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Propaganda, Hygiene and Museums: A Case Study on Social Museum Budapest (1901-1939) and St. Petersburg Hygiene Museum (1893)

My research traces the cultural history of public health and industrial workers welfare education museums in the early-20th centuries in Eastern Europe. Following the Great Exhibition in 1851, local governments and private donors began to fund social-politically engaged museums. The first social museum was established in Paris (Musée Social, 1895) after the World Expo 1889. Modelled on that, several countries established a similar museum. (E.g.: Social Museum of Harvard University, 1911; Social Museum, Budapest, 1901; Soziales Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 1903, Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum, Wien 1925). The social museums carried quite the same mandate and mission: to promote the scientific study of social conditions, social betterment projects.

I aim to suggest a new context of analyzing these institutions: not only in the frame of the discourse on the social issue and the 20th century's premises of the welfare state, but also that on the history of hygiene propaganda and hygiene museums. I argue that the Museum promoted ideas about hygiene and biological theory of human improvement based on modernist concepts of purification and rejuvenation of the human and national body. A distinctive feature of the Central East European Social Museums (Wien, Budapest) was, that it primarily served the hygienic, moral and political education of a specific social class: the working class. My dissertation raises the question of why the museum was considered as an appropriate institution for health education and propaganda, and why did the founders choose the museum as the most suitable institution to emancipate the working class. To answer this question and understand the operation and changes of Social Museum I situate this institution in the cultural and social history of the museums, emerging after the exhibitions of the The Great Exhibition of 1851.

In the presentation, I will analyze and compare the St. Petersburg Hygiene Museum, and the Social Museum Budapest. The museum was founded by the Ministry of Commerce, but most of the colleagues were participants of a left-wing group. In the second phase, my research focuses on The St. Petersburg Hygiene Museum. Doing so, I investigate the connection between the Museum and the socialist state's mass production of hygiene. Representation policies will be analyzed within the broader framework of cultural representation and the techniques of display from the end of the 19th century through the end of the 1930s. Examples will be given on the chosen institution's exhibition praxis at three different points in time. To describe the museum's history at the turn of the century,

I consider its exhibitions to be paradigmatic examples for analysis from before WWI, under the WWI and the Russian Revolutionary era, before WWII.

I will argue, that this top institution of representation merges two different strategies of power. Not only it works as a space for education – and thereby also as a space for exercising self-control –, but also as a representational or propaganda instrument of biopolitics, demonstrating degeneration (i.e. whatever deviates from the state of 'homeostasis'), singing the praise of the welfare system and presenting the general rules of hygiene that are key to a long and healthy life. By doing so, I aim to answer the question: What role did the museums' spaces have on the representation of the hygiene discourse? How did the museums' rhetoric, discourse and representation change due to the political dynamics? What kind of instruments used political power in the museums?

The conceptual framework of my research follows Marius Turda's terms of the relationship between nationalism, modernism and racial hygiene. I am going to analyze the museum institution as an institutional articulation of power and knowledge relations, following the Foucauldian terminology of Douglas Crimp, Anna Maerker and Tony Bennett. My research is the first cultural sociological inquiry that investigates Hungarian hygiene museum collections, focusing on the fact, that this geopolitically semi-peripheral Museum had a modernist vision on the perfection of the nation and an idealized vision about the national community.

Keywords

Social Museum Network, Racial Hygiene in East European Art History, Exhibitionary Complex, Propaganda