cultural diversity among the Member States. Moreover, the twenty-first century is marked by the financial crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis of 2015, and the Corona crisis. These events have led to a revival of nationalism, as can be seen by the fact that many right-winged parties have gained a lot of power in recent years. Take, for instance, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) or the Euro-sceptic Marine Le Pen’s chance at French presidency in 2022. These setbacks have shown that to invest only in a legal and an economic framework is not enough

to build a “post-national community” (Stevens 48). The main reason that the EU could emerge, was not because of common values among the Member States. It was because the twentieth century was marked by devastating events such as the World Wars and the Cold War which have shaken the foundation of nationalism. The Union was able to emerge from these events to restore democracy, security, and the protection of human rights (Stevenson 47). This time allowed the development of the ideal to create “post-national forms of solidarity and security” (Stevens 48).

However, it cannot be expected that Europeans feel solidary to other Europeans just because they have the opportunity to freely cross borders and have the same currency because “[a] European identity cannot be assumed but needs to be politically invented” (Stevenson 50). Thus, the European integration process tries to create an awareness and understanding of each nation to strengthen solidarity, develop democratic ideas, and eventually a feeling of belonging to Europe. For example, Creative MEDIA, an EU funding organization, tries to establish transnational collaborations between artists such as filmmakers and musicians. The intention, as foregrounded in MEDIA's policy plan, is to encourage cooperation on a EU level (Culture and Creativity). These collaborations not only strengthens awareness in the artistic community but also encourages cultures to mix. Similar ideas of entering the public sphere can be seen in other projects that encourage cross-cultural cooperations, such HEH which started as a cross-cultural collaboration in which academics from different European countries collaborated.

In 2007, the idea of a European museum was launched by Hans-Gert Pöttering, the former president of the European Parliament, with the words:

I would like to suggest the founding of a ‘House of European History’. It should [be] 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’ for the European

identity to go on being shaped by present and future citizens of the European Union.

(qtd. in Huistra et al. 129)

After appointing a committee of experts consisting of nine historians and museum experts from all over Europe - such as Ronald de Leeuw, a former General Director of the Rijksmuseum and the Polish historian Włodzimierz Borodziej— the committee presented their *Conceptual Basis* in 2008 (Huistra et al. 130). The *Conceptual Basis* is the first draft in which the committee describes in detail how they want to present European history. The *Basis* received a lot of criticism on various points. On the one hand, critics pointed out that they feel that their region was underrepresented and that their nation should receive more attention (Huistra et al. 134). Another major point of criticism was that the initial estimated budget was overdrawn and had been almost doubled (Huistra et al. 134). With these major points of criticism, the committee needed to reevaluate its focal points, resulting in an updated concept in 2013 and Pöttering sharing his new objectives in 2014. These events showed that there has been a gradual shift to new principles. These new objectives were to foster a common historical consciousness that was grounded in the European ideals; human rights, democracy, liberty, legality, and solidarity (Settle 408). With the opening of the museum in 2017, HEH announced that their mission would be to “enhance [the] understanding of European history in all its complexity, to encourage the exchange of ideas and to question assumptions” (HEH Questions and Answers About the Project). They decided to focus on processes and phenomena that have shaped present-day history (Kesteloot 2). Even though Pöttering declared in his inaugural address that it will be a locus for the European identity, the museum counters this. The museum explains that they view the term ‘European identity’ as too reductionist and too static and that it would only hinder a many-voiced discussion (HEH Questions and Answers About the Project). Moreover, they would like to initiate and stimulate the public discussion of European memory and consciousness (HEH Questions and Answers About the Project). In short, the museum justifies its importance by explaining that it

offers a place for future generations to look back at how and why the Union has developed.

HEH underlines that especially in moments of crisis it is important to sharpen consciousness

of cultural heritage and to not take cooperations of peace, such as the Union, for granted

(HEH Questions and Answers About the Project).

Chapter 2: Deconstructing The House of European History's Narrative

The House of European History not only underlines its symbolic meaning in its Mission Statement but also underlines the symbolic meaning of the museum through its location. Geographically, the museum is not located in the heart of the continent Europe nor at the heart of the Union (which would, geographically, be Germany or the Czech Republic), instead, it is Brussels, Belgium. Brussels is seen as the headquarters of the EU because all major institutions of the Union are located there. Thus, Brussels is de facto the capital of Europe. Moreover, Brussels can be seen as a cosmopolitan city when considering that it is a metropolis and even is its own autonomous region in Belgium². Brussels is bilingual with Dutch (Flemish) and French as the official languages. Moreover, the museum is located in the heart of the Union's headquarters in the Leopold Park. The park can be perceived as memorization of European knowledge because it hosts several buildings that are associated with knowledge such as the former Solvay Library, the former Solvay School of Commerce, the former Institute of Physiology, and the museum itself which used to be the Eastman Dental Clinic. Outside the park, in close proximity, is the Museum of Natural Sciences, the Wiertz Museum (a fine arts museum), and lastly the Parliamentarium (See Image 1). Thus, it can be presumed that the location of the museum was not incidental but is loaded with meanings that are closely interwoven with the ideal of European integration. The geographical location highlights the closeness between the museum and the EU as an institution. Besides, the location of the museum gives it a certain authenticity that it is 'approved' by the EU, further underlined by the European Parliament's financing of the project.

² Flanders and Wallonia are the other two autonomous regions. They are less cosmopolitan because Flanders is the Flemish region and Wallonia is primarily French-speaking.

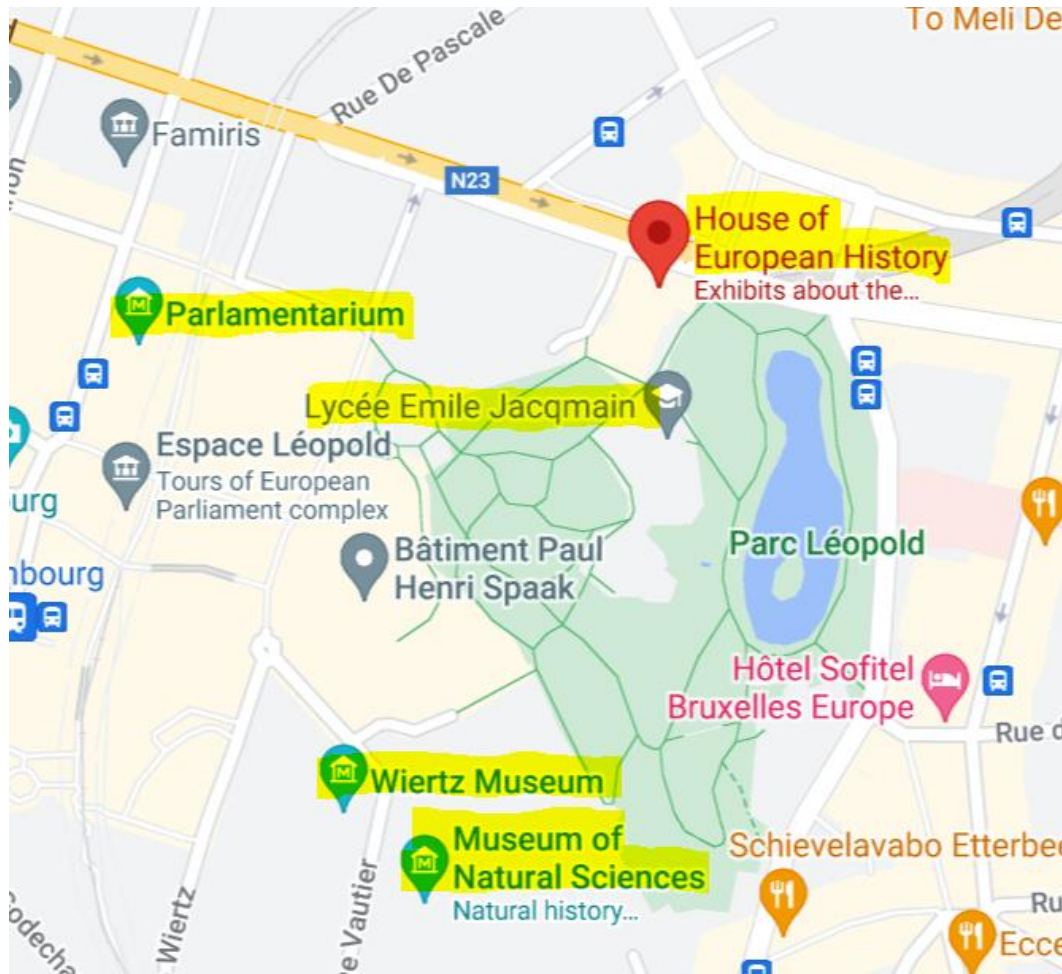


Image 1: Map showing location of House of European Museum. Google Maps,

<https://www.google.com/maps>. Accessed 27 May 2022.

The section above shows how the geographical location of the museum is already an important element that shapes the European narrative. The following sections give a more detailed account of how the actual construction of the exhibition space imagines European identity and shapes Europe as a cosmopolitan community. HEH decided to focus on creating a common memory among the European population because “what binds Europe together and what divides it is, quintessentially, shared memory” (Muschg qtd. in Kesteloot 2). This common memory was introduced in 2017 in the permanent exhibition, existing out of 4 000 square meters across five levels, including the following six exhibitions:

1. Shaping Europe
2. Europe: A Global Power
3. Europe in Ruins
4. Rebuilding a Divided Country
5. Shattering Certainties
6. Europe Now

Each of these exhibitions represents a stepping stone to the unification of the EU and growing connections among the Member States. It frames the idea of Europe in a context; this context includes questions of how to map Europe, “where does Europe begin and where does it end” (HEH Shaping Europe), as one example. HEH also reestablishes the founding myth of Europe by dedicating a whole section on ‘The Myth of Europa’ in which HEH recounts the abduction of Europa by Zeus (HEH Shaping Europe). It continues to reflect on the memory of the First World War, Second World War, and the Cold War. HEH focuses, here, on the effect of these wars on Europe’s population in its entirety by using photos and video material of destruction which cannot be identified as country specific (See Image 2). Finally, the permanent exhibition ends with a reflection on current issues in the EU such as climate change, the Brexit, and colonial heritage.



Image 2: Münninghoff, Melanie. “Total War”. 19 March. 2022. Author’s personal collection.

The biggest issue HEH is facing is how to form a common narrative wherein the focus is not on the separation of winners and losers of the World Wars. This separation would only disrupt the aim of creating peace among these countries. As a result of the World Wars, the Iron Curtain was created – a political and socio-economic divide between the East and West of Europe. Thus the museum aims for a multidirectional form of representing memory. The idea of multidirectional memory is not to pose one memory over the other, such as in competitive memory (Rothberg 7). Instead of framing certain events such as the Holocaust as something historically unique, Rothberg explains that in multidirectional memory it is seen as something belonging to a wider context of histories of collective violence (9). The potential issue of making a certain historical event unique is that it could create a hierarchy of suffering (ibid.). As a result, the museum’s aim is to avoid the creation of a hierarchy of suffering by

avoiding the framing of national traumas as a unique events and thinking through multidirectional memory. This opens up the possibility to see the relationship between different histories (Rothberg 10). The museum needs to think in these terms when talking about European memory to be able to find similarities among European countries to construct a sense of belonging among the visitors.

The creation of such a nuanced narrative is already a major task, how does one even begin to visualize multidirectional memory? The museum does not own any unique artifacts that visualize European prestige such as a fine arts museum. Instead, HEH works with varying exhibition pieces that carry a symbolic meaning and enhance the visualization of the narrative from the audio guide. Exhibition pieces consist of replicas, photographs and video material, and works of lesser-known artists. As seen in image 3, the exhibition room can be turned into an art installation. Huge photographs cluster the walls and in the middle of the room is a vitrine with a European map, old ballot boxes and copies of ballots. None of these objects have a cultural or economical value but they offer the visitor a visualization of the success of democratization which is further explained by the audio guide. In image 2, instead of photos, video material is used which is played in a loop. The wallpaper looks torn to further visualize the destruction of war. Opposite to the videowall is a vitrine with several objects such as various uniforms, postcards, photos, and posters with propaganda. Again, the objects only carry a symbolic meaning to demonstrate the visitor an exemplary view on life during World War II.



Image 3: Münninghoff, Melanie. "Rise of Democracy". 19 March. 2022. Author's personal collection.

In hindsight, it would also be counterproductive to exhibit major artworks as doing so would reflect the values of the elite and bourgeoisie of Europe, which would make the museum less accessible to Europeans who have little knowledge of art or do not feel a connection to it. On the other hand, doing so would also promote national heritage. Art movements have not been the same all over Europe and the intention of the curators of the exhibition was not to focus on different nations (HEH Questions and Answers). Hence, the artifacts exhibited need a different appeal to draw in the visitors and immerse them. After all, the main intention of the Parliament was to create a space for European identity (Huistra et al. 129). Thus, the museum focusses less on historical details and rather on creating an immersive space that evokes an emotional response in the visitor. This is seen by the use of different light throughout the exhibitions. For example, dimmed light on the first exhibition floor, the use of natural sunlight on the last exhibition floor, or the use of sound effects and

music throughout all the exhibition floors, such as the sound of air planes and bombs dropping (See Image 2). HEH mentions in its vision statement that an important aspect in its development was to create a modern exhibition space that would reflect on the latest museological thinking (HEH Questions and Answers). Whereas they do not delve deeper into the meaning of this, Burnette Stogner argues, in her article, that the modern museum experience is immersive, multi-sensory, and participatory – engaging the visitor in new forms of storytelling techniques and implementing media technologies (189). As the author Frank Rose already explains: “[people] want to be immersed [...] they want to get involved in a story, to carve out a role for themselves, to make it their own” (qtd. in Burnette Stogner 190). This immersiveness of the visitor is the museum's main goal, making the memories and the narrative HEH create the ones of the visitors and, thus, deepen the process of the European integration and strengthen the feeling of belonging to Europe.

To achieve this immersiveness, it is necessary to fully engage the visitor in the narrative in a similar way that authors and filmmakers immerse their audience into their story world (Burnette Stogner 191). As John Falk et al. have shown in their research, the elevation of emotional arousal has a positive effect on cognition and memory (Burnette Stogner 191). Considering the museum is heavily reliant on the immersion of visitors, it can be assumed that HEH cannot rely on older forms of museum curation but needs to make use of new technologies. The approach that HEH took can be identified as ‘narrative immersion’. Narrative immersion uses stories to contextualize objects and guide visitors through a narrative space (Burnette Stogner 192). To ensure this immersion, every visitor receives a tablet with headphones at the entrance to the first exhibition level. This tablet does not involve any extra costs. The staff approach the visitor with it so it is impossible to miss. The tablet works with a GPS locator and its main function is that of an audio guide; as soon as the visitors enter a new exhibition space the audio guide automatically turns on and starts with an introduction to the exhibition space - it does so smoothly without delay. These aspects help to

maintain the visitor's interest and help to fully engage the visitor in the narrative, and thus, have a greater impact on the visitors' emotional engagement with the narrative presented. Further, the tablet not only functions as a guide but also as a map of the exhibition space (See Image 4). Additionally, it contains information about the artifacts. This function allows the visitor to engage with each object in their own time without actually needing to stand next to the object itself. Being able to access this information in the visitors own language, time, and order gives the visitor a sense of agency. This illusion of agency helps to make this narrative one's own narrative.



Image 4: Münninghoff, Melanie. Photograph of Tablet and its Map. 19 March. 2022.

Author's personal collection.

However, the sense of agency is nothing more than an illusion because the tablet also limits the visitor. The high surveillance (e.g. the GPS tracker, the staff that gives you a tablet) hinders the visitor mapping their visit because that would disrupt the concept of the audio guide and the immersiveness of the narrative. Further, the headphones and tablet, which help to

immerse the visitor, make the idea of HEH to stimulate a discussion no more than an lofty ideal. The practical setup of the exhibition and the technology involved underline that the vision of HEH and the actual implementation do not necessarily coincide. For one, as mentioned above, the headphones separate visitors from one another. Then there is a general lack of benches and the benches that are offered are usually more hidden and uninviting to converse with others. The immersiveness also clashes at some points with the setup of exhibitions. For example, in the exhibition 'Europe: A Global Power', is a glass and steel construction which resembles the crystal palace (1851) (See Image 5). The crystal palace held the 'Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations' that presented the different nation's newest technologies and scientific advances. The copy of HEH, plays with this reference and displays on the lefthand side, technological and scientific advances of the nineteenth century. On the righthand side, HEH displays imperialism in its different forms and explains that "colonies provided the raw materials and luxury commodities to meet rising consumer demand" (HEH Europe: A Global Power). The intention is to foreground the simultaneity of these phenomena by presenting them side by side. However, the visitor cannot adopt such a view; the narration of the audio guide makes their connection implicit: the audio guide does not refer to both sides at the same time but treats them as two separate entities. This separation disrupts the sense of simultaneity that the exhibition sought to create.



Image 5: Münninghoff, Melanie. Photograph of “Notions of Progress and Superiority”. 19

March 2022. Author’s personal collection.

The clash between HEH’s vision and the actual implementation of the exhibition design leads to question, what kind of narrative the museum wishes to tell the visitor. The key is, as mentioned above, multidirectional memory. The museum tries to avoid to contest the memories of the different nations. On the first two floors, the museum curators try to connect more common memories, thus focusing strongly on the nineteenth century spirit of revolutions and the changing of political order, and also focusing on common concepts that are assumed to be known by all Europeans such as Capitalism, Democracy, and Humanism (HEH Shaping Europe). However, the presentation of multidirectional memory only comes into play with the introduction of the Second World War on the third floor. Instead of blaming

one specific nation for the war, they set Totalitarianism and Democracy as contesting political ideals. This way HEH tries to depict the different memories of the Second World War such as National Socialism, Stalinism, and the rise of Democracy. This theme is continued on the same level when the curators present the causes of war and the extent of the war's destruction. This way the focus is taken away from separating the different nations into defeated and victorious countries and instead focuses on the common people who were affected by the war. The trauma of war is the only memory that connects all the countries without the creation of a hierarchy of suffering. The climax of presenting the pain of war is the last part of this exhibition. It is set in complete darkness and shows the number of people that died during the war as the only source of light (See Image 6). It does not refer to who died, it does not refer to how many people died in each nation but solely focuses on the number of the dead itself. However, it is questionable if this variant is actually more sensitive. Turning people into numbers for the sake of creating a cosmopolitan memory disregards the pain and memory of the individuals involved. Regardless of this highly questionable choice of representation, it is a memory that many Europeans needed to suffer through; the loss of a loved one due to the destruction of war and how to come to terms with trauma and loss on such a scale (HEH Europe in Ruins). From the fourth until the fifth floor, the museum tries to represent the memory of western and eastern Europe and the political divide between Capitalism (the west bloc) and Socialism (the east bloc). Reaffirming the multidirectional approach of the museum, the exhibitions try to show both experiences at the same time in an unbiased way without proclaiming one political ideal as superior. Instead, HEH phrased it this way: "the Western and Eastern blocs were determined to present their particular model of society as being superior" (HEH Rebuilding a Divided Continent). To phrase it in this particular way creates a certain distance and gives a sense of the divide being a thing of past. In this way, HEH also

showcase the socio-economic differences between the blocs and how the Shoah is being remembered.



Image 6: Münninghoff, Melanie. Photograph of “The Harvest of Destruction”. 19 March,

2022. Author’s personal collection.

Nevertheless, one should be careful in assuming that the museum tries to be completely unbiased in presenting the diverse war and after-war period. The creation of multidirectional memory is an important building block in the creation of a cosmopolitan community; becoming aware of the diverse memories of other European nations and seeing that one memory might not be as unique as one thinks – thus becoming equal or moreover treating one another equal (Held 155). As mentioned in the first chapter, the EU, however, also tries to form a European identity. This can be seen in this museum again. The divide in Europe is not very promising for the creation of a union and a common narrative even if one tries to find similarities. Instead, the museum creates the image of the EU as the bringer of

peace, democracy, and the force that brings Europe into a union. This message is not explicitly foregrounded but the symbolic narrative of the construction of the exhibition brings this message forth. This can be especially seen on the fourth floor 'Rebuilding a Divided Country'. When the visitor is entering this part of the exhibition they can see on their left and right side a grey wall that resembles an iron wall. Each wall represents either the west or the east bloc, which leads to conclude that these walls are a reference to the Cold War where the divide was also referred as the Iron Curtain. In the middle, are square-shaped vitrines that represent the EU and its Milestones. This symbolism is supported by the fact that each vitrine is colored in the European flag, they are also a lot brighter and seem more welcoming than the Iron Walls. This specific positioning of the milestones connotes to the visitor that the EU was a bringer of light in the cold and grey times. This idea of European Integration as milestones is continued until the end of the exhibition on the fifth floor 'Milestones of European Integration'. Noticeable is that there is a general discrepancy between HEH's vision and the reality of the visitors experience in the exhibition space. HEH envisions to create a space of discussion, instead they have created an immersive narrative space which does not allow an interruption for discussions between visitors. HEH tries to include some criticism in the history of Europe, however, the design layout of the exhibitions undermines the criticism (for example by the use of light). Moreover, even though the museum curators proclaim in their Mission Statement that they are academically independent they re-create the narrative of the EU.

Chapter 3: Discussion

The academic discourse surrounding the HEH has mainly discussed problematic elements of the exhibition itself, such as the absence of gender in the narrative as discussed by Ann Ighe or to analyze the exhibition through a postcolonial lens as discussed by Astrid van Weyenberg and Elizabeth Buettner. However, for me, the question is why does the EU even need a museum that discusses European History or to be more precise European memory. Over the last two chapters, I touched upon this; does the EU need to strengthen its presence in the public mindset? This means to strengthen a cosmopolitan feeling in which the European population does not start to close their borders but is aware of the other Member States and to strengthen the feeling of solidarity to ensure peace, democracy, and human rights. The road that the institution has taken is seen in HEH which aims to ‘reflect’ on European memory.

Here I put the word ‘reflect’ in quotation marks because the core of wanting to present memory in a museum should be viewed critically. Questioning the intention and the actors involved in such a project is important because memory is the “outcome of a series of ongoing intellectual and political negotiations; it is never a unitary collective mental act” (Müller 21). The museum is the result of the negotiations of a small group of historians, museologists, and politicians. This small scale discussion is further underlined considering that only academics voiced their opinion towards the *Conceptual Basis*. Thus, it is already questionable if this exhibition can be really representative of ‘the European memory’. Though it is hard to consider a realizable alternative, the point is that the core idea of the museum should be seen as a step to strengthen the political agenda and make foreign policymaking easier instead of seeing the memory presented as a representation of lived experience. Memory has played an important role in political matters before (Müller 10). In January 2007, the EU had its fifth major enlargement project in which Romania and Bulgaria became EU Member States. This enlargement project has yielded anxiety among the older

Member States as it did in the previous enlargement project in 2004 (Drew & Sriskandarajah 2007). In both enlargement projects Eastern European countries became Member States and both times the older Member States were most worried about the impact of the movement of people – being overwhelmed by workers that move from poor (new) to rich (old) Member States (Drew & Sriskandarajah 2007). In the same year Hans-Peter Pöttering also shared his idea about the necessity of a European museum. This overlap of events can be merely seen as a coincidence – history and memory have been centralized before when either ‘national identity’ seems to be in question or when they lose their salience (Müller 15; 18). Even though, HEH states that the academics involved in the museum are academically independent of the Parliament it is hard to fully trust this statement when also considering HEH’s geographical location.

But even if we assume that the academics involved in the project were academically independent, it is still undeniable that the presentation of memory in this museum is closely connected to the EU’s agenda. The museum tried to be forward-thinking in its ideas by trying to be critical in many aspects. For example by posing questions rather than statements, such as: “Can we say we say that we have a shared European past when history has affected people differently? Can we find any commonality – a reservoir of European memory?” (HEH Shaping Europe). These questions are not answered straight away but the EU bias comes fourth in the following exhibitions which give the answers away – yes, there is shared history and yes there is commonality. Other aspects of the museum are that HEH tries to avoid contesting memories and presents memories in a multidirectional way, and the use of modern museum technology. In their attempt, they tried to create a space that invites for discussion. However, this attempt is not quite successful due to the immersive narrative. The immersiveness of the narrative which encapsulates the visitor into their own world, utilizing the tablet and the headphones, decreases the visitors' ability to engage with other visitors in a discussion. The 'Track you Story' device, on the last floor, is the only space which offers a

space for the visitors to share their personal story. The main intention is to let the individual visitor share where they were born, where their favorite music or sports team is from, or what place they call home - this information will be then transferred into an interactive map together with all the other stories to visualize the connections between the countries. This is the first and only moment in which it is about the lived experience of an individual. Here the individual memory has its place in a very abstract form which only consists of a concept and a location of the individual's personal interpretation of that concept. However, here the individual memory is marshalled to support the EU's cosmopolitan idea that 'we'³ are connected beyond 'our' borders. On another note, HEH also tries to avoid focusing on specific nations to allude to the cosmopolitan idea that Europeans are a community that surpasses national borders. For the museum to highlight commonalities between people, the exhibitions need to become as vague as possible so that the narrative formed reaches a broad range of people. Not only does the exhibition need to be vague but European memory in general to make people feel connected to the narrative. However, the risk is that minority narratives get ignored or washed over, which can be seen in Ighe's and van Weyenberg's thorough analysis of the exhibition. A multidirectional memory approach has also its limitations in a museum space. The museum might have covered the East/ West conflict but did not touch upon the influence of, for example, the Islam on Europe. Thus, the execution might be well thought through but the core idea of the museum is based on instrumentalizing a cultural institution for European identity politics (Huistra et al. 135) .

³ 'We' and 'our' has been used here deliberately because it is not clear through that device to whom specifically this map is targeted because the dots can be placed anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the House of European History helps to shape the EU as a cosmopolitan community - a community that is connected beyond the border of a nation-state. HEH is creating a sense of belonging by avoiding thematizing specific states and their specific role in, for example, the wars. Instead, the exhibition tries to find a common ground in the shared memories of the European population. These include the revolutionary spirit in the nineteenth century and the two war experiences in the twentieth century. Further, HEH focuses on presenting the founding of the EU as milestones that brought Europe together and divided the Iron Curtain. Despite the dividing narrative after the Second World War, the museum takes on a multidirectional approach to avoid contesting memories and placing one political and socio-economic structure over the other. Nevertheless, one should be careful by assuming that the museum is a neutral space that objectively displays European history. The museum is not as academically independent as it proclaims on its website. For one, it is impossible to show history objectively – there are too many different viewpoints on history which is underlined in view of the exclusion of certain narratives such as the Islamic influence on Christian Europe. The permanent exhibition does not give a unique or inspiring viewpoint on European history or identity but rather materializes the narrative that the EU sees as European inheritance which has developed through the Graeco-Roman civilization, Christian religious culture, and the culture of Enlightenment. Thus, the museum is a representation of the EU's values which are democracy, solidarity, and human rights. Whereas these values are not inherently bad, the presentation of them just further underpins the political influence of the Parliament. The political influence is further connoted by HEH's geographical location which is in the heart of the Parliament's institutions. It connotes the political involvement of the project which underlines that the Union's president initiated and financed the project. Another aspect, that needs to be viewed critically is the proclaimed room for discussion which is eradicated by the immersive narrative which diminishes open discussions on the exhibition

space itself and limits visitors' discussion to the sixth floor with the 'Track your Story' devise. Lastly, the immersive narrative which is established not only by the automatic audio guide but also by sound effects, music, and the intensive use of light and color has an elevating effect on the visitors' emotional arousal and helps to strengthen the visitors' feeling of identifying with the EU. Thus, the museum needs to be rather seen as an instrument for the Union's identity politics.

The concept of cosmopolitanism helps to understand why the Union would invest in identity politics and in financing such a project. Not only does the rise of nationalism leads to more Eurosceptics but also a potential threat to the existence of the Union. To keep the Union stable the Parliament is determined to go beyond legal and economic cooperations and enter the public mindset. An international cooperation would only work together in the interest of ones own country, however, a cosmopolitan community accepts that its own states matter but not only and exclusively. To achieve the stabilization, the Union needs to make sure that the European population can identify not only with their own state but also with Europe. Materializing a narrative in a museum is one way to build upon this because memory and history are commonly used when an identity is being questioned due to their power to create a social framework in which people can organize their own history. However, how progressive is the EU when wanting to use typical nation-state building techniques and grounding themselves on old founding myths and past memories? Is memory really the right approach when it tends to signify resistance to a new utopia of globalization? (Müller 15)?

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