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**Museology and New National Museums of History and Culture**

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**1. The German Historical Museum in Berlin – history newly presented**

On the 2nd of June, 2006, in Berlin, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the permanent exhibition on the 2000 years of German history, entitled “German History in Images and Testimonials”.

The opening of this national museum for the Germans brought the preparations of almost two decades to a close, a process that was set in motion in 1987 with the founding of the museum in West Berlin. Originally the museum was to be opened in the 90s. However: history itself saw to it that the plans were to be fundamentally revised.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification in 1990 did not put an end to the conception for a completely novel type of national history museum, but did bring a change in location. Aldo Rossi's excellent designs for a new museum building in West Berlin across from the Reichstag building were discarded, since the parliament and the government moved from Bonn to Berlin and the site was needed for construction of the new chancellor's office. Instead the 300-year-old baroque Berlin armory on the historic boulevard “Unter den Linden” was chosen for the museum.

The armory building had already functioned as a museum, first as the Prussian Army Museum up to the end of the Second World War and then, during Germany's division, as the national history museum of the GDR, presenting German history from a Marxist perspective.

Following the German reunification and the unification of both national history museums in Berlin, museum colleagues from both East and West have been guiding the museum according to the conception of 1987 and have presented more than 160 temporary exhibitions on both inter-German and international topics of German history. It is due to the broad acceptance of the exhibitions that the house has advanced in a brief span of time to become the city's most visited museum. The armory building was completely renovated and modernized starting at the end of the 90s in preparation for the permanent exhibition, while for the temporary exhibitions the Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei designed an impressive exhibition space connecting to the baroque building.

The German Historical Museum developed from a political will and was founded without either a building or a collection. At the beginning, museological aspects in a sense played no role: it was a cost-intensive and abstract idea that the state wanted and was ready to support for reasons having to do with the politics of culture.

What had changed in German society such that this sort of institution could be founded in the year 1987? It was the shift in the historical consciousness that emerged in the late 60s, after the German post-war society had suppressed history as a result of their experiences with the Nazi era – a rethinking and a natural curiosity could be felt and were reflected in books, cinema and television production, as well as effecting changes in school and university curricula and even in the museums. Large regional special exhibitions at the end of the 70s met with unexpected success among visitors. The societal need for information about history, which was reflected in the visitor quotas, triggered a nation-wide discussion about a future permanent exhibition on German history. This led to the development of the idea of a national history museum for Germans, which the federal government took up and made into a political program.

The concrete preparations for the national history museum were overseen by an independent commission of experts consisting of the country's leading historians and the directors of larger museums. Enjoying a large measure of independence from state policy, they outlined a conception for the museum that was to conceive and present history differently than had previously been the case.

It was no longer the history of the nation, conceived narrowly, that was to occupy the focus of the exhibitions. History was no longer to be presented as a Golden Age that museum visitors could be proud of, as in the conceptions of many national museums of the 19th century.

Rather the stated objectives for a German historical museum read:

“The museum should be the site of self-reflection and self-determination through historical memory. It is to inform but also, above and beyond this, to provoke the visitors to raise questions about German history, and to offer answers to these questions. It is to inspire a critical interaction with history but also offer possibilities of identification. The museum is to help citizens attain clarity about who they are as Germans and Europeans, as inhabitants of a region and members of a worldwide civilization. For these and for visitors from other countries the museum is to provide an overview of German history in its European context and its internal variety – in a manner neither overbearing nor self-accusatory but rather sober, self-critical and self-aware. The museum should enrich the store of knowledge and experience of its visitors through its own means, stimulate their historical imagination and facilitate their independent judgments. In addition to this, it should entertain...” (1).

These founding statements then served as a basis to develop ideas about the presentation of conceptions of history and about the dimensions of history – German history in its international context is the new approach – as well as to pose lines of historical questioning such as the formation of state and of sovereignty, formative institutions, the struggles for freedom and emancipation, oppression, war, the relation of humanity and nature, questions about the forms of social justice, questions about cultural and religious interpretations, and conflicts within history.

Since the museum was founded without a collection, the conception called for the rapid organization of one by acquiring relics of German history. What is interesting from a museological perspective is that the collection process aimed at making the historical situations and interrelations clear and communicable, so that objects were collected primarily not according to type and genre but rather for their value in evidencing and explaining historical statements. The objective of the collection became the rich variety of historical material in its great breadth, with which historical topics could then be prepared: high art as well as cultural objects of everyday use are presented in direct contiguity whenever required by the topic.

Following the acceptance of this conception for the German Historical Museum after a nation-wide process of discussion from the years 1985 to 1987 in the form of public hearings and statements from societal groups, it has served as the foundation of the museum since its inception.

## **2. New national historical and cultural museums and reflexive modernization**

The German Historical Museum in Berlin is not a singular event in the development of history museums in the 80s; rather – if one draws a worldwide comparison – it is a part of a wave of national historical and cultural museums founded in several highly industrialized states and post-industrial societies whose conceptions all differ fundamentally from those of the national museums of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As diverse as the mandates of these new national museums might be in the particular countries, they share great commonalities.

With original historical materials they explicate history and culture in a stronger political-historical sense than ever before, highlight historical structures and characteristics, show the heights and depths of history and in doing so elucidate the political, social and economic developments from various perspectives. They offer visitors a site to come to terms with history, form their own opinions and thus become more assured of themselves. Cultural and historical learning is thus meant to contribute to the stabilization of identity and put people in a position to better understand the present on a basis of historical knowledge. This is also a precondition to being able to more sustainably shape the geographical surroundings as well as the future.

In each of the countries that saw the foundation of new national historical and cultural museums in the past few decades, there is a singular, specific societal context for that cultural and political action. And yet the wave of these new museums can also be seen comparatively and explained as an international phenomenon.

In the Germany of the 80s it was above all the internationalization of everyday life through the expansion of the European Union, the shift in the loci of decision-making outside national borders, the yet unclarified German question, and the increased influx of migrants from southern regions that led, besides positive experiences, to insecurities and a weariness with politics, and that the German politics of culture reacted to by offering possibilities of identity in terms of the conception described above; whereas other countries had other nation-specific reasons.

In the USA the protracted civil rights conflict had produced changes in society that the museums then took into account. The National Museum of American History in Washington began to supplement their permanent exhibition with social, historical and political topics. Thus the situation of the African-American population after the end of slavery and their migration from the cotton fields in the south to the industrial cities in the northeast of the US is elucidated with a new permanent presentation. Another permanent exhibition, new at the time, describes the living situation of the Americans after winning independence. Not until a few years ago was another topical exhibition opened as part of the permanent exhibition on American history that shows the effects of mobility on the American population and their everyday life.

In Australia the national parliament founded the National Museum of Australia in 1982 and planned a new building in Canberra for this. In previous decades the structure of the country's population had been changed significantly by the new waves of immigrants from other regions of the world, especially Asia. In addition the white society had found a new relation to the native Australian population, the Aborigines.

In the first years following the museum's founding, the museum practiced a de-centralized approach with the design staff in Canberra preparing exclusively traveling exhibitions that were shown throughout the whole country. On the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the colonies' independence from Great Britain, the museum was opened in its new building in Canberra in 2001. It follows the principle of cultural diversity and has contributed intensively to the engagement with history and culture in Australia among the visitors to the country as well as the various societal groups within the country. Parts of the exhibition have also been the subject of controversial political discussion, such that the "Nation" chapter of the permanent exhibition is being reconceived at the present time.

In the year 1983 the National Museum of Japanese History was established in a new building in Sakura City near Tokyo. The museum and the universities have, as a result of extensive historical and museological studies, for the first time attempted to present Japanese history in a kind of thematic chronology. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is for Japan a heavily charged period of history, has so far been left out. Thus the Japanese cultural politics and academia have reacted to the criticism that there has been too little education and clarification of Japan's history in political terms.

The need to present the history and culture of the large population groups of Canada, namely the French-Canadians, the English-speaking Canadians as well as the First Peoples, occasioned the opening of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa at the end of the 80s in an impressive new building. The depiction of Canadian history and its various cultures, taking into account both the differences that separate and the commonalities that unite them, has facilitated a better understanding, on the part of the citizens, of these groups within the country, their respective particularities, and their interests in current conflicts as well.

The New Zealand capital of Wellington is since 1998 home to the completely redesigned National Museum of New Zealand – Te Papa Tongarewa, conveying the history and culture of the country from the perspective of the Maori society as well as from that of the white immigration society, and with great success. Besides the presentation of the material artifacts, the intangible heritage also plays an important role. The museum reflects the societal reconciliation between the groups within New Zealand.

These new history museums, with their commitment to awakening critical reflection, are now part of the contemporary memory of these nations. If particular historical and societal preconditions held for the first wave of national museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this is equally so for this wave at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Current sociological research helps to provide answers to this with its theory of "reflexive modernization", also called the theory of the "Second Modernity" (2).

According to Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash and Ulrich Beck the transformation processes of contemporary society in the most economically developed nations of the world evince a disengagement from the structures and values that molded the modernity of the industrial society. These "old" values include above all unlimited economic growth and the belief in technical progress without significant consideration for resources and ecology, fixed societal structures according to classes or according to groups and working conditions, as well as the dominant societal forms of life (marriage, household) of a nation-state and of the society of gainful employment. The national museums of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, almost all of which were established in the era of industrialization, are situated in this context.

Today – according to this sociological analysis – the determining factors are growth limits, ecological problems on a global scale, the globalization of the economy and the labor markets, the increased significance of recreational and leisure activities outside of gainful employment, the receding significance of the nation-state, the internationalization of everyday life, the dissolution of old bonds (marriage, household), loss of tradition along with individualization (economic independence, consumer power), and the search for sustainable strategies for the development of the earth in the present and future.

The analytical critique of modernity does not reject these, but replaces the theoretical discussion of modernity as well as post-modernity and its fundamentally positivist positions. It calls for a rethinking through reflection and thus an adaptation to reality.

How the current culture of history, that is, the full spectrum of this re-apprehension of the past through written documentation, oral narratives, preservation and exhibition, accomplishes this adaptation, and which effects of it are visible, was first explained for the museums by Rosmarie Beier-de Haan from Berlin on the basis of the sociological theory of reflexive modernization. She clearly brought out the characteristics of the Second Modernity and placed them in the context of current museum developments in the practice of representing history and memory (3).

Individualization as a formative characteristic of the current society leads to the need for the individual to create his or her own identity. Together with the rapid loss of tradition in our time, the engagement with history wins a significance and a value that it never previously had. The culture of history (historical science, exhibitions, etc) is, for one, subject to changes and re-evaluates the past from the needs of the present, which is expressed in changed lines of historical questioning.

Secondly, the demand for what museums and the culture of historical science in general can offer is growing to a degree never before seen. The connection between the discipline of historical study and the museums has also thereby been deepened. Whereas for a long time art historians set the tone for the discipline, nowadays there are more and more historians working in museums, and in many exhibition projects and specialized museum conferences, university professors and museum curators work together as public historians of a kind and make important contributions to orientation, education and integration.

The acceptance shown by the visitors to the exhibitions in all of the new national historical and cultural museums mentioned above validates not just their warrant but also the correctness of the cultural-political actions of their founders.

This also holds for the conceptual further development of these history museums. Whereas with the founding of these institutions in the 80s the primary questions concerned the various perspectives on the history of the nation, in terms of both the situation within the society as well as the national history in its international context, today the question of national identity in connection with the global challenges that are another essential characteristic of the Second Modernity is being posed with increasing frequency. New exhibitions are being prepared accordingly by the history museums; Canada will already begin its new approach in 2007 by changing its exhibitions.

The question of the sustainable development of the earth and the search for a means to this also count among the characteristics of the Second Modernity. Museums also pose themselves this challenge and examine to what extent they can contribute to an education for sustainable development. This was seen recently at an international conference on sustainability in Vietnam at the beginning of 2006 at which cultural institutions approached this question of the future together with economic, environmental and educational institutions (4). The involvement of the museums in this sector takes up the topic of the current United Nations' Decade 2005-2014 "Education for Sustainable Development", aimed at all educational institutions the world over.

This also raises the interesting question of the extent to which the national history museums of the 80s function as the model for more recent museum developments. The famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam – traditionally an art museum – is at present being conceptually reorganized and will include a focus on the history of the Netherlands. In nations that were committed to a certain ideology for a long time and whose museums offered a one-sided treatment of history (Russia, China, Korea, South Africa) the national museums find themselves facing new challenges. Thus the State Historical Museum in Russia in Red Square, Moscow, is serially opening its new permanent exhibition on the history of Russia for the public, beginning with the older epochs. The newly conceived and expanded National Museum of Chinese History is to open in time for the next Olympic Games in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. The National Museum of Korea in Seoul was recently re-designed.

Furthermore it would be interesting to compare the conceptions of other types of history museums currently being prepared with the success of the national history museums of the 80s. Of particular interest here are the history museums that depict trans-national spaces, for example on Mediterranean culture (Marseilles), or Europe (Brussels) or other individual international topics of global scale, such as international migration (Paris).

### **3. Museology and history museums**

The new national history museums distinguish themselves from classical museums insofar as they no longer place the highest priority on the historical value of the individual objects from the very beginning, but rather align their educational mandates around conceptions that aim to elicit an awareness of the problems of the present through historical exhibitions. In the opinion of Gottfried Korff and George Rivière, this also expresses the aspiration to a new holism. The significance of history for the present as reflected in the exhibitions in the history museums is seen as a successful cultural achievement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The museological discussions about the concepts of the eco-museum and the New Museology are also worth examining in this context (5).

Nonetheless, the new historical and cultural museums are not absolved from the professional treatment and care of objects, as required by the ICOM Code of Ethics or described in the handbooks of museology (6).

Obviously the new museums also confront their visitors with the world of objects, of necessity remove these objects from their original historical context and press them into service in an exemplary role, and explicate the past along societally conditioned lines of questioning. The concern is less with a reconstruction of history and more with a convergent approach to historical situations and an understanding for them. Structures within history and the conceptions of history of earlier ages are made visible through staged constructs with a clear conceptual goal.

Whether original objects speak for themselves or remain basically mute is always a question of producing the interconnections, the relations and contrasts between the objects. The particular object might on its own require explanation, but its placement within a historical context and an arranged environment can facilitate the object's expressiveness and the observer's understanding of it, depending on the intellectual accomplishment of the curators in each case.

Here I would like to describe the aspirations of the new history museums using a few examples from the German Historical Museum in Berlin:

The basic difference between the permanent exhibition on German history and the temporary exhibitions on particular topics is that the permanent exhibition has more the character of a handbook to history using original materials from the past. Whereas historical overview is the dominant aim of the permanent exhibition, and the formative stages of history, their institutions, and their internal and external relations are elucidated and developments made manifest, the temporary exhibitions concentrate in a more in-depth, questioning and provocative manner on individual topics. They more closely follow the needs of the current moment concerning certain particular aspects of the past or of the culture than the subject matter of the permanent exhibition does.

#### **A) National topics: an example**

The reunification of Germany was followed by a great societal need to experience more about the respective other part of the nation that had been divided so long. The German Historical Museum took this as the occasion to show "Chapters of Life in Germany" in 1993, which tied in to a very great extent to the experiences of those in the East and the West and about which everyone ultimately had something to say.

The exhibition presented – in a somewhat broad and simplified manner – one life-path for the East and one for the West, dramatically separated by a wall. It reported on birth, schooling, youth, the

military age, wedding, professional life, and old age. Visitors were thus able to comprehend and relate to the underlying structures of the different paths offered by both social systems.

The exhibition was intensively discussed in the media and above all among the visitors themselves. It led to a direct dialogue and exchange of experiences on site and the people familiarized themselves more reflectively with the world of objects offered and with their own life experiences from the time of the German division. Naturally there were accusations that the situation in the GDR as depicted was too strict, or that the depiction of everyday life in the GDR was glossing over the dictatorial nature of the state and was trying to whitewash the past for the sake of harmony within the newly unified Germany.

Yet to trigger just this discussion was a very essential goal of the exhibition.

#### B) International topics: an example

A topic of German history in its international context that is largely unknown is the colonial history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the German Empire took part in the European division of the world and possessed colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific up to the First World War.

In being taken up today this topic offers not only the redress of a deficit of knowledge but above all the opportunity for international dialogue. The nature of the exhibit facilitates this with collaborations that allow the colonial power and the colonized peoples to be presented such that visitors from both regions can see the history depicted as a part of their own history, thus pre-empting an accusation of having shown a one-sided view of history. An understanding of the historical situation enables an understanding for the contemporary situation of the other.

1998 saw the one-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of a German colony in China, the beginning of the construction of the colonial city of Tsingtao (Qingdao) in the Shandong province according to German model. This was taken as the occasion to prepare the exhibition "Tsingtao – a chapter of German colonial history in China 1898-1914" in the three years leading up to the anniversary, in collaboration with the museum in Qingdao. This made it necessary to coordinate the conception with the Chinese partner, which was no simple matter, as the traditional German picture of the colonial era always highlights the achievements in building the infrastructure and the Chinese side – also as a result of the Maoist system of education – sweepingly assesses the colonial era as an imperialist act that does not need to be investigated any further. The exhibition that resulted took both sides into account but in addition presented the social and economic situation of the regional population in a much more differentiated manner, including the legal inequality as well as the cultural transfer that was set in motion by the colonial era. It is just these cultural repercussions of this epoch in China and in Germany (transfer of knowledge, educational systems, doctrine, research, museum work) that presents a still insufficiently researched and unfamiliar area, so that the integration of this topic, enriched by a German-Chinese symposium, explored uncharted territory of interest to both sides.

The presentation functioned on a basis of parity: German depictions were paired with Chinese ones of the same object (e.g. views of a city); German situations were directly compared to those of the Chinese through the presentation of everyday objects, of the cultural foundations of both sides as well as of the different political positions and also those of the intermediaries between both cultures. The inscriptions in the exhibition were in German and Chinese and the symposium publication was also bilingual. The visitors to the exhibition as well as the representatives of both states were satisfied and the exhibition project led to a lasting collaboration and friendship.

#### C) Multilateral topics

In several exhibitions the German Historical Museum has dealt with multilateral approaches; that is, in topics concerning several nations it seeks a direct comparison.

For the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the year 1945 was highlighted as a topic in that the views of this concluding year of the war from almost 30 different countries were

presented --the result of a collaboration with academics from these nations. In this way the viewers were enabled to see how the assessments of this year differ in comparison (as defeat, liberation, a new beginning, a change from one system to another, etc.) and why they are so different. The process of formulating myths about history, which clearly was necessary for the stabilization of these individual states in the post-war era, was brought out with a distinct clarity.

History gets mythologized not just in the time of the generations living today but throughout the centuries and springs from different social causes in each case. How do historical images of the states of Europe find their way into our consciousness? This question was pursued a few years ago in planning for an exhibition; the schoolbooks and textbooks in European countries were collected and compared for the depictions that represent a particular country and that we are all familiar with. Often it was icons that convey a certain image. "Myths of the nations" then sought out the original objects that served as a template for the commonly known depictions and juxtaposed them in the exhibition. Thus the history of how these images emerged was presented as well as the "use" these works have as national icons.

The visitors were thus given the opportunity to reflect critically upon their own pictures of history, thereby casting light on the common European history and culture, which had been long obscured by the violent events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The development of the national history museums of the last quarter century can be seen in light of a diverse spectrum of evaluation, ranging from the idea that history is in a boom period and museums are profiting from this at the moment to the opposed conviction that there is a great lack of historical knowledge, even a weariness about history in today's age and that for this reason the history museums are of such great significance for the politics of education.

Be that as it may, the new national history museums have created factual knowledge that people engage with very actively and in great numbers. The professional circles follow suit, the museologists as well as the professional historians. This process of a new scholarly engagement also presents a convergence between historical science and museum science, a convergent approach that focuses on the treatment of original objects of the past and on the questions of the mediation of history and that ultimately contributes to bringing the past clearly and vividly to the present light of day.

#### Notes

1. Christoph Stölzl, Deutsches Historisches Museum. Idee – Kontroversen – Perspektiven, Frankfurt 1988, p. 311.
2. Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash, Reflexive Modernization, London 1994 and Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens und Scott Lash, Reflexive Modernisierung, Frankfurt 1996.
3. Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, Geschichtskultur in der Zweiten Moderne, Frankfurt 1999 and Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, Erinnernte Geschichte – Inszenierte Geschichte. Ausstellungen und Museen in der Zweiten Moderne, Frankfurt, 2005.
4. Hans-Martin Hinz, Museums – Cultural Forums of Education for Sustainable Development? Lecture at the international conference on sustainability in Hanoi, 2006 on the topic "Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability", publication in preparation.
5. Katharina Flügel, Einführung in die Museologie, Darmstadt 2005, pp. 21-22.
6. Friedrich Waidacher, Museologie – knapp gefasst, Vienna 2005.