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On the Relationship between "European History"

and "European Identity" Using the Example

of the "House of European History" (Brussels)

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Abstract

This article explores the intricate relationship between European history and the formation of European identity, focusing on the House of European History in Brussels as a case study. It delves into how the House of European History portrays historical narratives and symbols to shape a collective European identity, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities in this endeavour. Through analysing exhibitions, narratives, and the museum's role in fostering a sense of belonging and understanding among Europeans, the article sheds light on the complex interplay between history, memory, and identity in the European context.[1]

Keywords

European History, European Identity, House of European History/Brussels, Historical Narratives, Memory

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[1] The abstract was created with ChatGPT 3.5.
[2] https://ku-linz.at/universitaet/aktuelles/detail/architektonische-und-kuratorische-strategien-ueberstaatlicher-repraesentation.

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Content

The "True" Europe

The year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the "Document on The European Identity"[3] at the Copenhagen Summit on 14 December 1973. The document had a predominantly foreign policy objective and is related to the first enlargement of the EC from the six founding states (France, Germany, Italy, BeNeLux) to then nine with the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark.

There was no explicit update of the document, but the principle that the community has an identity, which can be defined not least by the way it conducts its international relations, still applies.

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[3] For the text see: https://www.cvce.eu/de/obj/declaration_on_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-en-02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32.html. See also my article "Europa und Europäische Identität. Die Geschichte einer Idee": 10.25365/phaidra.473.

From the beginning, symbols were sought that would visualise unity and identity or make them audible. The usual national symbols such as flag, anthem, Europe Day, etc. served as models. This approach was not very imaginative, but it is partly explained by the fact that the question was discussed whether Europe was on its way to becoming a *nation*. This is still not very likely, but the EU has a legal identity that plays a significant role both internally and externally, and is admittedly most easily expressed using the same symbolism that states use for themselves.

The Europe meant in the first two decades of European integration was that of the six founding states of the ECSC or EEC. In a certain sense, the claim was made that these six states represented the real, the true Europe, whose doors were open to the Scandinavian countries, the Iberian peninsula (then the scene of two dictatorships, with Portugal also still an active colonial power), Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This must be understood as at least an indirect statement of identity. The 'true Europe' was partly explicitly partly subtextually the Europe of the 18th century Enlightenment, with somewhat one-sided references to the origins of democracy, freedom and generally human rights in the Enlightenment. The horizon was usually broadened to include the Renaissance and humanism; for many, Christianity was also considered *the* foundation of Europe.

Critically, one could judge that it was a very selective, basically embellished interpretation of history, which was admittedly explained by its positioning as a counter-design to the Europe of the World Wars, the Genocides and the dictatorships that persisted or were newly established after 1945. Humanism and the Enlightenment were the main consensual elements of European history.

Since then, historical images have become more differentiated; on the other hand, a quasi-official narrative of integration has developed that is once again highly simplified, because its regular use in public speech does not work without simplifications.

The "House of European History"[4]

The paths of the positive integration narrative and the paths of critical history and cultural studies have constantly crossed, but there has long been a lack of an institutional structure, a place, a site where European history was put up for discussion for the public of citizens.[5]

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[4] Homepage: https://historia.europa.eu/en.
[5] See also my article "Les Lieux de mémoire européens" (https://uscholar.univie.ac.at/detail/o:2045742) (https://doi.org/10.25365/phaidra.475).

[4]

This location has been a given since its opening to the public in 2017 with the "House of European History" in Brussels, an institution of the European Parliament.

Such a permanent site is different from other equally permanent initiatives such as the European Capitals of Culture, the awarding of the European Heritage Label – both EU agendas – or the Council of Europe's European exhibitions. In addition, many museums have become Europeanised and have developed into learning sites for European history.

A key initiator of the current House of European History was Hans-Gert Pöttering, who was elected President of the European Parliament in 2007. In his inaugural speech, he spoke about the idea of such a house and explicitly established a connection with European identity.[6] This is in the tradition of thought that sees the history of Europe and European identity as closely connected. Academically, this raises a number of questions. Before I ask them, let me give a portrait of the house.

The house is an institution of the European Parliament and, by chance, could be located in the immediate vicinity of the Parliament's seat in Brussels in a small park called Parc Léopold. The parliamentary ensemble is located in Brussels' Europe district. The building, which was then structurally adapted, was originally a dental clinic where needy children were treated free of charge. It was built in 1935. Since 1985, due to quite different uses, it has been linked to the development of the infrastructure for the institutions of European integration in Brussels.[7]

The programme of the house consists of the permanent exhibition, which extends over 5 levels, temporary exhibitions that delve into certain aspects and perspectives of European history, and various event formats, which since the Covid 19 pandemic are also increasingly offered online and mostly now hybrid. Gradually, the collection will be made digitally accessible on the homepage.

Since everything has to be made accessible in the 24 official languages of the EU, there are no labels in the exhibitions, but tablets are handed out on which you choose the language you want to use. Or you can book guided tours. There is an extensive offer for school classes, families, and so-called "VIP tours" are also offered, the latter to attract influential voices to the House of European History. Social media channels are also used.

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[6] The history of the creation of the House of European History is documented in: Mork/Christodoulou (2018).
[7] https://historia-europa.ep.eu/sites/default/files/files/the-building/2022_das_eastman-gebaude.pdf.

The permanent exhibition focuses on the 20th century, but starts with a few objects evoking the ancient myth of Europe, then moves swiftly to the 18th and 19th centuries and on to the World Wars, the Holocaust, Stalinism, etc., and finally to post-war history, including the history of European integration.

Thematic tours have been developed since autumn 2022. The first concerns the history of the Holocaust and guides visitors through the permanent exhibition with the help of related objects. On the sixth and last floor, visitors can become active Europeans themselves or relax aesthetically.

The house was opened to the public in 2017. Since it takes a while for such a new offer to find its way into the usual tourist itineraries for Brussels, and since the Covid 19 pandemic forced temporary closures soon after the opening, it is too early to interpret visitor statistics. In the meantime, the temporary exhibitions are sent on tour through a cooperation network of museums in Europe.

The house works a lot with loans and also has an acquisition budget. For example, it has a very extensive collection of posters, from which one of the temporary exhibitions entitled "When Walls Talk!"[8]

The realisation of the idea of a House of European History was anything but a foregone conclusion. It is no less challenging to make the House a truly European site, well known in all countries of the EU and beyond, including outside Europe, and a self-evident item on the programme of a tourist trip or a programme of visits to the EU.

"European Identity": Exhibitable?

That the history of Europe has something to do with European identity seems obvious, insofar as history and identity are undoubtedly somehow connected. But there is no such thing as *the* history, there is no such thing as *the* identity, and there is certainly no consensus on what is actually European history or the history of Europe and what is meant by "European identity".

Clearly, the House does not present national histories; demands to give greater consideration to this or that national history counteract the basic intentions.

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[8] https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/when-walls-talk.

[6]

There was fierce criticism, for example, against the exhibition of a poster in the aforementioned temporary exhibition "When Walls Talk!", which shows Our Lady of Czestochowa with a halo in the colours of the rainbow. It is a work by Elżbieta Podleśna from 2019. The artist was arrested in 2019, the trial ended only 2 years later with an acquittal for the artist and other activists who had protested against the degradation and persecution of LGBT persons in Poland by the Polish Catholic Church and the PiS.[9]

Ultimately, such conflicts are unavoidable because Europe's history in singular does not exist, and therefore any concept that seeks to capture the diversity of what has happened and the diversity of perspectives on it, as well as the interpretations applied in the process, will encounter national contradiction. The example also shows that not all EU members respect Article 2 of the EU-Treaty, which postulates a discrimination-free society as the value basis of the EU. It is precisely this value basis that would have the potential for a European identity.

A presentation and exhibition of European history and the present, however conceived, can therefore hardly be in the service of a European identity, unless all too much is left out. What still works as a simplification among the member states in the so to speak Sunday texts of the EU, such as the preamble to the EU-Treaty, does not work for the House of European History: Some country always feels underrepresented or would have preferred to see other priorities set or has only formally signed the EU-Treaty with its fundamental EU-values, but not interiorised it in terms of content.

In the case of the Council of Europe, to take a comparative example, a purely formal rule applied to European projects, which was based on the size of the member countries. In the 1990s, for example, an anthology on the history of human rights was produced for use in schools as part of a project on democracy education. Large countries such as Germany and France were allocated six historic documents in the anthology, very small countries such as Liechtenstein only one.[10]

Such a formal rule cannot be applied to the presentation of history – and undoubtedly it was equally inadequate in relation to the actual history of human rights. In principle, the House of European History follows the epochs and partial epochs since the French Revolution, about which there is consensus as such. The multitude of objects on display causes visitors to develop individual per-

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[9] Christodoulou/Mitchell (eds.) (2022), p. 203f., illustration p. 204.
[10] Carpentier et al. (2001).

spectives. The actual weighting of what is more important to them and what is less important to them is done by the visitors.

They are guided by offering topics such as colonialism, gender injustice, violence and genocide, but also more positive topics such as human rights and European integration, in principle in chronological order.

If you spend a lot of time with the objects, you will arrive on the 6th floor after 2 hours, rather exhausted, especially as there is usually a temporary exhibition running alongside the permanent exhibition.

The exhibition concept realised in the House of European History works with the individual motivation of the visitors, giving them the necessary freedom. The exhibition does not advocate a specific European identity, because this cannot simply be derived from one or the other or a third version of the history of Europe. If European identity should play a role, then it should be with the individual visitors, who are free to do so – or not.

Initially, the political expectations were somewhat different compared to the realised permanent exhibition, the expectations that the house could convey European identity were there. It is worth quoting from the text by Hans-Gert Pöttering in a publication from 2018, in which the development of the House is documented. According to Pöttering, the intention was, among other things: "The exhibitions … show the common values of European unification – human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peace, and the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity – as representing the progress of peaceful coexistence, particularly since the end of the Second World War (…)."[11] (etc.)

This corresponds quite precisely to the EU's basically official narrative of history, which deals with history very selectively and is committed to a certain degree to a narrative of progress. The House of European History differentiates between the two, with scientific and, of course, curatorial points of view being decisive.

The Problem of "Progress Narratives"

In the humanities and cultural studies, the widespread narrative of progress, also in relation to the understanding of history, has been comprehensively deconstructed. While it cannot be denied that

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[11] Mork/Christodoulou (2018), p. 11.

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progress has been made in many fields in the course of European integration, which presumably no one would want to miss, on the other hand, we are all currently witnesses to a climate change that is becoming life-threatening and in the prevention of which the EU has also made little progress for a long time. It is not necessary to overshoot the mark and immediately deny all progress if the narrative of progress is to be viewed critically. But it must be critically questioned. Progress is a relational category.

The House of European History should appeal to European citizens, pupils, students, teachers, etc. It should appeal to visitors to the EU who come from countries outside the EU: What is presented on the basis of the permanent exhibition and the temporary exhibitions must be in dialogue with the perceptions of the present. The projection of an ideal world of progress would be out of place, especially since ideal worlds can only ever be considered ideal for certain social groups. The temporary exhibitions are an important instrument for highlighting certain disruptive aspects of history. For example, the current temporary exhibition entitled "Throwaway"[12] deals with the topic of waste and the throwaway society, which is closely linked to the topic of climate change.

"European Identity" as Individual Identity

Politics pushes history-saturated identity narratives that, faster than thought, take on mythological features. Science deconstructs this with persistence. But there is a third actor, namely the Europeans as individual personalities, to whom an offer like the House of European History is addressed. They are the place, if you can put it that way, where European identity comes into being. History, European history, is only one factor among many others.

In the present, the possibilities are numerous and varied to experience one or the other Europe individually, to take part in something with a European connection, to move freely in this space, to live and work in the country in which one would like to do so (EU), and so on. In these contexts, identities emerge, possibly also European ones – but this will always have to be formulated in the plural.

As far as history is concerned, one's own location – literally and figuratively – is important. At present, no one can prescribe or even command a certain understanding of history, even if specifically nationalistic parties try to do so. The House of European History has designed the permanent

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[12] https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/throwaway.

exhibition, accompanied by temporary exhibitions, in such a way that individual suggestions arise, but all visitors are responsible for consequences, also of an identity-building nature, themselves.

History and Identity: Final Thoughts

The official designation as "House" of European history (in all official languages of the EU) and not as "Museum of European history" goes back to the German terminology that began to establish itself with the initiative for the "House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany" from around 1986. In English and French, the expressions "house of history" and "maison d'histoire" exist, but occur much less frequently than in German. In English and French it is rather "museum of history" or "musée d'histoire". In fact, the House of History in Bonn also had a model function.[13]

Museums always have a strong historical component, but that does not mean they exhibit "History". The designation as a house rather than a museum therefore marks an important distinction. In the case of the history of Europe, there is also the fact that "house" has a long tradition as a metaphor for a united Europe. The metaphor already existed in the second half of the 15th century, it was used specifically figuratively for the promotion of the Marshall Plan after the Second World War, famously it was used by Gorbachev, finally it was used for the emerging houses of history.

The metaphor of the house allows for many associations, including very individual ones. The distancing from stories in the manner of national mythologies or from an overly apologetic view of European integration can also be conveyed very easily with it.

History establishes identity when it is accepted as "our history" by the collective to which its narrative and representation is addressed. In the case of Europe, however, this only works to a limited extent. It works above all with regard to the division into epochs, which is based on those mega-events and general cultural developments that were relevant everywhere in Europe – which here is mostly a widespread geographical conception of the continent of Europe. The interpretations, on the other hand, turn out very differently, definitely follow national-historical patterns and are interwoven with clearly divergent traditions of thinking and seeing Europe. Claus Leggewie described the European memory landscape in a 2011 book title as a "battlefield".[14]

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[13] Klaus Welle, in Christodoulou/Mork (2018), p. 12.
[14] Leggewie (2011).

The objects exhibited in the House of European History represent different interpretations of history and different narratives of memory, but they do not impose a particular view.

Those who want to base European identity primarily on history or derive it from it must basically first create a historical myth. As with nation myths, such a strategy only works for a certain period of time, until the contradictions and ideological nature of the construction become apparent. The composition of the presumptive collective addressees of such mythological constructions changes continuously, both within the framework of individual states and in relation to Europe as a whole. The number of immigrants from non-European countries is continuously increasing; they have different memories and experiences.[15] Including these people and not forcing them into memory and other ghettos is a permanent task.

European identity must be based on individual experience and cannot only be a topic for people with EU-passports. One element of this experience is the discussion about the history of Europe, e.g. in the context of a visit to the House of European History.

There is no doubt that one can "learn from history" – but only if one deals with history on the basis of a certain set of values. Such a value framework underlies the House, in the spirit of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Nevertheless, the value framework does not hang on the EU-passport, but rather on the question of a "democratic identity".

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[15] See, among others, Otele (2020); Otele/Gandolfo/Galai (2021).

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