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NATIONAL MUSEUMS AS NATIONAL SYMBOLS: A survey of strategic nation-building and identity politics; nations as symbolic regimes

Gabriella Elgenius

Abstract: This chapter will analyze national museums as significant national symbols and as nation-building devices. As part of a nexus of symbolism, they raise awareness of and help claim and construct national identities. National museums are uniquely placed to tell us something about the process of nation-building and its imaginations; illuminated through the museum institution itself its collections and displays, for Anderson (1991) 'imagined' and Hobsbawm 'invented' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Museums as institutions, buildings and collections highlight further the crucial role of high culture (Gellner 1983) in nation-building as central for the 'politics of home' (Duyvendak 2011).

Firstly, a comparative framework is necessary with regards to the opening of the first main national museum in the nations of Europe. Dates of inauguration are of particular relevance as tangible expressions of nation-building, analyzed within their socio-political context. For instance, with the alleged crisis of a British identity today, the once construction of Britishness – gradually imposed over the Scottish and Welsh - is discussed with the inauguration of the *British Museum* in 1759 during a period of nation-building after the union between England and Scotland in 1707. In contrast, one of the youngest museums in Europe tell another story about the receiving end of imperial pursuits as with the inauguration of *Ajtte, Mountain and Sámi Museum* in Sweden 1989, established by the Sami nation as a significant initiative of identity politics. Other forms of complexities regard the national museums of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina that have remained closed for significant periods since 1995.

Secondly, a comparative framework is required as we have much to learn by placing national museums in the context of other national symbols, often introduced with independence after break-up of empires and pivotal times of nation-building. Significant patterns emerge when national symbols are analyzed in a systematic manner as all nations have flags, anthems, national days and indeed national museums. National symbols show to the world that at nations are distinct, yet equal and on a par with other nations. National museums are no exceptions; they constitute therefore *strategic markers of nation building* within and without and are often introduced at pivotal times.

Thus, national museums constitute part of symbolic clusters that draw attention to the strategic use of national symbols within processes of nation building and identity-politics. When comparing such symbols clusters (different forms of national symbols) that are specific for the individual nations, patterns emerge with regards to dates of introduction, timing, types, contents and usage. This makes it in fact possible to understand *nations as symbolic regimes* and analyse their underlying nation building by and through their symbolic design, which tells us that nation-building is layered, recyclable and ongoing. The *symbolic regimes approach* help, in other words, highlight national symbols as valuable analytical tools (For a conceptual discussion see e.g. Elgenius, Palgrave 2011).