

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



Productions and Omissions of European heritage

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This brief presents research into European heritage at official and non-official levels. Analyses of heritage sites, museums, policies and audience views suggest the need for new policy and training infrastructure to engage with connections between heritage practice and contemporary political realities.

This Policy Brief is relevant for:

POLITICIANS	because	understandings and uses of the past connect directly to social divisions in the present; consequently, heritage needs to be taken seriously as being political salient.
POLICY-MAKERS	because	heritage policy needs to be 'rewired', since it is both confusing and unresponsive to the contemporary political roles of heritage in Europe.
HERITAGE AND MUSEUM SECTOR	because	the traditional but simplistic and 'safe' presentations of the European past need to give way to practice that encourages audiences to gain deeper historical consciousness, linking the past to contemporary social and political situations.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1** – policy must now help heritage practitioners to frame diversity, exchange, conflict and difference as key elements of the European past, alongside commonalities.
- **Recommendation 2** – heritage policy and practice should address the ways in which people's understandings of heritage link to contemporary social divisions.
- **Recommendation 3** – heritage practitioners should be encouraged to design interpretive and creative solutions through which different ideas of European heritage can be brought into dialogue.
- **Recommendation 4** – a superabundance of different policies, taken together with the above recommendations, requires a review and 'rewiring' of the current frameworks that determine strategy, management approaches and practices in the heritage profession.
- **Recommendation 5** – to implement the above, training and certification programmes should be developed for heritage practitioners as a co-ordinated action across European policy-making agencies.

CoHERE: Critical Heritages – performing and representing identities in Europe, seeks to explore and analyse productions and meanings of the European past in the present. Heritage is made in the myriad practices and cultural forms where the past is valorised for the present, from folk traditions to museums and memorials, the management of historic sites and traditions, and everyday matters such as education, political discourse, home life, food consumption and people's relations with place. Likewise, contemporary connections with events, cultures and sites from prehistory to the very recent past may all be important for the construction of identities, values and futures.



Introductory gallery of the House of European History, Brussels, representing the foundations of European culture, courtesy of European Parliament.

Overview

Productions and Omissions of European Heritage is the bedrock research of the CoHERE project. The research investigated the ways in which Europe is represented in key museum displays, heritage sites and commemorative practices. The research also addressed the silences and hidden histories that are significant within European memory, and popular valorisations of the past that are absent from official heritage. This involved attention to partisan uses of the past that link to political positions in the present. These investigations, which were undertaken through selective, qualitative ethnographies in different sites primarily within Europe (but not all in the EU), involved interviews with heritage professionals and visitors and analyses of key museums, sites and memory practices. In tandem, the cultural politics of techniques for identifying, valuing and managing heritage in Europe were analysed with a view to providing policy recommendations.

Introduction

Heritage is the symbolic, and inherently political, valorisation of the past for the present and future. It is a highly significant dimension of cultural life in Europe, but with different meanings for different groups. It is far from being a simple part of our leisure time and economies; it needs to be understood as a critical element within key social and political debates. At official levels in Europe, heritage has often been used as a resource for collective identity, pride and sense of belonging as well as for place regeneration and the development of tourism potentials and economies. But heritage is also manifest in people's everyday practices and beliefs. It is at work in political mobilizations that sometimes counter official ideas of peaceful collectivity. In these forms – for example in uses of the past in populist party-political or xenophobic discourses – it may reinforce senses of division and difference between groups. Heritage policy and practice needs to recognise and address this by innovating more sophisticated methods for building awareness of the historical roots of today's social tensions and contests and counteracting simplifications that support antagonistic worldviews. Under the surface of many of the most divisive socio-political events of the last decade in Europe (responses to refugeeism, referenda, populist nationalisms, separatism, the re-emergence of Fascism and Nazism, etc.) lie questions about history:

- What is Europe?
- Who is European and who is not?
- Are Europeans all the same or different?
- What historical events have shaped – or even created – Europe and Europeans?
- Do Europeans have a kind of collective 'memory' of the past – even of events before their lives – that makes them who they are?
- Who shares that memory? Who is excluded from doing so, how and why?

Although a range of official legislation and policy instruments (i.e. the tools used to implement cultural heritage policies) promote a coherent narrative of Europe, these often have little lasting purchase beyond the sphere of policy. They also fail to unify the plethora of different pasts from which people draw in order to frame both their identities and their preferred futures. People's historical, political and geographical understandings of Europe differ markedly, as do people's attachments to different pasts and their desires about Europe's future. In many ways, and at many different levels, from the informal spaces of people's lives to public space and the sphere of policy, there are different 'Europes' being made, and these sometimes come into antagonistic and even violent relationships.

Research findings

Our research involved a survey of literatures, policies, practices and initiatives relating to heritage and memory in Europe. We studied heritage policy, frameworks, sites, museums and monuments in Europe of different types. A number of these were chosen for in-depth research, interviewing key heritage actors (mainly professional heritage managers, policy makers and museum staff), and audiences. We adopted a qualitative approach in order to gain a deep understanding of practice, through sampling cases – locations, groups, actions, phenomena, assemblages – that form important paradigmatic indications of the social life and meanings of the past. Four propositions emerge from this:

1. **'Europe' is a changeable and contested geographical and historical concept.** European heritage (the contemporary valorisation of the past in and of Europe) is active at multiple levels – within policy, museums, memorials, commemorative practice, school curricula, political discourse and action, and in people's beliefs about and attachments to the past. European heritage therefore has multiple modes of production and there is scope for contradiction between them. In some cases, European heritage, identities and values are used as a cover for promoting nationalism and xenophobia. This connects to a canon of core narratives and symbolic stories that tends to present a homogeneous and coherent vision of the European past, rather than a history of constant transcultural exchange.
2. **People often take the past very selectively and personally and use it to situate themselves socially and politically in the present.** While for some, engaging with heritage is predominantly a leisure activity, many people relate in deeply personal ways to the past. More than this, they often bring it into the present to make sense of contemporary events and circumstances, to justify political actions and to position themselves in place and time.

3. **Notwithstanding a vast array of policy instruments and frameworks for practice, there is still a limited amount of support for responsible and innovative practice relating to the consideration of the past in the present.**
There is an untapped potential to exploit key heritage phenomena (sites, materials, narratives, symbols, monuments) as ways of tracing the histories of, and engaging with, contemporary social and political issues.
4. **There is a superabundance of heritage policy.** Making sense of European heritage is complicated by an incoherent and vast array of policy instruments and actions, meaning that the development of new approaches and strategies has to find a place within an already crowded landscape of policy and practice. The Council of Europe, European Commission and the European Parliament all promote heritage initiatives. These sit alongside UNESCO, national and regional-level initiatives.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – heritage policy at the European level has tended to privilege ideas of shared and collective heritage. While this encourages senses of ‘European’ identity and community, it has had limited purchase and is undermined by contemporary uses of the past at popular levels that often foment or reinforce social divisions.

Policy and training must now help heritage practitioners to frame diversity, exchange, conflict and difference as key elements of the European past, alongside commonalities. This has the potential to lead to new, more sophisticated and more convincing articulations of historical community and unity in diversity.

Conventional and canonic histories of Europe – notwithstanding their importance and value – need to be revisited and alternative formations explored. One reason for this is to increase the textures, richness and depths of the European heritage produced by and represented through official and institutional practice. Explorations of the ‘crossings’ of people and peoples, cultures, technologies, religions, ways of life across land, waterways, public and private spaces have already been experimented by some museums and sites. Their further refinement has the potential to counter views of European culture and identity as static and singular. One approach to this is to promote cross-border and transnational initiatives that stress interacting and plural heritages, in line with other policy recommendations such as Fast Forward Heritage. The idea of Europe as a ‘cultural space

of difference' may offer opportunities for historical reflection and awareness upon which to base more plural senses of belonging.

Recommendation 2 – heritage policy and practice should recognise and address the implication of heritage – in both official and non-official forms – in the production of contemporary antagonistic identities, social divisions and anxious responses to change, and as a matter of everyday life and high political salience

The entanglement of heritage in both the politics of togetherness and the politics of division needs to be recognised by contemporary heritage policy and practice. The purpose of this recommendation is not to eradicate the political dimensions of heritage, which would be impossible because the very nature of heritage is political. Rather, it is to encourage people to develop more complex understandings of the European past, which are more likely to counteract exclusive, xenophobic and antagonistic uses of it.

Recommendation 3 – heritage practitioners should be encouraged to innovate technically, to design interpretive and creative solutions through which to help audiences to gain complex understandings of European heritage as interactional rather than static, multiple rather than singular, and as a phenomenon of the present and future as well as the past.

The potential exists for heritage initiatives and museums to work creatively with a 'past-in-present' approach, seeking to unpick historical strands of contemporary phenomena, bringing historical narratives to bear on today's concerns and asking questions about relationships between past and present, in order to encourage audiences to engage reflexively and critically with their own understandings of the past and its connections to the present. This often illuminates different viewpoints on the past and what it means for society today. Our research suggests that it is possible for heritage institutions and initiatives to bring contrasting viewpoints safely and productively into dialogue.

Recommendation 4 – a superabundance of policy instruments, taken together with the above recommendations, requires a review and ‘rewiring’ of the current frameworks that determine strategy, management approaches and practices in the heritage profession. This requires a negotiation between multiple governing bodies and heritage actors, in order to develop a coherent set of approaches across Europe.

Attempts are needed to map the heritage policy landscape at the European level, and to negotiate a coherent framework that works between and through the different bureaucracies and conceptual approaches, maintaining and harmonising sophisticated heritage solutions that have transformed practice for the better, but also addressing inconsistencies and obstacles to practice. While a review such as this is a necessary response to policy abundance and confusion, it has further urgency because of political contests over European heritage that have been critical over recent years.

Recommendation 5 – to implement the above, a training and certification programme on the *European Past in the Present: Politics and Policy* (E4P) should be developed for heritage practitioners.

The EU and CoE should jointly design and promote the E4P programme with an ongoing focus on global state-of-the-art thinking on the politics of the past in the present, with particular reference to European space. Funding from the Creative Europe programme should be earmarked for a blend of distance learning, e-learning, situated and practice-based learning, leading to certification recognised internationally, e.g. by UNESCO. E4P should be delivered with input from universities and senior heritage practitioners and scholars, as well as European experts in related fields such as political science, development and tourism. Basic aims of the programme are to enable practitioners to:

- i) understand the political salience of the past in the present in Europe and innovate creative and sensitive methods to engage with this and build audiences’ historical and social consciousness and criticality, to create grounds for peaceful and communitarian social relations.
- ii) navigate the policy landscape, gauging the uses, relations and differences between cultural heritage frameworks at UNESCO, EU, CoE, national and regional levels.

At the EU Council level, Member State representatives, Commission representatives and heritage experts should comprise a long-term working group to develop and benchmark E4P, considering its linkage to university-level credit, practice-based PhDs and professional qualifications. In developing E4P, the working group would also investigate how European heritage policy could be better coordinated and integrated across its diverse legislation and practices, and how it could relate to heritage instruments within the CoE and UNESCO.

Additional sources

Fast Forward Heritage: Culture Action Europe's principles and actions for a forward-looking legacy of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, available at:

<https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2018/07/CAE -Principles-EYCH-Legacy.pdf>

Whitehead, C., Eckersley, S., Daugbjerg, M. and Bozoğlu, G., eds. (2019) *Dimensions of Heritage and Memory: Multiple Europes and the Politics of Crisis*, London: Routledge.

Whitehead, C. and Bozoğlu, G. (2017) 'Heritage and Memory in Europe: a review of key frameworks for CoHERE', available: <http://cohere-ca.ncl.ac.uk/#/grid/319>

Zito, A. and Eckersley, S. (2018) 'Framing European heritage and identity: the cultural policy instruments of the European Union. Work Package 1 Working Paper, available: <http://cohere-ca.ncl.ac.uk/#/grid/459>

Summary statement

The European past is complex, and characterised as much by multiplicity, the mobility of people and ideas, external influence, conflict and dissonance as it is by shared values, cultures and peace. It cannot be rewritten as a harmonious and unified history that has produced a stable and singular European identity, and attempts to do this have had patchy success. Heritage can be used to create shared senses of identity but also to emphasise difference, division and ideas about who belongs. New ways of representing the past – and proposals for living with it peaceably – need to be developed as a counter to misleading and ideologically-charged uses of heritage, whether these support xenophobic interests, or idealistic, trans- or supra-national collectivism.

This requires a review and rewiring of a confusing body of existing heritage policy and strategy that is unintentionally conducive to incoherent practices of the making, framing and interpretation of European heritage. It also requires the development of a training and certification programme to equip heritage practitioners with awareness of policy and with tools for engaging responsibly and innovatively with the politics of the past in the present at the practical level of heritage interpretation, communication and audience engagement.

Policy recommendation

The European Union and Council of Europe should develop and implement a *professional training and certification programme*, potentially leveraging Creative Europe funds, among others. This programme would equip the heritage sector to promote and renew audiences':

- historical awareness
- reflexive understandings of our connections to the past and future
- intergroup sociality and communitarian identities in European space

This would transform the ambition, skills and approaches of the heritage professionals in engaging with the political importance for all European inhabitants of the past in the present.

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