MCC
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A MUSEUMS' RENAISSANCE

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IN DEFENCE OF A TRADITIONAL ROLE

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1. Introduction

The traditional museum is in crisis. The ancient Greek idea about the museum (*mouseion*), as a place of study and a seat of the muses has been superseded by the turn towards the "activist museum", mobilised to achieve social change or reinforce a political vision of society.

The new "museum definition" ratified by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2022 declares that the purpose of museums is to "foster diversity and sustainability". This definition ratifies the shift in the mission of museums from professional expertise to the promotion of contemporary ethical values such as human dignity, social justice, and equal access to culture and to education.

Critics within the professional community have questioned this shift. Nevertheless, the sceptical majority eventually bowed to the doctrine of a vocal minority. As a result, the collection and knowledge-centred approach of museums has been replaced by one underpinned by ethical and social concerns. This development raises some fundamental questions:

- What is the problem with the transformation of the museum's encyclopaedic, Western civilisation and nation-centred vision?
- Should we be sceptical about the politicisation of museums and their new mission to transform society?
- How do those of us who support the traditional role of the museum respond to recent changes and innovations?

This report aims to address these questions. To do this, I will outline the main ideas, events and contexts that led to the disintegration of the traditional museum from the 1970s onwards. Then I will narrow the problem down to three related areas:

- The emergence of the activist museum in the old and new EU member states
- The misuses of digital technologies in museums
- The overarching agendas shaping European museums: democratisation, integration, and decolonisation

The ambition of this report is therefore to stake out a measured defence of the traditional role of the museum as a place where the legacy of the past can be encountered and understood.

It is a sign of the serious degradation of the museum that this very modest idea of what museums are about would be considered effectively heretical within the professional realm of museums and museum criticism today. Nonetheless, for those of us who believe that our societies can only find clarity about what we are by faithfully understanding where we have come from, it is an essential undertaking.

2. The Cultural Politics of Anti-Elitism

In their historical development from antiquity to the present, museums have been fundamentally concerned with presenting the highest (elite) achievements of the human mind and intellect, thus providing a view of progress and demonstrating confidence in human civilisation. This confidence in intellectual, technological, social, or political progress suffered a severe setback after the devastation of two World Wars and the Holocaust. European museums have had to rethink their work in devastated and divided societies. All in all, museums have witnessed the collapse of the ethical and intellectual framework of the Greco-Judeo-Christian civilisation from which they emerged.

2.1. The politicisation of the museum

The social critique of the "elitist" tradition of cultural institutions began as early as the 1970s. This paradigm shift was motivated by the recognition of systemic inequalities in Western societies, which led to the emergence of such anti-traditionalist academic disciplines as Critical theory, Cultural studies, and Postcolonial studies. These academic trends have had a major impact on the methodologies and ethical guidelines of museology.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital, which set off an avalanche in Cultural Theory and had a huge impact on how museums would contribute to civilisation, culture, and knowledge.[1] Bourdieu stated that the ability to make aesthetic judgements (to participate in cultural life) is not a "natural" human quality, but a consequence of class-based educational and economic status. This implied that cultural institutions were a key place where Western values were reproduced. Moreover, these values were labelled as colonial, elitist, or marginalising broad segments of society. The logical next step was to challenge the authority of cultural institutions to make value judgements about what is good or bad. This led to the proliferation of various forms of community art and "visitor-centred" or "participatory" models.

By the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain, this process was already firmly entrenched in the cultural spheres of Western Europe. But post-communist East and Central Europe still retained a more "traditional" perception of culture. This presented a problem to the programme of critical and postcolonial theory. The response was to translate the jargon of these disciplines into general terms and adapt it to the "unreformed" post-communist regions.

> **"Museums have witnessed the collapse of the ethical and intellectual framework of the Greco-Judeo-Christian civilisation from which they emerged."**

The central concept used in these efforts was the idea of "democratisation", introduced to the European cultural sector from the 1990s. The democratisation doctrine was essentially a projection of liberal values onto societies that had been "Sovietised" and shielded from Western influence for decades. The key pillars of democratisation were the inclusion of minorities and the acceptance of "otherness" or "difference". That many of the societies of post-communist Europe had little tradition of "inclusion" of sexual or racial minorities was seen as no obstacle to these efforts.

The "cultural conquest" of the East-Central European countries – seen as part and parcel of their accession to the EU – could not have been achieved without the involvement of the cultural and educational sectors. Museums, as part of the so-called GLAM institutions (galleries, libraries, archives, museums), have become important actors in linking these two sectors and have been given a strategic role in implementing the EU's policies for social change. As a result, museums gradually began to shift the focus of their professional expertise from shaping social memory to strengthening civil society.

2.2. History from below

This conceptual shift inspired a new vision of a museum, conceptualised by E. Gurian as a "safe space for unsafe ideas"[2]. This seemingly neutral but inherently anti-establishment approach to museums has two major downsides. First, by drawing museums into politics, it compromises the traditional authority of the museum which lies in its

attempt to present an objective view. Second, it focuses unilaterally on audiences drawn from a perceived social or cultural margin. This politicisation of museums differed from previous encounters between the museum and political power: if previous confrontations came from "above" (such as kings, rulers, etc.), this confrontation was made in the name of those "below" such as marginalised communities; although demands rarely came from minorities themselves but from so-called civil society groups who claimed to speak in their name.

Consequently, museums were no longer meant to be vehicles for *Bildung* (cultivation and erudition) in matters of the national past and general knowledge, but became institutions for the re-education of broader society. The new social contract between political power and museums led to the emergence of activist museums, which no longer statically reflect the dominant culture and power relations but are actively engaged in social change.

"Across Western societies, traditional expertise, judgement, and authority have been called into question. Museums have served as a vehicle for the broader transformation of society."

Examples of such national or transnational activist museums include the House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany (1994), the Jewish Museum Berlin (2001), the House of Terror in Budapest (2002), the Museum of World War II in Gdansk (2017), the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews (2014), or the House of European History in Brussels (2017). From city museums to art museums to science museums – all have adopted the activist and social engineering model.

2.3. From history to memory

In addition to the expectations to engage museums more actively in social change, the 1990s brought another critical challenge to the work of museums: the shift from "history" – the dominant, authoritative narrative of the past – to "memory" – the subjective, grassroots narrative. This conceptual shift was rooted in the so-called "memory boom" of the 1990s, triggered by simultaneous efforts to come to terms with the past of two European totalitarian regimes, Nazism and Communism.

It was this shift of attention from history to memory that gave rise to academic disciplines such as "history from below" or "public history". The memory boom attempted to produce "bottom up" history, celebrating "the power of the powerless", (an axiom that can be traced back to Czech playwright and political dissident Václav Havel[3]). Hidden, contested, tabooed, and personal historical memories thus began to compete with established, mainstream historical accounts. One important consequence of this change was to cast a large part of the population in the role of victims ("the powerless"), instead of active subjects or protagonists of history.

Of course, such trends are not restricted to museums: across Western societies, traditional expertise, judgement, and authority have been called into question. Museums have served as a vehicle for the broader transformation of society – rather than raising human aspirations by reminding us of the achievements of the past, they impose a uniform narrative of identity politics in terms of race, class, and gender.

2.4. Crisis point of the museum

For many, the culmination of these trends has raised problems that have become impossible to ignore. The corruption of the traditional idea of the museum has resulted in museums denying their own *raison d´être*. Museums now seem to serve no distinctive purpose separate to galleries, theatres, universities, and other cultural institutions. All now serve the agenda of "democratisation" and identity politics. Some are prepared to speak out – witness the critical response to ICOM's new proposed definition for museums in 2019-2022.[4] But many do not let their voices be heard, often intimated by a loud minority.

A critique of the transformation of museums should not begin with museums as such. Instead, we should look at the overarching ideological agendas of political power. In our case, we should take a hard look at the political and ideological agenda of the EU, perpetuated through its networks and funding. The irony is that the more scholars sought to unmask "power" in the museum context, the less the real sources of power were interrogated: the systems of professional networks, academic training

programmes, PhDs, postdoctoral fellowships, funding regimes, grants and the like. While we were preoccupied with the colonial, Nazi or communist misappropriations of memory and museums, we ignored the authoritarian endeavours of current EU institutions attempting to shape and control our professional practice and ethos.

“We can no longer ignore that the pursuit of often admirable goals has resulted in the corruption of the museum and its replacement with politicised re-education.”

Many critics of the politicisation of museums find ourselves in a strange position. We sincerely believed in a self-reflective intellectual and cultural unification of Europe after the fall of the Iron curtain. We enthusiastically assisted at the birth of auxiliary scholarly disciplines such as history from below or public history. We understood the need for breaking historical taboos and opening the sealed drawers containing facts and explanations about our life under the polarised East and West during the Cold War. And we were all mesmerised by the opportunities promised by digitalisation of cultural heritage. But we can no longer ignore the end to which these often-admirable goals were put: the corruption of the museum and its replacement with politicised re-education.

The link between museums and political power is real. Since the end of the Second World War, the state and politics have patronised museums in both Western and Eastern Europe. From the 1960s onwards, however, a third branch of power, “civil society”, began to emerge with the ambition to represent “the voiceless”. In analysing the instrumentalisation of museums for political purposes, we must therefore consider not only the institutions of political power, but also the growing influence of the unelected civil sector.

So, what needs to be done? It is not enough simply to criticise the multiple museum projects arising from the EU’s diverse agendas of social integration, inclusion, and denationalisation of European societies. We need to highlight the broader causes and operating mechanisms that deprive museum work of professional autonomy and use museums for political ends. There is also a need to discuss the pitfalls of enabling activist museums and to set limits to museums’ social engagement.

3. The Problems with Relevance and Participation

Two problematic terms need to be clarified: relevance and participation. Of course, museums have always been a mirror not only of cultural norms and identities, but also of progress, innovation, and political ideas. So, why is it problematic that they increasingly seek to ensure audiences "participate" in museums around "relevant" issues?

Relevance has become a buzzword in contemporary cultural and education policies and a driving force behind museums' mission statements and activities. Creating "relevance" has become a fundamental goal at all levels of cultural work: in policy strategies, mission statements, project creation, exhibition design and individual learning.[5] Even those who question the "relevance" agenda of museums, such as critic Graham Black, only resist the relevance agenda because what is relevant now might not be "relevant" for the future.[6]

The increased focus on the present and the future, and consequently on "relevance", weakens the ability of museums to become a place for constructive engagement about society. Museums' professional expertise lies not in divining the future, as Black claims, but in their ability to take a long-term historical view. Of course, museums cannot avoid addressing issues currently in the public sphere – in part because they are subject to market conditions and funding requirements. But if there really must be a contribution made by museums to "relevant" debates, they should at least respect their distinctive, historical role.

The question is therefore not *whether* but *how* to engage with current trends in relevance in the museum context, and how to open things deemed relevant for museum audiences to views other than those of the progressive current.

"Participation" is another problematic term. The idea of public participation in curatorial practice can be traced back to the social critique of elitist museums in the 1970s, and in the 1980s became a slogan of the New Museology movement, which called for the democratisation of the social and political role of museums. Participation can mean everything from simple hands-on tasks assigned to the public, such as transcribing texts or tagging objects, to more complex collaborative tasks, such as involving the public in interpreting historical displays, researching collections, or designing exhibitions.

> **"The increased focus on 'relevance' weakens the ability of museums to become a place for constructive engagement about society."**

Certainly, empowering visitors to take a stand on issues of culture, history, or science strengthens museums' visibility in society and can increase their appeal to a range of visitors. But on closer inspection, the idea of a "mutually engaged relationship" or "shared authority" between museum and audience rests on shaky ground.

First, the participatory model calls into question the authority of museum staff and the museum itself. If the audiences, as educated as they might be, are expected to be a part of the curation or interpretation of displays, this can lead to gaps or contradictions – calling into question the truthfulness of the museum's central narrative.

Second, participation poses a broader challenge to museums as places of shared understanding. When participatory museums invite, us, the public, to reshape and reinterpret their collections, they inevitably raise the question of who "we" are. Such questions can often prompt a fruitful exchange. But in the museum context, "participation" explicitly seeks out groups "outside" the established culture – who are invited to shape society's cultural standards. This immediately challenges the idea of any kind of cultural, national, or religious similarity in favour of a focus on difference, diversity, and otherness.

Whilst this is successful in fostering a small "cultural vanguard" with oppositional attitudes – united by oppression, racism, discrimination,

anti-Semitism, or simply a self-distinction from majority society – it is uniquely unsuited to fostering any kind of community consensus. In fact, the social mainstream sees such "vanguard" attitudes as directly contradictory to ideas of national or community consensus and belonging.

Participatory practices are now an integral part of museum work and are gradually becoming better underpinned by their own methodological and theoretical apparatus. Rather than rejecting them wholesale, therefore, we need to critique their disputable aspects: the anti-elitist and anti-establishment content of these practices and their scepticism towards traditional collection and research-oriented museum work.

4. The Mission-Driven Museum

It is hard to disagree that the idea of the "activist museum" has become the dominant model for museums in the 21st Century. A tentative definition:

> *The activist museum is concerned with the political activity of social change. Museums are entrusted the task of changing certain patterns of social thought and values and motivating the public to actively participate in bringing about these changes.*

The activist museum sprouted within the New Museology movement of the 1990s, yet it only became a leading paradigm of museum practice in the last decade. Theorists of activist museums see museums primarily as important intellectual and civic resources for addressing inequalities, injustices, and environmental challenges.[7] This mission necessarily involves political engagement and judgemental participation in contentious public issues, which runs counter to the traditional ethos of communicating universal values. Although in theory activist museums can be politically left or right, liberal, or conservative, transnational, or national – left-liberal, progressive values dominate.

Post-communist Europe has its own "activist" museums, although these are understood differently than in the West – they "correct" the recent historical experience as it was distorted by communism, rather than seeking to transform society as such. We will, however, include them in the category of activist museums for the purposes of a comparative assessment – even if many of their mission statements would strike Western-style activists as heretical.

An important point to emphasise is that museum activism is implemented differently in the West and in former Eastern bloc countries. National history was viewed with suspicion under communism and was roughly associated with bourgeois nationalism (read: middle-class historical consciousness). Communism wanted people of different ethnic, racial, and national origins to believe that they all belonged to one community through the creation of universal cultures and values. Museums in the former Eastern Bloc were used, to varying degrees, as tools to promote the official vision of society. Against this background, it is understandable that for the first decade after the political turnaround of 1989, museums were primarily concerned, first, with eradicating the Marxist-Leninist cultural-historical perspective in their exhibitions and, second, with restoring national historical narratives.

> **"It was ironic that the goals of museum activism in the West were not so different from those of former Marxist-Leninist cultural policy."**

The way East-Central European museums dealt with national history in the post-communist era involved a strange balance between recovering the previously tabooed national past and engaging with the anti-national impulses of the Western New Museology. It was ironic that the goals of museum activism in the West were not so different from those of former Marxist-Leninist cultural policy. The only difference was that while the latter sought the creation of an international popular culture, the former promoted the formation of globally intertwined multicultural societies.

5. The Emergence of the Activist Museum

Since the turn of the millennium, there have been a growing number of museum projects initiated by incumbent governments that seek to impose their own political memory agenda. Consequently, these museum projects reflect society, culture, and history along explicit ideological fault lines that adhere to either a left-liberal or a national-conservative worldview.

To examine how activism is reflected in museum practice on both sides of the former Iron Curtain, in today's old and new EU member states, we will trace the relationship between different major Historical Museum projects that emerged between 1990 and 2017: The House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn (1994), the Jewish Museum of Berlin (2001), the House of Terror in Budapest (2002,) the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews (2014), the World War II Museum in Gdańsk (2017), and the House of European History in Brussels (2017). What they all have in common is that they are political projects with social engineering goals; what distinguishes them is their basic attitude towards the utopia of a post-national Europe.

5.1. The House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany

One early explicitly political museum project dates back to German reunification in 1989/1990, which is seen as paving the way for European integration and the founding of the European Union. Because of its responsibility in World War II and for the Holocaust, Germany was the driving force in the critical examination of the national past in post-war Europe. It played a key role in the creation of a restorative culture of memory, which gave rise to the "House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany".

"The House of History is a prototype of museums that integrate activism and social engineering goals into their mission."

The "House of History" was opened in Bonn in 1994, on the initiative of Chancellor Helmuth Kohl, who played a leading role in the process of German reunification. The denomination "House" rather than a "Museum" is a deliberate choice: it places the institution's social transformative purpose above traditional museum functions.

The "House of History" in Bonn tells the story of the Federal Republic from 1945 to the present, creating a narrative about the construction of the post-war German democratic tradition, admittedly only in relation to West Germany. The "House of History" is a prototype of museums that integrate activism and social engineering goals into their mission. The core task of this institution was to shape an ideal type of German citizen permeated with humanism, who would rise like a phoenix from the turbulent national past. The most striking political element of the exhibition concept was probably the black-and-white juxtaposition of the FRG and the GDR, which underscored the axiom of the democratic West and the non-democratic East.

The permanent exhibition was redesigned in 2001 with a focus on reunification and updated again in 2017. In setting the parameters of a democratic society in a German and, fundamentally, a European context, the House of History also takes a stand on issues such as globalisation, migration, digitisation, and terrorism. It has become one of the most popular museums in Germany, with around 850,000 visitors per year, and has enormous influence on the formation of values in current public issues.

5.2. Jewish Museum of Berlin

Coming to terms with Germany's responsibility for World War II provided the impetus for a kindred political museum concept that grew out of the national trauma of the Holocaust and the therapeutic need for collective catharsis. In 2001, Germany opened its national Jewish Museum in Berlin, offering a counterpoint to the elevated national self-image created by the "House of History." Several Jewish museums have been founded or reopened in post-war Germany; however, the Jewish Museum Berlin is by no means a conventional museum. It rather follows the social engineering patterns of the "House of History" by providing a narrative framework for critical engagement with Germany's recent

past, for almost as many visitors per year as its counterpart in Bonn.

The curious thing is how these politically highly sensitive museums take a stand on divisive issues, with or against the prevailing opinion.

"Activism in museums can paradoxically create situations where museums, under political pressure, subject themselves to censorship."

At the Jewish Museum Berlin, this dilemma came to the fore in 2019, when then museum director Peter Schäfer was accused of sympathising with the boycott movement against Israel in an exhibition on Jerusalem as a multicultural city. Schäfer was asked to resign at the intervention of the Central Council of Jews in Germany and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The episode is important for the discussion about the politically engaged role of museums, i.e., just how "safe" museums are for "unsafe ideas".

The official position of the Association of European Jewish Museums (a Jewish pendant to ICOM) is particularly interesting in this context:

> *"It is of great importance in today's world that museums in general and Jewish museums remain independent institutions. Museums should be "safe places for unsafe ideas" and should not fall victim to the expectations that different audiences, organisations, or governments may have of their performance. Their exhibitions, programming and management may be criticised by society at large, but should not be interfered with. Museum leaders should be accountable only to their respective governing bodies".* [8]

The AEJM's statement is double-edged: the activist museum itself invites political debate, whereas the limits of free expression are quite opaquely defined. As Alec Coles put it in his reflections on museums and freedom of expression, museums shall be open for different and sometimes opposing views. At the same time, of particular importance is the museum's own position – the stance it takes in a debate and the extent to which it encourages or constrains the views and voices of others.[9] As the scandal of the Jewish Museum in Berlin illustrates, activism in museums can paradoxically create situations where museums, under political pressure, subject themselves to censorship. The public, on the other hand, has a much wider ambition for debate and discussion.

5.3. House of Terror Museum in Budapest

There are alternative examples of the activist political museum from the national conservative camp. There is a fundamental difference between the way in which national histories are being reassessed in Western Europe and in Eastern and Central Europe. Western European history museums sought to create a single post- or supra-national identity. These museum concepts are in some respects in line with Fukuyama's famous "End of History" thesis, which sees history as an evolutionary process with the ultimate stage being the governance of a post-national liberal democracy.

For Eastern and Central Europeans, however, the latest judgement of history (that it had ended) was an involuntary reminder of the previous judgement of history (the supposed "victory of the world proletariat"). As a result, museums in post-socialist societies sought to move beyond this framework and attempted to deal with their own history without imposed ideological frameworks.

The first significant activist museum to promote the revision of a national history in a post-communist country was the House of Terror Museum in Budapest. Opened in 2002, the museum was strongly supported by the first national conservative FIDESZ (Hungarian Civic Alliance) government. It is housed in an infamous building that was the headquarters of Hungary's far-right Arrow Cross Party during World War II and of the Communist State Security Service between 1945 and 1956.

The museum displays exhibitions about the atrocities and traumatic consequences for Hungarian society of two totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the fascist and the communist. It also serves as a memorial to the victims of these regimes, including those who were imprisoned, interrogated, tortured, or killed in the building. Since 2011, the museum has been a member of the Platform of the European Memory and Conscience, an EU-sponsored supranational body of

government institutions and NGOs dedicated to the crimes of the communist dictatorships. This membership positions the museum on an international level and takes the wind out of the sails of those who accuse it of being a simple product of FIDESZ's political ambitions.

Since its opening, the House of Terror has been subject to harsh criticism. Critics of the museum claim that its exhibitions portray Hungary too much as a victim of foreign occupiers and do not sufficiently acknowledge the contribution that Hungarians themselves made to the regimes. It has also been criticised because its exhibitions devote much more space to the communist than to the fascist terror regime. Finally, the critical voices accused the museum of excessive use of emotional multimedia, said to cognitively overburden visitors.

The real reason for the attacks on the museum's historical concept, however, is that it represents a conservative, sovereignty-focused, and nationally oriented anti-communism as promulgated by the conservative FIDESZ since the 1990s – rather than the liberal, European, supranational anti-communism that is the preferred version of European elites today. The other reason that the museum's national memory activism is a thorn in the side of Hungarian left-liberals is that the conservative camp in Hungary sees the post-communist left, consisting of the liberal and socialist opposition, as the heir of communism.[10]

The House of Terror Museum thus embodies the “corrective” memory activism of post-communist countries, aiming to confront tabooed periods of their national history, rather than conform to a denationalised European memory.

5.4. Museum of World War II in Gdansk

Aside from Hungary, Poland is one of the other Central and Eastern European countries that consistently opposes the hegemonic "vision of a united Europe".[11] Perhaps the most striking Polish example of corrective memory activism that (similarly to the House of Terror Museum) pits left-wing and right-wing constituencies against each other, is the Museum of World War II in Gdansk.

Although the museum was founded in 2008, it took almost a decade before its exhibitions were opened to the public. The delay can be partly explained by the fact that after the conservative Law and Justice Party came to power in 2015, the original exhibition concept was changed. While the first concept presented the Polish trauma of World War II from the implicit point of view of universal human suffering, the new concept takes a more patriotic stance, highlighting among others, the sacrificial role of Catholic priests during the war and the role of Polish citizens in saving the Jews.

> **“The supranational, European stance is considered democratic *per se*, but national perspectives are attacked as barbaric and propagandistic”**

From the very beginning, the national-conservative revision of the first exhibition concept was fiercely attacked both at home and abroad. The peak of the resistance to the conservative redesign of the exhibition was an open letter signed by 500 academics, in which they described the changes to the museum concept as “barbaric” and part of an attempt to turn the museum into a “propaganda” institution.[12]

This reaction, akin to the politically motivated reaction against the House of Terror Museum in Budapest, shows how the criteria for "right" and "wrong" politicisation of museums have been established since 1989. While the supranational, European stance is considered democratic *per se*, national historical perspectives are attacked as “barbaric” and “propagandistic”, or at best parochial and manipulative.

The effort to discredit and fundamentally delegitimise conservative interpretations of national history can be further promoted through the establishment of "counter-museums" that, with the appropriate expertise and political backing, set themselves up as the correct model for interpreting a historical event, era, or controversy.

An example of such a "counter-museum" that fights conservative views of history is the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

The Emergence of the Activist Museum

The cornerstone for the museum was laid in 2007, but its permanent exhibition only opened to the public in 2014. The museum is the result of a major political history initiative supported by actors from a broad ideological spectrum, including the Polish Ministry of Culture and Cultural Heritage, the Warsaw City Council, and private sponsors, especially from the United States. Located on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto, the museum's multimedia exhibition shows the thousand-year history of Polish Jews up to the Second World War.

The openly politicising credo of this museum/history house was developed deliberately in response to the conservative Law and Justice Party gaining a majority in government since 2015. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Canadian folklorist and chief curator of the museum, argues for the democratising role of museums in strengthening civil society, especially, as she postulates, in the context of the rise of populism and the strengthening of illiberal and autocratic regimes in Eastern and Central Europe.[13] Such a radical policy unavoidably involves a permanent conflict with a country's democratically elected government, which is rightly reluctant to be considered autocratic.

The ideological conflict around the museum escalated in 2019 after its then director, Darius Stola, publicly criticised the amendment to the Institute of National Remembrance Act, which criminalised public statements about the Polish nation's guilt in the Holocaust. Under pressure from the Polish Ministry of Culture, Stola was eventually forced to resign as punishment for the museum's "very aggressive political engagement", a clear reference to the left-liberal value orientation of its international academic community and sponsors.

In response, several private donors from the United States suspended their financial support. "We lost Stola, who was the best ambassador of the Polish-Jewish dialogue in the world. However, the museum remains independent" [from the Polish government, ed.], declared Piotr Wiślicki, head of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, one of the founding organisations of the museum. The situation was gradually resolved after several meetings between the museum's state and private sponsors: "We met with the culture minister, representatives of the City of Warsaw and the Jewish NGO, and we feel optimistic that the matter will be resolved in a manner acceptable to the global Jewish community", said one of the museum's main sponsors, an American businessman of Polish Jewish origin.[14]

> **"The openly politicising credo of this museum was developed deliberately in response to the conservative Law and Justice Party."**

This statement is a striking example of disrespect for the arm's length principle, which guarantees that museums can pursue their professional objectives independently of both governments and sponsors. It confirms that the Polin Museum finds itself at the crossroads of conflicting historical views and political interests. It also illustrates that the parties involved in the conflict use the museum as a tool to secure their own hegemony over Polish-Jewish memories of the Holocaust.

5.5. House of European History (HEH) in Brussels

In the front rank of activist museums tasked with promoting social or even political change stands the House of European History (HEH) in Brussels, opened in 2017. The HEH embodies the political museum activism that emerged in the post-1989 era. It is the first House of History to include political advocacy as a stated part of its mission. The idea of creating a museum of European history was launched by Hans-Gert Pöttering, a German jurist, historian, and conservative politician (CDU, European People's Party), who was President of the European Parliament 2007-2009. Like the House of History in Bonn, the HEH also stands implicitly for Germany's flagship role in the recreation of the ideal of European humanism, an ideal that Germany itself was responsible for destroying in the Second World War.

The HEH's historical narrative is the result of a compromise reached over 10 years, through the cooperation of museum experts and various political stakeholders around Europe. The permanent exhibition was intended to be based on three fundamental elements: the memory of European history, the history of European integration (until Brexit) and its impact on the formation of a putative European identity.[15]

The Emergence of the Activist Museum

HEH's first exhibition concept sought to present Europe as a progressive success story, and to shape a unified European history out of the fragmented and often contradictory narratives of the 27 member states. After the EU's eastern enlargement in 2004, however, Polish MPs questioned the HEH's efforts to present a unified European narrative. Above all, they questioned the consensus among Western European elites about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. They were also keen to treat the experience of Stalinism on an equal footing with Nazism, and thus to better integrate Eastern European suffering into pan-European discourses. This effort has been attacked by some of the founders of HEH as the "Eastern Europeanisation of history policy" – an attempt by Eurosceptics to downplay the narrative of European integration.[16]

> **"The HEH embodies the political museum activism that emerged in the post-1989 era. It is the first House of History to include political advocacy as a stated part of its mission."**

The corrective memory activism of the post-communist countries inevitably collided with the consensus-oriented memory activism of the West within the HEH history concept. To cite Mária Schmidt, the director of the House of Terror Museum in Budapest:

> *"For almost half a century, the intellectual and media elites of Western European countries were not only indulgent but all too often supportive of the operators of totalitarian communist dictatorships. The fate of tens of millions of Central and Eastern European citizens who suffered the horrors of communist dictatorships barely touched them."* [17]

Moreover, as Schmidt notes, they have always communicated with Eastern Europe from a podium, as they have always done with their colonies.

6. East vs West: Contested European memories

To reframe the question of European integration, the House of European History is currently engaged in a debate on extending its concept of Europe to the former European overseas colonies, and to highlight their significance for contemporary European societies. Some suspect that the intention is to use Europe's imperial past and the legacy of colonialism to justify the EU's current migration policies. It is symptomatic in this regard that the HEH interactive guide explicitly links the impact of colonisation with European integration, claiming that "Europe has been shaped by successive waves of migration, the languages, beliefs and cultures of migrants" and that "Europe today is therefore multicultural and diverse”.[18]

As Sebastian Conrad aptly points out, the memory of the colonial era has always been a means to an end.[19] The HEH’s enlarged vision of post-national European integration goes hand-in-hand with repaying the moral debt of colonisation. One stumbling block remains the difference between countries with a colonial imperialist past, such as Great Britain, France, the Benelux countries, or Germany, compared with East-Central Europe where there is no such past.

Germany, the driving force of the European integration project, is at the forefront of addressing its colonial past. The colonial past was also used as an ideological tool in both German states as early as the 1960s and 1970s. In the GDR, it was exploited primarily as a means of distancing itself from Western imperialism; in the Federal Republic, the issue was taken up by the left as a critique of capitalism and of neo-imperialism.

The globalising or cosmopolitanising approaches to colonial remembrance began in Germany from the 1990s onwards, when a growing part of its population had a migrant background, so that for many the conventional national history was no longer the self-evident point of reference[20]. This post-national approach to colonisation equally fits within the multicultural realm of the United Kingdom, France, or the Benelux countries and is also consistent with the HEH’s vision of European integration.

The debate on this issue has nevertheless had to be conducted in the broader context of Germany’s National Socialist past and the Third Reich's expansion to the East during World War II. Fitting Eastern and Central European countries into the HEH's combined narrative of decolonisation and European integration will be a complex challenge. These countries have neither colonial experience nor any intention of adopting the model of Western multiculturalism, in part because they themselves have centuries of experience with pre-existing “multiculturalism”.

> **“The vision of post-national European integration goes hand-in-hand with repaying the moral debt of colonisation.”**

The various attempts of the HEH to create a consensual “vision of a united Europe” encounter conflicts or contradictions and led to a result that Frank Füredi, MCC Brussels’ executive director, calls a "museum of the lowest common denominator".[21] Viewed as a laboratory of museum activism, the HEH clearly demonstrates the paradox of how fervent critiques of cultural hegemony have inadvertently created a counter-ideology that in fact reinforces a more subtle, and therefore more difficult to manage, kind of cultural domination.

Of course, the war for cultural hegemony is as old as mankind. However, as Michael Savage argues, this is no excuse for making museums a tool for creating a right-thinking, progressive citizenry. Savage furthermore poses the rhetorical question: do we want left-wing museums and separate right-wing museums, or museums competing between radical and conservative curators? And he rightly concludes that, in this case, we risk losing sight of the inspiring genius of museums, and it would be arguably tragic if we lost our sense of wonder because of the culture wars.[22]

The dilemma is acute because museum activism is gradually becoming a norm. The metamorphosis of the traditional museum idea has taken on such Kafkaesque proportions that, in principle, no radical transformation can be expected: the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa is, as it were, complete.

But the task for critics of this shift like ourselves is not to grumpily yearn for a dead and buried culture. Thus, when addressing the problem of activist museums, the problem lies not primarily in the fact that they are partisan or politically biased - these accusations can easily be levelled at any museum when it engages with a controversial theme. Nor is the problem of museum activism that it promotes utopia, humanist ideals, reform, innovation, and social change – only that they have made these goals their whole *raison d'être*. The main argument against museum activism should be rather that they have ceased to be reliable sources of free intellectual inquiry and engagement – and thus, as Savage put it, of wonder.

7. The Misuse of Digital Technologies

The implementation of digital technologies in museums (AR-, VR-, AI-technologies, apps, inter-active, gamified navigation technologies, etc.) goes hand in hand with the politically endorsed goals of accessibility, audience-centricity, and the so-called democratising endeavours.

The digital turn has also taken place in education, with museums playing a key role in mobilising their collections and expertise to promote an education in line with the zeitgeist, one that is creative, critical, inclusive, and integrated. Museums today are expected not only to be places of learning, but also to transform themselves into popular educational institutions – ones that serve the goals of inclusion and accessibility.

This reminds us of the socialist goal of the "de-elitisation" of museums, with the motto "museums serve the people". But the coupling of political goals with digital means could allow the contemporary form of indoctrination to proceed on an even wider scale: digital space allows museums to reach a potentially unlimited audience beyond the physical space of the museum. The dangers of digital technologies coupled with the democratisation agenda have been outlined by critic Jenny Kidd, who notes that such processes are presented as value neutral but often loaded with ethical and political agendas.[23]

7.1. The Case of the Anne Frank House

The manifest misuse of digital technologies in museums directly undermines museums' own professional standards and practices. In the case of the renovated Anne Frank House (AFH) in Amsterdam, the "added contexts" partly contradict the museum's own mission and subject matter.

The AFH raises the somewhat daunting dilemma of digital heritage (a collective term for digitised books, works of art, historical and scientific monuments), which was given a separate legal personality by UNESCO in 2003.[24] As a consequence, digital and digitised heritage cannot be seen as a copy of the original, but rather as an interpretation or second life. In discussing digital cultural heritage and digital technologies in museums, we will reflect on the side and long-term effects of the digital revolution in cultural and memory institutions and start from the thesis according to which "we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us".[25] In other words, new technological tools can trigger social and intellectual transformations, and may also embed political changes that happen faster than we can control.

But back to the Anne Frank House. "The AFH is a museum with a story", reads the museum's self-declaration. Visitors can experience this "story" through "quotes, photos, videos and original objects", as well as digital and VR elements.[26]

> **"Digital technologies are often presented as neutral, but are in fact deeply loaded with political and ethical agendas."**

The museum consists of the main building and an annex, the upper floors of which were used to hide eight family members during the persecution of the Jews between 1942 and 1944. The AFH was opened as a museum in 1960, but the annex was deliberately left empty during various renovations of the museum, the most recent of which took place between 2017 and 2018.

Since its opening, the museum has supported a wide range of educational activities, now covering more than 70 countries, and developed its own educational tools. During the recent renovation, the permanent exhibits were significantly enhanced with interactive digital and virtual devises, allowing visitors to explore the museum through its website without visiting the physical spaces. The technical upgrade was necessary because space in the museum building was limited and could not handle the growing influx of visitors. Since the museum has no authentic inventory and can only provide an on-site framework but no on-site content, the missing interior equipment had to be visualised through digital technology, with the former inhabitants being visualised through VR.

The museum has a second life through its website, offering knowledge not only about the museum, but also about educational programmes and activities. It also includes a storytelling environment. The aim is to bring the story of Anne Frank and the Second

World War to life through “digital, immersive storytelling”. The key part of this is the ability for visitors to “explore” the house and secret annex as they were at the time. Film clips show what was happening and what daily life was like for the Frank family, other hiding people, and helpers in the secret annex. Eventually, the website, which attracts 4.5 million users a year, includes not only digital lessons about Anne Frank, but also interactive online learning materials about anti-Semitism, discrimination, and racism in general.

The digital refurbishment of AFH raises two fundamental issues. Firstly, the ethical implications of the second life of objects and persons as digital avatars, endowed with qualities they did not originally possess; and secondly, the targeted ideological indoctrination of visitors through digital means, according to a progressive, liberal worldview.

It is not an easy task for the AFH to address its own subject. Since the revival of Holocaust remembrance that began with the Auschwitz trials in 1960, Anne Frank has become not only a moral role model, but in some ways her own brand. Thanks to decades-long activist remembrance politics, she is now seen by many young people as an icon of the struggle for freedom, alongside Che Guevara or Nelson Mandela. This proliferation of paradigms leads to provocative contradictions as it uses Anne Frank's name to address conflicts and concerns that have nothing to do with her life story (from the Palestinian conflict to the refugee crisis, LGBTQ rights, and Islamophobia).

Paradoxically, the AFH follows the tendency to universalise the Holocaust and deprive it of its distinguishing Jewish character. This makes Anne Frank an ever-changing *vox humana* in space and time, a voice that is being used to speak out for a wide range of causes, even those that are hostile to Jews and deny the Holocaust![27]

Although the museum's digital education offerings are geared toward the multicultural Netherlands, its online programmes are aimed at millions of visitors and can be adopted by other museums around the world.

The concern here is not restricted to public understanding of the Holocaust. Instead, what deserves attention is the pseudo-didactic use of digital technology in museums. Not only can this technology be misleading, overly emotional, or even manipulative, but it even has the potential to cause profound shifts in our idea of memory. As Richard Hoskins points out, museums like AFH are engaged in a project of transforming individual and collective memory (which ought to be rooted in specific experiences and a specific history), into a transnational, transhuman, borderless digital memory. Not only does this remove memory from its specific context, but it also generates a false belief in the permanent accessibility and reproducibility of the past.[28]

> **“Anne Frank has become not only a moral role model, but in some ways her own brand. The museum uses her name to address conflicts that have nothing to do with her life, from the Palestinian conflict to LGBTQ rights.”**

This problem could stimulate discussions about how current ICOM codes of ethics – last revised in 2004 – and standard museum methodology can be adapted to better respond to the power of digital technology and prevent it from taking over museum issues. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution and each museum will have to find its own way to keep the digital challenger at bay, the return of museums’ focus on their collections could be a first step in preventing the intrusion of foreign content into their sphere of competence.

8. The Dangers of Integration and Decolonisation

Integration and decolonisation are the overarching agendas responsible for the increased politicisation of museums, orienting them toward progressive values. Three cases illustrate, from different perspectives, the same problem of transforming museums to promote broader social goals.

The first case reveals how academic networks sponsored by private foundations capitalise on technological innovations to engage museums in a progressive agenda of social change and to stigmatise the conservative worldview as populist and anti-democratic. The second case illustrates the similar problem of linking museum projects to social engineering aims, only this time through the EU's funding structure for research and innovation. The third case illustrates how restorative justice in the context of museums' colonial legacy is being aligned with secondary ends, such as promoting integration and social cohesion in postcolonial Western societies.

8.1. Case One: The role of private foundations and dangers of digitalisation

The project entitled "Challenge of Populist Memory Politics for Europe: Towards Effective Responses to Militant Legislation on the Past" (CHAPTER) aims through ethnographic research and digital innovation, "to develop approaches and best practices to help museums combat the growing influence of populist discourses in Europe".[29] The project enables a collaboration between researchers in Berlin, Tübingen, London, and Krakow and museums in their respective countries. It is supported by Germany's largest private non-profit organisation for the promotion and support of academic research, the Volkswagen Foundation, with 1.2 million euros for the period 2020-2026.[30]

Briefly, the project sees one of the greatest challenges to democratic public discourse in contemporary European societies in the emergence of so-called "post-truths", especially on the internet, that challenge established norms and facts. It recognises that museums are increasingly confronted with post-truths, whether about culture, history, society, politics, or environmental developments. By drawing on anthropological perspectives on emotions, it explores how museums can respond to, reflect on, and critically confront populist claims.

In collaboration with the Viennese software development company, Fluxguide, the project-team is also developing a museum app for young visitors that will help them evaluate and interpret "populist views" of history and encourage "critical engagement" of young visitors in the process of "truth-finding". Available for free download from the App Store, it has the potential to make a considerable impact. It is worth noting that the Volkswagen Foundation primarily supports scientific innovations and not cultural projects.

> **"The app is designed not just to educate the young public, but replace their personal understanding with the 'correct' interpretation."**

The app itself is designed to be used before, during and after a visit to a museum by school classes. It prides itself on being "holistic", "collaborative" and "dialogic". Students use the guides in teams and complete the quiz/learning tour. Upon completion of the tour, students receive a certificate, which Fluxguide labels as a "community sharing opportunity". Finally, teachers receive aggregated, "benchmarked" results and a team ranking, with detailed results per team.

Fluxguide has two shared aims with the app. One is to monitor, analyse and evaluate the use of the app in order to gain a broader critical understanding of the potential of digital media in the museum. The other, more grandiose, ambition is to combine ethnographic research and digital innovation to develop best practices that support museums and other cultural institutions in challenging populist debates and promoting "democratic" public discourse in Europe.

This app is designed not just to educate the young public, but also to intervene directly into their personal judgement, attempting to replace their personal understanding with the "correct" interpretation. Such an ambition is

part and parcel of the “post-truth” debate, where authorities claim to protect democratic discourse by designating (dismissing) some interpretations as “post-truth”.

When reading the project description, red warning lights should go on in every reader. CHAPTER is an open declaration of war against the professional autonomy of museums and the dignity and intellectual integrity of museum visitors. The project draws a distinction between truth and post-truth and claims at the same time the right to determine the criteria of truth. Unsurprisingly, Poland was included in the project to serve as a litmus test for a presumed “populist post-truth society”.

These sweeping judgements violate any reasonable standard of museum or scholarly ethics.

The exorcist zeal of the project, which seeks to drive populism from the minds of visitors because it sees it as the greatest threat to democracies, implies open hostility to those deemed to hold “post truth” ideas, whether these are conservative family models, a different understanding of minority rights, environmental issues, etc. The very fact that Poland was included in the project's focus group reveals its rationale. While national conservatism has been basically outlawed in Europe, Poland is one of the last EU countries where the traditional social model is still being upheld. The effort of the CHAPTER project to standardise what is “right” and “wrong” through memory politics is reminiscent of the former communist appropriation of museums in the name of the people, party, or world proletariat. Given the project’s international outreach, interdisciplinary academic structures, and its alliance with a commercial enterprise seeking to profit from the project's results, it sets a precedent and should be viewed with serious concern.

8.2. Case Two: Social engineering through EU grant-making

The project entitled: "Participatory Memory Practices: Concepts, Strategies and Media Infrastructures for the Vision of a Socially Inclusive Potential Future of European Societies through Culture (POEM)", was funded by the European Commission under the HORIZON 2020 programme’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Grant Agreement, with 4.5 million euros for four years (2018-22).

Behind the long and incoherent title lies an even more verbose statement of purpose, according to which the project aims "to acknowledge difficult and dissonant traditions and challenge public memory in terms of the representation of colonial traditions and immigration, multiculturalism and transnational history, non-Christian religious heritage in European societies, female heritage, or the inclusion of disadvantaged groups”.

This project was initiated by the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin, which invited five universities from Denmark, Germany, Cyprus, UK, and Sweden, and one NGO from the UK, to participate. It was coordinated by the Institute of European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg.

> **“The POEM project, underpinned by 4.5 million euros of EU taxpayer money, is a maze of de-constructivism and Dadaism.”**

Reading the POEM project’s description, one involuntarily becomes nostalgic for the rabid ideological zeal of the Fluxguide project. As nakedly political as it was, there was at least a stated and intelligible purpose that could be supported or contested. Instead, the POEM project, underpinned by 4.5 million euros of EU taxpayer money, is a maze of de-constructivism and Dadaism:

> *“The project investigates how an inclusive memory culture embraced by all members of society can be shaped in times, when [...] contemporary nationalist movements and Islamist radicalisation across European societies place particular relevance on social and cultural inclusion”. The project aims “to establish inclusive memory politics for envisioning possible futures of how we should remember our past in Europe”.*

POEM aims to train experts in the field of cultural heritage to promote socially inclusive memory practices in times of social and political crisis. Compared to the CHAPTER project, which merely identified populism as the greatest threat to democracy, POEM goes further and refers to “nationalist movements” in Europe by linking them to Islamist radicalisation. While CHAPTER wishes merely to banish populist post-truth paradigms

of remembering, POEM sights a vision of how "we" in Europe "should" remember the past.

“It is a quintessential EU grant-winner project: using museums as a tool to pursue a political purpose. It has little if anything to do with the needs of museums.”

While the paragraph cited above can be understood as the overarching vision of the project, it is followed by a purpose statement – here in an abbreviated version:

> *“Participatory memory work (PMW) is a framework for examining the strategies and practices of public memory institutions – libraries, archives, and museums – as well as of individuals and groups in their everyday life. PMW, means the inclusion of diverse memories across social situations (gender, socio-economic status, education, migration, etc.) into public memory work. [...] A component of the project is against this background an Innovative Training Network for 13 young researchers from Europe, Canada, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Vietnam so that they can later become mediators in fields concerned with cultural heritage”.* [31]

The project website indicates two preliminary outcomes.

The first is the “Why (not) participate” game. According to the project website:

> *“The main purpose of the game is to help practitioners rethink participatory work through exploring insights into the potential obstacles and motivations for participants. The game can help practitioners improve participatory work; users can learn from their own and each other’s experiences to consider needs and irritations that may arise when participating in a cultural project…”*

Translated into English, this “game” is supposed to help activists detect the subconscious reasons why people might be hesitant about becoming involved in heritage projects. Not only does this word-salad have questionable academic or practical value but seen against the project cost, it becomes hard to comprehend.

The second outcome is an Open Access Publication titled “*The Aftermath of participation: Outcomes and Consequences of Participatory Work with Forced Migrants in Museums”,* which runs to 272 pages.[32]

This publication explores how participatory museum projects with “forced migrants” (a term which seeks to legitimate mass migration whilst, ironically, also referring to its organised nature) affect both the museum and the participants. The study is based on participatory projects in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK and aims to explore the supposedly restrictive infrastructure of museums, the shortcomings of their ethical frameworks and the problems of treating presumed forced migrants as a “community” (a presumed group with common interests and/or characteristics). Outlining the different aims, experiences and outcomes of the participatory projects, the publication suggests how these could be combined in practice.

Without getting into the politically manipulative nature of the publication’s central ideas, it is worth noting that the other journal articles, book chapters, reports and reviews produced in the framework of the project are exclusively centred around issues of migration and decolonisation. POEM, a quintessential EU-grant winner project, thus uses museums’ participatory practices as a tool to pursue a political purpose. It has little if anything to do with the needs of museums. Even its political purposes are confused – the “non-participation” of migrant groups in cultural heritage projects is to be overturned through greater academic funding!

Underlying the POEM project are the anxieties of multicultural Western societies, which increasingly seek to turn museums into therapeutic institutions that help them understand their own fear of cultural disintegration.

8.3. Case three: Who benefits from decolonisation?

Attempts at the ideological monopolisation of museums mostly revolve around the role and mission of museums in society, while largely ignoring the collections. It is paradoxical that museum collections, the fundamental identity of museums, have returned to the centre of public interest only in the course of the heated debates on the status of the cultural heritage of former Western colonies.

The Dangers of Integration and Decolonisation

Comparably emotional debates have taken place in Eastern and Central Europe over museum collections that originated from confiscated Jewish property during the Second World War - although this process of heritage transfer is now largely completed. The difference, however, is that assets that belonged to Jewish communities that were exterminated in the Holocaust (synagogues, community buildings, artefacts, religious objects, or libraries) remained in the country of origin in most cases, even after restitution to the heirs. Thus, they are not detached from any of their historical contexts and remain part of local collective memory and commemorative traditions – either as a sign of continuity or as a void and memento.

The restitution of colonial cultural assets to their communities of origin, on the other hand, poses Western cultural memory a double-edged dilemma: regardless of whether they remain in Western public collections or are reintegrated into their contexts of origin, they inevitably lose some of their historicity and representative value. Colonial artefacts thus evade firm definitions of belonging. In a figurative sense, they are like the restless wooden splinter "Odradek" in Franz Kafka's story "The Cares of a Family Man": a phenomenon which has lost its original shape and purpose and can be described most closely as "a broken remnant of an earlier Entire." [33]

Colonial cultural heritage in Western museums and galleries can be discussed in two different contexts: first, when the restitution and repatriation of cultural assets is negotiated between the Western cultural institution that holds them and the source community or institution in the former colony reclaiming them; second, when intermediary actors enter the process of restitution and repatriation of colonial cultural property with their own, not necessarily culture-specific goals.

The first context specifically concerns museum collections. Major cultural institutions that hold colonial collections, such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Brussels, the Tropical Museum in Amsterdam, or the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, to name a few, approach decolonisation according to their own acquisition history and are at different stages of its implementation. Nonetheless, all these institutions have the same trump card, when negotiating about their colonial assets, namely that keeping colonial goods in Western collections has the advantage that these objects can be bwetter cared for and attract many more visitors and experts than the communities of origin from which the artefacts were removed by the colonisers. The downside of this pragmatic approach is that for many, particularly for Western intellectuals, it evokes an undertone of cultural superiority that is uncomfortably reminiscent of the colonial past.

> **"Decisions about decolonisation can lead to self-glorifying acts aimed at covering up unresolved historical guilt."**

An emblematic example of the fatal consequences of a purely apologetic and politically showcased act of colonial artefact transfer relates to the "Benin bronzes" from the collection of the Berlin Ethnographic Museum. The bronzes were looted by British troops in 1897, and while most of them ended up in the possession of the British Museum, some 1,100 of them came to the collections of German museums. The entire German beholding of the collection was returned to Nigeria in the second half of 2022, based on a bilateral museum cooperation. Unfortunately, less than a year after their return, the invaluable artefacts were transferred by presidential decree to the Beninese ruler, Ewuare II's private ownership, and their multi-layered, dramatic history was silenced therewith for present and posterity.[34]

Decisions about decolonisation can thus lead to self-glorifying acts aimed at covering up unresolved historical guilt. As Sumaya Kassim points out on the British colonial legacy:

> *"Decolonisation is more than just representation. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to "diversity", "inclusion" or "decolonity" we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye […]*
>
> *I do not want to see decolonisation become part of Britain's national narrative as a pretty curio with no substance—or worse, for decolonialism to be claimed as yet another great British accomplishment: the railways, two world wars, one World Cup, and decolonisation".* [35]

The Dangers of Integration and Decolonisation

While recognising that the decolonisation of museum collections raises serious ethical concerns for museums, the possibility of empty display cases and interactive exhibitions of returned objects is unlikely. In any case, cultural institutions have a moral duty to tell rather than erase history.[36]

The second context in which the decolonisation of cultural heritage, and especially of museum collections, can be considered, involves stakeholders who are not directly from the world of museums, and who therefore represent broader, external political goals such as restorative justice, common cultural ownership, the integration of immigrant communities into Western societies, or the desire to tackle racism. These institutional stakeholders work in support of each other at the national and European level.

One such powerful stakeholder supporting the repatriation of colonial heritage is the Museums' Association (MA), a professional membership organisation based in London. The MA was founded in 1889 to advocate for museums, set ethical standards, and train professionals. Its declared mission today has become loftier, namely: "inspiring museums to change lives".[37]

> **"We see the instrumentalisation of the past to assuage and control the anxieties of the present."**

The MA sees decolonisation as a long-term process that seeks to recognise the "integral role of empire in museums" – from their creation to the present day. According to MA, decolonisation requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work. For the MA, decolonisation is a central pillar of all museum work. This includes working towards a strategy for anti-racism, addressing contemporary inequalities in museums and campaigning for workforce and governance diversity.

Again, we see the instrumentalisation of the past to assuage the anxieties of the present. Museums are not even striving to understand these anxieties but to control them and, through them, to effect control of society. The MA aims to address contemporary inequalities by using the potential of collections. The MA's vision evokes once more Kafka's Gregor Samsa in the process of transformation into the image of his own inner fears and shame.

As we have seen previously, this process is contested and even confused when it comes to the East-Central European context. In East-Central Europe, the term colonisation is used in museums primarily in connection with the invasion of the region by Nazi Germany or its subsequent Sovietisation. Colonisation also refers to long-term processes of cultural appropriation, such as the settlement of the Saxons in Romania or the Russians in the Baltic countries. It can also refer to the experience of partitions in the region, such as Hungary's post-war partition, formalised through the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Against this specific historical background, the term "occupation" is used instead of "colonisation" in public discourse. Coming to terms with various occupations in this region may also involve the forced transfer of cultural objects and their later retrieval from museum collections for the sake of restitution. But to pretend that this resembles the process of "decolonisation" in Western museums substitutes analytical rigour for easy sloganeering.

When discussing the overarching agendas that shape European museums, be it general progressivism, globalised cultural identities, or decolonisation of cultural heritage as the panacea for European integration, it is important to look at the actors and programmes that create these programmes. Until we succeed in reclaiming the proper role of museums, let us simply apply Émile Zola's strategy at the time of the Dreyfuss affair and express our concerns with the motto: *J'accuse*!

9. A Conservative Manifesto for Museums

The conservative case for museums is not a wish simply to return to the past standards and self-understanding of museums. Visual culture, digital communication and contested museum narratives are permanent realities, with positive contributions and challenges for museum professionals and scholars of memory culture. It is thus crucial that we do not embrace the image of Don Quixote, associated with the conservative worldview.

We need to define clearly what we take to be the fundamental purpose of the museum, on which we can brook no compromise, and what is a matter of legitimate debate and disagreement.

A conservative museum manifesto should be built on the following principles:

- Re-emphasise museum collections as the core identity of museums.
- Bring back text to museum displays. Although the younger public has less experience interacting with longer explanatory labels, museums should not renounce the higher standards of knowledge as compared to social media.
- Avoid wherever possible dragging museums into public debates on scientific, political, or ethical issues.
- Review the EU museum funding system and contest the devolution of power to transnational museum networks. Expose the ideologically biased criteria for funding awards.
- Preserve national frameworks for museum narratives, where relevant.

Conservative defenders of the museum institution's historical integrity should not be intimidated by the mainstream narrative – a narrative which in reality only enjoys the support of elites, activists and researchers; significant groups but a tiny population.

When it comes to defying larger powers, we have plenty of examples to draw on. Hungary, to take but one example, has struggled for its political and cultural sovereignty without allies under the most difficult historical conditions. We should use relevant and valuable historical experience here, but also call for renewed resistance in an *époque* when it seems, as the poet Sándor Petőfi called out after the crackdown on the revolutionary waves of 1848: "Europe is quiet, quiet again".[38]

It must be stressed, however, that we are not seeking a revolution, but a recovery and re-birth. Our cause is not only legitimate, but vital, and we have many friends and allies. This cause represents an exciting intellectual quest, as opposed to a fading, decadent consensus culture that only repeats its own doctrine ad infinitum. If we refuse to live in consensual "safe spaces", we must go straight to the heart of the problem and reclaim and give new meaning to the noble ideals which have inspired the museum across history.

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Katalin is a native of the Hungarian minority of Slovakia. She spent her early years in Prague, where she also witnessed the Velvet Revolution and the break-up of Czechoslovakia. In the mid-1990s, she returned to Slovakia and was one of the founders of the Jewish museums in Bratislava and in Presov. Dr. Deme studied at the Institute of Oriental Languages, Cultures and Civilisations in Paris, where she obtained a Master's degree in Hebrew and Yiddish language and literature. She holds a PhD from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Aarhus, where she became a lecturer in the Department of Central European Studies. Her main research area is the politicisation of Jewish museums, particularly in the context of the transition of Central European societies from state socialism to European integration. In 2022 she was awarded the Gold Cross of the Order of Merit of Hungary for her work in promoting Hungarian history, culture and religious traditions in Denmark.

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2 Elaine Heumann Gurian, Civilizing the Museum: The collected writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian (London, New York, Routledge, 2006).

3 Václav Havel and John Keane, The power of the powerless: Citizens against the State in Central Eastern Europe (Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 1985).

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