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Political Values in a European Museum

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Abstract

The last decades have seen the rise of a European politic of cultural identity. One of the most recent initiatives in this respect, dating from 2007, is the House of European History that is due to open its doors in 2015. In this article, we investigate the recent history of the House, in particular through an analysis of the *Conceptual Basis* that was meant to be its foundation. We analyse the two narrative strategies that are employed in the formation of a shared European past and cultural identity. The first is that of continuity, in which Europe's deep roots are traced. The second is that of a shared European destiny. Finally, we investigate the criticism these plans have received.

Keywords

House of European History; History Museums; Narrative Analysis; Identity

In 2007 the European Parliament launched an initiative to build a museum, the so called 'House of European History'.¹ Like the introduction of the European flag and anthem in the mid-1980s, and the presentation of a (rejected) European Constitution twenty years later, this project can be seen as an instrument of identity politics. As Cris Shore made crystal clear, the cultural dimension of the European integration process has been stressed more and more over the last few decades.² Officials and politicians operating on a European scale strive for the construction of a European identity.³ Their concern is driven by, according to Shore, 'political imperatives, particularly the need to endow the EU's institutions and emerging system of transnational governance with legitimacy'.⁴ This stress on cultural identity thus serves as a way of legitimising the European integration process.

As a consequence of political attention and the societal debate, scholars from the social sciences and humanities have put the theme of European identity on their research agendas. Exemplary contributions focus on icons, rituals and discursive taboos such as mottos and texts.⁵ Other studies try to conceptualise and measure European identities.⁶ Innovative research has been done on European memories and politics of remembrance.⁷ These studies all have a strong relationship with history, because history plays a crucial role in research on European identities. History can give a sense of belonging and provides answers to questions of group identity, such as 'who are we, where

¹ We would like to thank Manuel Müller, Tobias Reckling, Andreas Weiß and two anonymous reviewers for their stimulating comments on earlier versions of this article.

² C. Shore, *Building Europe. The cultural politics of European integration* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

³ See, for example: H. Mahony, 'We need to invest in a European identity', *EUobserver*, 30 March 2012, available at <http://euobserver.com/843/115759>, accessed on 10 August 2013, and the European Heritage Label initiative: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc2519_en.htm, accessed on 10 August 2013.

⁴ Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 1.

⁵ I. Manners, 'Symbolism in European integration', *Comparative European Politics*, 9, 3 (2011), 243-268.

⁶ P. Huyst, "'We Have Made Europe, Now We Have to Make Europeans". Researching European Identity among Flemish Youths', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 4, 4 (2008), 286-302; K. Eder, 'A Theory of Collective Identity. Making Sense of the Debate on "European Identity"', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12, 4 (2009), 427-447.

⁷ C. Bottici and B. Challand, *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory and Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); A. Sierp, 'Integrating Europe – integrating memories. The EU's politics of memory since 1945', in L. Bond and J. Rapson, eds., *The transcultural turn: interrogating memory between and beyond borders*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming); M. Pakier and B. Stråth, *A European memory?: Contested histories and politics of remembrance* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010).

do we come from?’⁸ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in recent years, European politicians have taken an interest in history as a means of identity formation, and another strategy underpinning the legitimisation of the integration process.⁹

The House of European History is one of the instruments within this process. It was launched by the then president of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, in 2007 and should serve as a medium that communicates European history through exhibiting objects and historical relics. After its political birth, the infant years of the museum revolved around the so called *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History*.¹⁰ This document was published in 2008 and written by a team of experts, with the goal of formulating the scope of the museum. Because research on European identity politics still leaves space for studies on *direct* usages of the past by EU-officials, we believe the *Conceptual Basis* is an ideal case-study for scrutinising political values in identity politics. After an explanation of our methodological approach in the second section, we will analyse the *Conceptual Basis* itself. Our aims are twofold. On the one hand, we want to record the early phase of setting up a European museum which - almost entirely – took place away from any public scrutiny or debate. Therefore, a description of the important steps made towards the House of European History in 2007 and 2008 will be given in the third section (‘The House of European History and its *Conceptual Basis*’). Who is responsible for the museum and which route led to proposals for its content? Meanwhile, on the other hand we want to reveal political ideologies in the *Conceptual Basis*. How is history being used for the construction of a European identity in the House of European History? The historical narrative proposed in the *Conceptual Basis* is, according to the fourth section, structured by two discursive strategies; that is, invoking continuity, and constructing a shared European destiny. We think it is important that hidden political imperatives in the museum’s original concept are made explicit, so that they can be subject to intellectual criticism and debate. In the last paragraph we will briefly look at the reception of the museum document and its aftermath.

POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN MUSEUM NARRATIVES

Museums as instruments of identity politics

Thirty years ago, Benedict Anderson published his *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. This book has been very influential over the past decades, both in the social sciences and the humanities. Its strength lies in the mechanisms Anderson indicated behind the formation of collective identities. Collective identities are instigated by ideas which are spread through the media such as newspapers and magazines. Ideas, thoughts and symbols are incorporated by many individuals at the same time and, as a result, these individuals feel part of the same “imagined” community.¹¹ Newspapers and magazines are media that reach out to a large audience, influencing society itself, and thus a whole nation. There are other media through which collective identities are communicated that have a fixed place, such as monuments and national museums, though national museums also manage to reach a large audience and thus contribute to (national) identity formation.

⁸ H. Lübke, *Geschichtsbegriff und Geschichtsinteresse. Analytik und Pragmatik der Historie* (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1977), 145.

⁹ F. Larat, ‘Present-ing the Past: Political Narratives on European History and the Justification of EU Integration’, *German Law Journal, Special Issue: Confronting Memories – Reflecting History*, 6, 2 (2005), 274-290.

¹⁰ The *Conceptual Basis for a House of European History* can be found at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721_en.pdf. Accessed on 12 August 2013. From here on it will be referred to as *Conceptual Basis*.

¹¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London; Verso Editions, 1983).

National *historical* museums are especially invested with this quality. They offer a more or less official representation of the past that evokes identification with the nation. The nineteenth century was preoccupied with history as well as nation-building. Almost every single European nation saw the creation of a national history museum.¹² Recently, national history museums have been on the rise again. The past decade has seen initiatives in the Netherlands and France, both with the clear goal of identity formation. In France, Nicolas Sarkozy initiated a Maison de l’Histoire de France that was due to open in 2015. It was scrapped by his socialist successor François Hollande. In 2011, a Dutch centre-right government threw out a national museum plan for the Netherlands – a plan instigated by a socialist politician.¹³ The French and Dutch plans have both been abandoned because of budget cuts and disagreement over the content of the museum.

These cases illustrate that museums are not neutral spaces: they convey a message and instruct an audience. In other words they are, as has been shown by Tony Bennett’s seminal study *The Birth of the Museum*, instruments of ideology. Bennett clearly took his inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault and put the museum in line with other disciplining institutions such as the prison or the clinic, that were characteristically “born” in the 19th century.¹⁴ This top-down view of the museum has been criticised and replaced with a view in which the audience regained some of its independence: a museum can offer a message through the objects it displays and the texts it shows, but it is still up to the audience to find its own interpretation.

The same is true for history museums: they offer a representation of the past which are value-laden. Of course, it is up to the visitors of history museums to interpret and appropriate these representations, but there does still exist an “author’s intention” that can be traced, and this is true in the case of the House of European History. The use of the term “author” serves very well in the case of a history museum, for the representation of the past in museums does not differ fundamentally from other representations of the past and can be read as a text. Although they consist of objects, historical relics *and* texts, history museums are - as Ilaria Porciani wrote - ‘crucial workshops for the construction of historical master narratives’.¹⁵ In the planned Dutch national history museum, for example, the narrative even received an architectural form.¹⁶ In 2005, the Dutch government had asked a committee of “wise men and women” to establish a Canon of the History of the Netherlands in order to fill a shortcoming in Dutch cultural identity. In order to fulfil its assignment, the committee placed Dutch history into fifty “windows”, with each window representing an event or person of national importance from the past. The national history museum would contain a Canon Tower in which all of these windows were to be displayed. Thereby, even the building itself would become an instrument of narrative.

European integration in museum narratives

Recent contributions show that museums make space for a more European perspective.¹⁷ As observed by a research team working on the ambitious project *Exhibiting Europe*, the perception of

¹² I. Porciani, ‘Nations on Display: History Museums in Europe’, in: I. Porciani and J. Tollebeek, eds., *Setting the Standards. Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 130-151.

¹³ P. Huistra and M. Molema, ‘In de steigers. Het Huis voor Europese Geschiedenis’, *Internationale Spectator*, 66, 6 (2012), 313-316.

¹⁴ T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁵ Porciani, ‘Nations on Display’.

¹⁶ For this Canon, see: www.entoen.nu. Accessed on 12 August 2013.

¹⁷ L. Eilertsen and A. B. Amundsen, eds., ‘Museum Policies in Europe 1990-2010. Negotiating Professional and Political Utopia’, *EuNaMus Report*, no. 3 (2012), available at: <http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:557284/FULLTEXT01>. Accessed on 11 August 2013.

this European perspective follows in two ways.¹⁸ On the one hand, the museum sector shows a shift towards it: existing (national) museums display new narratives that clearly connect to a European context. On the other hand, new exhibitions and museums are created which present the story of Europe as a whole. Together, both developments illustrate the difficulties that have confronted the House of European History from its inception. These difficulties are rooted in the question about the relationship of the sum total to its parts: how should a European past be represented without dissolving the national particularities of history?

Several answers have been proposed. The first solution is cumulation: European history is the sum of national histories. As Stuart Woolf reminds us, the ‘grand collective histories of Europe [...] are conceived and structured as the histories of Europe’s nation states’.¹⁹ One can also reject the idea of “European” history altogether, because there is only a history of nation states.²⁰ A third option is a multi-layered identity, one that ‘combines regional, national and European elements’.²¹ Tension between national and European histories can be overcome by being part of both histories. A fourth position in this debate underlines the pluralistic character of identities too, and places the cultural ideal of citizenship as a normative guidepost in European identity formation.²² National histories form the cultural background of a communicative process in which the ongoing construction of the European identity takes place.²³

Narrative analysis of the Conceptual Basis

The *Conceptual Basis* is the analytical object which informs us upon how these issues were being dealt with in the (early) phase of the House of European History. Our approach towards the *Conceptual Basis* is influenced by critical discourse analysis. We hypothesise that this 26 page text is both constituted by and constitutive of a political ideology in favour of EU integration. The text itself is thus a product of a political discourse, with the aim of reproducing and strengthening this political discourse. The discourse can be analysed by close scrutiny and empirical analysis of the language that is being used.²⁴ As a collection of 116 paragraphs, each containing a statement about the House of European History or its content, the *Conceptual Basis* encompasses a mixture of genres. On the one hand, it is an outline of central topics which should be part of the historical exhibition, presented in 87 statements. Each statement contains one or more historical processes and/or events. The statements are divided into three chapters. The first chapter presents the “origins and developments” of Europe until the end of the 19th century. The second chapter is dedicated to the two World Wars. The subject of the last chapter is the period after 1945 up until the present. On the other hand, the *Conceptual Basis* takes the form of a policy document. A foreword of six statements outlines the context and political origin of the museum initiative. After the foreword, twenty

¹⁸ See the projects website: <http://www.ntnu.edu/ifs/research/exhibiting>. Accessed on 10 August 2013. Exemplary for its rich output, among others, is: S. Krankenhagen, ‘Exhibiting Europe. The Development of European Narratives in Museums, Collections, and Exhibitions’, *Culture Unbound*, 3 (2011), 269-278; W. Kaiser, S. Krankenhagen and K. Poehls, *Europa ausstellen. Das Museum als Praxisfeld der Europäisierung* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2012).

¹⁹ S. Woolf, ‘Europe and its Historians’, *Contemporary European History*, 12, 3 (2003), 324.

²⁰ R. Speth, ‘Europäische Geschichtsbilder heute’, in P. Bock et. al., eds., *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit. Geschichtsbilder, Erinnerung und Vergangenheitspolitik im internationalen Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

²¹ W. Loth, ‘Identity and statehood in the process of European integration’, *Journal of European Integration History*, 6, 3 (2000), 31.

²² G. Delanty, *Inventing Europe. Idea, Identity, Reality* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1995); L. Cram, ‘Identity and European integration: diversity as a source of integration’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 15, 1 (2009), 109-128.

²³ T. Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010).

²⁴ M. Jørgensen and L. Phillips, *Discourse analysis as theory and method* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2002), 67; N. Fairclough, *Analysing discourse. Textual analysis for social research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 67-68.

statements on the basic principles and goals of the museum are explained. The *Conceptual Basis* ends with questions for Europe's future (two statements,) followed by an outlook (two statements).

The *Conceptual Basis* is not "objective" in at least three ways. First, because of the selection of events and episodes: a *Conceptual Basis* of 26 pages can never contain a complete history, therefore it must contain a selection of events which is inevitably a reflection of the preferences of those who made the selection. Second, there is always a perspective in the way these events or episodes are related. Even the most neutral choice of words could not conceal a particular view on history. Third, and most important, is what follows: every historical text has a narrative structure. Ever since Hayden White's famous *Metahistory* in which he made an analysis of the textual structures and the plots and tropes in historical texts, historians of historiography have paid attention to the narrative structuring of texts.²⁵ Recent studies on (European) museums also focus on the narratives that are displayed.²⁶ They have been depicted as "macrostructures" which can be traced by searching for recurring words and arguments, and the inclusion of certain elements while excluding others.²⁷ They are not so traceable in the representation of single events, but in the way in which all the events in a historical text are related to each other. What kind of macrostructures can be found in the *Conceptual Basis* for the House of European History?

THE HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY AND ITS CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Hans-Gert Pöttering, the newly elected President of the European Parliament, made the following statement on 13 February 2007: 'I should like to create a "locus" for history and for the future where the concept of the European idea can continue to grow. I would like to suggest the founding of a "House of European History". It should [be] a place where a memory of European history and the work of European unification is jointly cultivated, and which at the same time is available as a "locus" for the European identity to go on being shaped by present and future citizens of the European Union'.²⁸ Pöttering, a German conservative and member of the European Parliament since 1979, made no secret of the purpose behind his museum project. A staunch Euro federalist, gravely disappointed by the failure of the 2004 European Constitution, he firmly believed in a Pan-European identity based on a common history, heritage, culture and, ultimately, destiny. At a recent press conference, Pöttering again clearly indicated what – according to himself – the goal of the House should be: 'We want to make clear to young people that European unification is no coincidence, that we have made a long journey together'.²⁹ This quote reveals that Pöttering's intentions did not differ so much from other founders of historical museums: a European identity should be reinforced through its history.

Amongst his peers, Pöttering's plan was well received. It was the Bureau of the European Parliament that unanimously approved this new strategy of communicating a European identity. In early November 2007, the Bureau kicked off the project by appointing a Committee of Experts. The Committee was to draw up a detailed concept of the planned museum, which could serve as the basis for further steps towards the realisation of the project. It consisted of nine professional historians and museum experts and was chaired by the German professor Hans Walter Hütter,

²⁵ H. White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973).

²⁶ B. Snelders, *Narratives for Europe. Not the Art of the State but a State of the Art* (2011), available at (http://www.ecflabs.org/sites/www.ecflabs.org/files/3653/narratives_state_of_the_art_0.pdf). Accessed on 11 August 2013.

²⁷ A. Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2008), 115.

²⁸ European Parliament, 'Conceptual Basis for a House of European History', (2008), available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721_en.pdf. Accessed on 10 September 2012.

²⁹ G. Sels, 'Museum voor Europa krijgt een gezicht', *De Standaard*, 2 Feb. 2012.

president of the German historical museum Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. The other members included the Polish historian Włodzimierz Borodziej, a specialist in the history of the European idea; Giorgio Cracco, an Italian specialist of ecclesiastical and medieval history; Michel Dumoulin, a Belgian historian and author of numerous works on European integration history; Marie-Hélène Joly, a French museum expert and curator; Matti Klinge, a Finnish professor emeritus whose main focus lies on Nordic history; Ronald de Leeuw, a renowned Dutch museologist and former General Director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; António Reis, a Portuguese contemporary historian, and Mária Schmidt, a Hungarian museologist and director of the House of Terror Museum in Budapest. The reasoning behind the exact formation of the Committee of Experts was not made public. Members were selected in a top-down process by Pöttering's administration, based on their nationality and curriculum.

Reaching a consensus on the portrayal of European history proved to be a challenging task for the Committee of Experts. Debates mainly revolved around several core issues: When does European history start? Are there one or several European cultures? Is there a European identity, and how does one define it? There were strong disagreements within the Committee, fuelled by the different professional and national backgrounds of its members. After only three meetings, the sole expert on European integration history, Michel Dumoulin, resigned over disagreements on the general historical orientation of the project. He was nonetheless mentioned as an author in the *Conceptual Basis*. On the executive level there was also disharmony. The initial proposal for the House of European History was inspired by the 2006-2007 "It's our History!" exhibition by the Musée de l'Europe.³⁰ Initiated in 1997, the Musée had pioneered the concept of a European history museum but, unlike the House today, it was never firmly anchored in the European institutional framework. Pöttering, who had visited the exposition and was very enthusiastic about it, wanted the House to take a similar form. His vision was at odds with the committee of Expert's chairman Hans-Walter Hütter, who had previously been involved with the Haus der Geschichte and who wanted to use this German template rather than Pöttering's concept. In the Haus der Geschichte, the post-war history of Germany is presented in an attractive, chronological way. It was founded on the initiative of Helmut Kohl, who launched the plan in 1982 during his first term as Chancellor of the German Government.³¹ Kohl opened the museum, still in his position as Chancellor, in 1994.

In spite of these internal struggles, the Committee of Experts finally agreed on the *Conceptual Basis* in October 2008. It offered a detailed outline of the museum's envisioned functions and philosophy as well as a summary of the European history that the museum was to present. The *Conceptual Basis* was presented to and approved by the Bureau and the Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament, the latter of which proposed some amendments, in November 2008. From then on, the *Conceptual Basis* served as the foundation for the future House of European History.

REPRODUCING EUROPEAN IDEOLOGIES

Invoking continuity

The *Conceptual Basis* reflects the difficult negotiating processes involved in defining a *European* history, because this is exactly what the House of European History should present to its visitors, as was explicitly stated in the *Conceptual Basis*: 'The permanent exhibition will not portray the individual histories of Europe's states and regions one after another, but will instead focus on *European phenomena*' (p. 8). However, what exactly European phenomena were aroused much

³⁰ See Website of the Museum of Europe, 'Realisations of the Museum of Europe', 2009, available at <http://www.expo-europe.be/content/view/60/82/lang,en/>. Accessed on 12 August 2013.

³¹ Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 'Entstehung des Hauses der Geschichte', 2012, available at <http://www.hdg.de/stiftung/geschichte-und-organisation/entstehung/>. Accessed on 12 August 2013.

discussion amongst the Committee of Experts. Here, the discussion over what European history is seems to reproduce aspects of the on-going debate about what Europe itself should be. On the one hand, Europe should be an entity of its own, not a set of nation states. On the other hand, there often seems no other way to define Europe, or to let it function, than to see it as a sum of nation states. That is made clear by the constitution of EU institutions such as the European Commission or the European Parliament: seats in Parliament are given proportionally to each member state, and every member state has the right to one position in the Commission. The make-up of the Committee of Experts mirrors these selection processes: the members were neatly divided into different member states of the European Union, a mix of old and new members, from East and West.

In European identity politics, the same problem seems to return. Europe as a geographical identity does not arouse much discussion, although one could debate its outer limits. Yet, it is hard to find cultural phenomena in Europe which can be defined as European. Rather, every aspect of culture seems to be national or regional. This is reflected in the Brussels' theme park, Mini-Europe, which has as its goal a strengthening of European identity. Mini-Europe consists of around 350 miniature models of buildings from member states of the European Union, of national symbols. The theme park, however, tries to present these buildings as a common European heritage and override their functions as national symbols through using them as markers of a European identity.³² The same is true for European history. All of Europe's history has been firmly claimed by national historians from the 19th (and 20th) century, who saw nation-building as their task. Their task resembled that of European historians today: they had to create a national subject out of what was a rather diverse collection of regional, local, monastical and all other kind of histories. Precisely because these nation-building historians have been so successful over the past two centuries, defining Europe as a subject for history is rendered extra difficult.³³

One of the strategies to overcome this historiographical tradition is to give Europe firm roots in ancient, medieval and early modern history. The intention is to create a sense of continuity throughout history.³⁴ Starting at point A and chronologically making its way up to the present (point B), the notion of continuity aids in the "plotting" of the story of Europe.³⁵ As Berger puts it, 'Creating and constructing long-term continuities is [...] one of the most important tasks of national historians'.³⁶ The longer the continuity is stretched out in time the deeper the roots, the more its present-day existence seems to be justified. At least, this is what is suggested at the starting point of the *Conceptual Basis*. Unaffected by any fear of anachronism, the beginning of European history is situated a few thousand years ago: 'Forms of higher culture which can already be described as "European" grew up around trading routes near the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea [...]' (p. 11). No exact date is provided, but the text is clearly referring to Mesopotamian times, where certain unspecified cultures are seen as (proto-) European in the modern sense of the word. We find other seeds of Europe subtly planted in other parts of the world: 'The riches of India and China and the routes leading to those countries have always attracted the interest of Europeans, from the time of Alexander the Great, through the Roman Empire several centuries later [...]' (p. 11) The idea of Europe, in one form or another, is firmly anchored in the cradles of civilisation which have been chosen as the beginning of the narrative. This civilisation is presented as a "higher culture" which evokes a subtle positive and sustained quality of European culture.

³² T. Lähdesmäki, 'Politics of Cultural Marking in Mini-Europe: Anchoring European Cultural Identity in a Theme Park in: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 20 (2012), 29-40.

³³ Woolf, 'Europe and its Historians', 333.

³⁴ M. Sassatelli, *Becoming Europeans. Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 22.

³⁵ J. Ifversen, 'Myth in the Writing of European History', in S. Berger and C. Lorenz, eds., *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p. 458.

³⁶ S. Berger, 'On the role of myths and history in the construction of national identity in modern Europe', *European History Quarterly*, 39 (2009), 494.

It is no wonder that the main focus of the first chapter of the *Conceptual Basis* is on culture. The notion of continuity rests on the stability of Europe. This stability is most easily found in some kind of a substrate underlying European history, namely European culture. Much attention therefore is paid to cultural phenomena, that have even retained their relevance up to the present day: Greco-Roman 'philosophy, literature, law making and statecraft' are 'central to present day European culture', and 'Greek and Latin form the grammatical, lexical and semantic basis for almost all other European languages' (pp. 11-12). The position of Latin as a unifying force is stressed by referring to its "key role" in the intellectual domain and the educational system. Education as such is seen as an important continuous factor to 'European cultural unity' (p.11). Migration and colonisation are presented as 'the key driving forces in European history', influencing ancient city-states and imperialist modern Europe alike (p. 11).

Further references to the Hanseatic League, the unity of the Roman church, the specifically European education system, all enforce the continuity of European culture. The stress on continuity makes the story of Europe rather static: if one stresses continuity, one is not so occupied with change. Of course, grand upheavals such as the Reformation are mentioned, but the first chapter of the *Conceptual Basis* often describes rather the *state* than the *history* of Europe; Europe is more or less timeless. This is also reflected by the few statements that offer a prefiguration of the destination that Europe would head towards. The Peace of Westphalia and the Congress of Vienna form the birthplace of modern diplomacy, and the nineteenth century is described as 'a long period of peace and economic, social and cultural development' (p. 14). In this sense, the first chapter offers not only 'the origins and development of Europe', what Europe *was*, but also what it *should be*. However, with the commencement of the twentieth century, the story changes.

United through common values

In an important article on the writing of European history, Jan Ifversen discerned two "myths" which had emerged throughout European historiographical discourse. One of them was that of 'the emergence of Europe from a long pan-European history dating back to antiquity', whilst the second was that of a myth in which European history centred upon the Second World War, and which represents an ending amid total chaos. From the ashes of the old, a new Europe rises, vowing to never again repeat the mistakes of the past. The enduring peace after the war is then attributed to the integration process and its economic success is emphasised. Thus, this "classic" narrative is structured around the triple foundation of breakdown, rebirth and progress. According to Ifversen, these myths are easily discerned in texts that come from the European institutions and therefore represent an "official" view on history. In academic forms of history writing, these myths are harder to find, but traces of them are still there.³⁷ The *Conceptual Basis* is situated somewhere between official and academic historiography: commissioned and validated by EU institutions, but written by academic historians and museum professionals. To use the term "myth" for this historiography is an overstatement: it has a connotation of falseness on purpose. The storylines in the *Conceptual Basis* are reminiscent of these so-called Euro myths. The deep roots in the first chapter are succeeded by two chapters on the twentieth century in which Europe breaks down and rises again. This means a serious change of tone. The narrative is no longer centred on culture, but on the political aspects of history, and the static nature of pre-1900 history is traded for dynamism and change.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe is brutally derailed from the destiny displayed by its common history. The first decades of the twentieth century are riddled with failure: the failure of democracy and the failure of capitalism. The First World War, the Great Depression, and the League of Nations serve as examples of this failure. Pacifist and pro-European ideas like the Briand-

³⁷ Ifversen, 'Myth in the Writing of European History'.

Kellogg Pact and the Pan-European movement 'were confined to Europe's elite and found no support in the population as a whole' (p. 16). The failure to combine democracy and capitalism during the interwar period led to Communist and Fascist governments, to poverty and, finally, to the Second World War. This war serves as an absolute low-point in European history, yet at the same time it is presented as a turning point. The war, acting as a catharsis, led to the creation of the Declaration of Human Rights and 'also formed the basis for building a new Europe' (p. 18). The post-war development of Europe is nevertheless presented as unsteady. The *Conceptual Basis* emphasises the consequences of the war, the problems of decolonisation, and the new East-West division. The creation of the European institutions is subordinated to the international context and their importance is put into perspective. This brings us to the role of the European institutions in achieving and maintaining the ultimate goals that are the plot of the narrative: democracy, peace and prosperity. 'In a narrative of European history, the crucial question is what role *Europe* is granted in this move towards progress'.³⁸

In "official" historiography, European institutions form the alpha and omega of this development. In the *Conceptual Basis* their overall role in post-war history is depicted as strangely passive. Until the 1990s, they appear to be isolated from the world, undergoing international developments without any involvement. Only with the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, which represent 'a step towards parliamentarization in the European Union', is the goal of democracy explicitly advanced by the EU (p. 24). Thus, the European integration that the House of European History itself was to promote is not a prominent subject in the history it should display. The reason for this is that the story wishes to leave enough space for a fundamental element in the narrative structures: the common values of Europe. Post-war Europe became successful because, contrary to the interwar period, it is based on popular democratic support and combines a healthy form of capitalism with fundamentally democratic principles. Or, looking at it from another side, a failure of the democratic-capitalist European institutions would inevitably lead to conflict. More broadly, the entire interwar period and its culmination in the Second World War mirror another part of the narrative. There, the emphasis lies on the enduring peace which is created through European unity. The narrative demonstrates that Europe was meant to be united, suffered greatly when it failed to be so, and now enjoys prosperity and relative peace as a result of finally acknowledging its destiny. This common destiny consists of a set of shared values.

One set of values is centred on the concept of diversity. This diversity refers to the democratic pluralism of ideas that existed in post-war (western) Europe, but is also reflected in the way the *Conceptual Basis* is written. The statements offer a variety of events and developments, most of which are traceable to at least one European country. In this way, European history in the *Conceptual Basis* reproduces the cumulative nature of the European cultural identity as presented in mini-Europe, or the European institutions in general. At the same time, the diversity of values is only relative. The core values of peace, prosperity and democracy are opposed to "other" parts and systems of Europe. In the narrative of post-war Europe there is clear opposition between the East and West, and the perspective is definitively western: the developments in the East form a "stark contrast" to what happened in the west (p. 20). This narrative strategy fits into a longer tradition in which European politicians construct an identity of the West-European self, as opposed to the East-European other.³⁹ It also bears similarities to Tony Judt's popular and influential book *Postwar* on Europe after the Second World War. In Judt's account too, Europe is passive and under the control of the superpowers. It is the Cold War that structures his narrative, the main contrast he sees is between East and West, rather than between before and after the Second World War.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ifversen, 'Myth in the Writing of European History', 469 (emphasis in original).

³⁹ E. de Angelis, 'The European Parliament's identity discourse and Eastern Europe, 1974-2004', *Journal of European Integration History*, 17, 1 (2011), 103-115

⁴⁰ Ifversen, 'Myth in the Writing of History', 474-479.

The endings of stories can be revealing. For Judt, 1989 serves as an endpoint of the postwar period. It is no coincidence that from that point onwards, the *Conceptual Basis* attributes a greater role to the European institutions. The Yugoslav wars notably interrupt the plot: ‘the European institutions played a shameful role’ in them (p. 24). The end of the *Conceptual Basis* is reached when East and West meet in one European Union: the great enlargement of 2004 and the admission of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 form the end of the great divide of the continent during the 20th century: ‘The division of the continent had finally been overcome’ (p. 24). It seemed as if Europe had reached its destination.

RECEPTION AND AFTERMATH

The end of the *Conceptual Basis* - quite unusual as normal stories go, but in accordance with the continuous state of development of the European institutions - is followed by another, open ending. Europe faces several challenges: prosperity may seem secure through the Euro (the *Conceptual Basis* predates the financial crisis), but the American war on terror is “dividing the continent” and resistance towards the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 stirs up fears of a “renationalisation of European politics” (p. 25). In short, the open ending of the narrative presents a series of challenges to be overcome: it is as if Europe needs an opposition to its project as a *raison d’être*.

The *Conceptual Basis* itself also faced some serious criticism, highlighting the most controversial aspect of its depiction of European history. There are protests by those who feel underrepresented; they feel that their national, regional or particular history deserves more attention in the House of European History. These critics agree with the framework of the *Conceptual Basis*, in which everyone receives his or her fair share, but they do not agree on the selections made. In December 2008, twelve MEPs protested against the “serious omissions and misinterpretations” of the *Conceptual Basis*, ranging from very abstract (‘the House of European History should pay a special attention to the historical sensitivity of the smaller nations of Europe’) to very specific (‘the presentation of “Austria and Hungary’s wars against Turkey” must include the Battle of Vienna, as well as the contribution made by Poland-Lithuania, which had also fought against Turkey for two centuries’).⁴¹ Most of the criticism remained internal, but the united protest of some Polish MEPs against the assumption that ‘the last Polish resistance was finally snuffed out in early October 1939’ was picked up by the press.⁴² Other groups also protested directly. For instance, in a letter to Pöttering, the COMECE (Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community) welcomed the project as ‘a unique opportunity to present the history of our continent, *from the very beginnings of Christianity [...]*’. The COMECE then continued to propose some amendments to accentuate the ‘contribution of Christianity’ to European history.⁴³

Criticism also pointed towards other issues involved, much of it directed at the budgetary provisions for the project (which have almost doubled compared to initial estimates). Also, the Eurosceptic — mostly British — press was quick to reject the *Conceptual Basis* account of history. British reports were particularly vitriolic with regards to proposals to refer to the Second World War as “European Civil War” (this was not actually mentioned in the *Conceptual Basis*, but emerged from later debates).⁴⁴ The main point of concern is that the House of European History may override the internal divisions and diversity of European history and devote itself to ‘the celebration of empty

⁴¹ Private documentation, 5 December 2008; Private documentation, 15 December 2008.

⁴² ‘Row Brewing as Cost of New Brussels History Museum Soars’, *The Daily Mail*, 6 Apr. 2011.

⁴³ Private documentation, 8 January 2009; emphasis added.

⁴⁴ See ‘A £7m TV Channel in 22 Languages and the Second World War Airbrushed’, *The Daily Mail*, 17 Apr. 2012; ‘Anger at Plans for “Official” European History’, *The Telegraph*, 2 Jan. 2009.

values like diversity, difference, and sustainability'.⁴⁵ Here, the critics seem to reject the attempts to find a frank "European" history, whether it is based on a long shared history or a common destiny, as the *Conceptual Basis* had proposed.

CONCLUSION

Since the House of European History was commissioned by politicians, that is the Bureau of the European Parliament, and will be located in the Eastman building very close to other European institutions, the new museum has the appearance of a political project. Appointing a Committee of Experts was a strategic decision that should safeguard the House from reproaches of too much partisanship. The experts themselves stressed the integrity of the future museum in the *Conceptual Basis*: 'Academic independence and the objective portrayal of history have top priority.' (p. 7) Unfortunately, there is no such thing as 'the objective portrayal of history', since there are as many histories as there are historians - to state the obvious. This is all the more true for historical museums.

The *Conceptual Basis* shows, along with its critics, that the House of European History was envisioned as an instrument in European cultural identity politics. Since the House is a history museum, it is no surprise that this cultural identity is sought in a shared past – although not everyone is convinced that there is a thing called *European* history. As we have shown in our analysis of the *Conceptual Basis*, the formation of a European identity is attempted through the use of two narrative structures. The first is the macrostructure of continuity. Europe is given a past that stretches back into ancient history and thus Europe receives a common substrate of European culture. The second macrostructure concerns the common destiny of Europe that the continent strayed from in the twentieth century, but that it regained after the Second World War. This destiny is formulated mostly in terms of common values, such as diversity, peace and prosperity.

The *Conceptual Basis* has thus sought to override existing national narratives in the new, *European* past that should be presented in the House of European History. This attempt has met with criticism. In this respect, the *Conceptual Basis* has also attained its goal, since it stipulated that debate should be generated by the museum. Since the inception of the House of European History and the completion of the *Conceptual Basis*, much has changed. Since January 2011, an "Academic Project Team" has been working full-time on the presentation of European history. The *Conceptual Basis* has turned out to be exactly what it originally implied - simply a basis - and the website of the House of European History suggests some fundamental changes. The focus on the twentieth century has become even firmer than it was previously and, as the museum's website today states, it should also serve as 'a place for debate on European history'.⁴⁶ And in generating debate, it has certainly succeeded.

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⁴⁵ M. Roach, 'European Union: Manipulating History with Tax Payer Dollars', 2011, available at <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2011/04/14/european-union-manipulating-history-with-tax-payer-dollars>. Accessed on 23 May 2012.

⁴⁶ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/visiting/en/visits/historyhouse.html>. Accessed on 12 August 2013.

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