



Exhibiting European History in the Museum

The House of European History

149

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The history of Europe and history in Europe are the focus of recent initiatives and controversies, at a time when the European project appears to be in a state of crisis.¹ Fashioning the history of Europe into a narrative in any format instigates political and emotional reactions. The resulting discussions convey the variegated public debate. The House of European History (HEH), which opened in May 2017, is first and foremost conceived as a transnational space², even though our frame of reference, notwithstanding our efforts, continues to be defined by a national approach. How should we consider this new museum? To what extent does it refer to national history? Would dialogue be feasible between two initiatives as distinct as the HEH and the BELvue museum, which highlights Belgian history?

De geschiedenis van Europa en de omgang met het verleden in Europa zijn het voorwerp van recente initiatieven en controverses en dit op een moment dat het Europese project in crisis lijkt te zijn. In welk narratief de Europese geschiedenis ook wordt gegoten, het lokt altijd politieke en emotionele reacties en veelvormige debatten uit. Het Huis van Europese Geschiedenis (HEH) dat in mei 2017 zijn deuren opende, wordt als een transnationale ruimte beschouwd, ook al is ons referentiekader, ondanks alle kritiek hierop, nog steeds sterk nationaal van aard. Hoe moeten we dit nieuwe museum beoordelen? In welke mate verwijst het naar nationale geschiedenis? En is er een dialoog mogelijk tussen twee uiteenlopende initiatieven, namelijk tussen het HEH en het BELvue museum waarin de Belgische geschiedenis centraal staat?

An open museological approach

During the nineteenth century, a great many national museums were founded³, accompanying, extending or promoting the construction of the nation state: ‘They participate in the process of construction and consolidation of national heritage and contribute to the pantheon and the canon of the nation, propagating its master narratives and often even emphasizing its founding myths’.⁴ These fruits of political projects were a dynamic contribution to consolidation and unification of the nation. Present both in countries characterised by archaic structures and in parliamentary democracies, they reflect national identity politics, from the educational system to the armed forces, via all the daily elements – the ‘banal nationalism’⁵ – conducive to fashioning that identity. Such a context has been very advantageous to the foundation and success of these museums. At the time, they promoted a top-down vision and were in no way conceived as forums of debate.

The opening of the HEH in May 2017 was framed within a very different context. From the moment of its conception, as drafted by the experts in 2008⁶, the European project elicited controversy: the economic crisis coincided with a wave of Euroscepticism and even with manifestations of complete rejection of the concept of Europe. The museum project was

- 1 See especially the beautiful book *Europa. Notre Histoire. L'héritage européen depuis Homère* edited by Étienne François and Thomas Serrier with Pierre Monnet, Akiyoshi Nishiyama, Olaf B. Rader, Valérie Rosoux and Jakob Vogel (Paris 2017).
- 2 For a detailed presentation of the history of this project, see Anastasia Remes, ‘Memory, Identity and Supranational History Museum: Building the House of European History’, *Memoria e Ricerca. Rivista di Storia contemporanea* 1 (2017) 99-116. See also the official, very comprehensive website of the museum: <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/fr> (accessed April 2018) and the book edited by Andrea Monk and Perikles Christodoulou, *Creating the House of European History* (Brussels 2018).
- 3 Defined by the EuNaMus project as: ‘those institutions, collections and displays claiming, articulating and representing dominant national values, myths and realities. National museums are institutionalized negotiations of national values that form a basis for national identity and cultural underpinnings for the operation of the state’. See *National Museums Making Histories in a Diverse Europe*, *EuNaMus Report n°7*, 2012, <http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:573632/fulltext01.pdf> 10 (accessed November 2017).
- 4 Ilaria Porciani, ‘History Museums’, in: Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of State Sponsored History* (London 2018) 373-397. See also Dominique Poulot, ‘Le musée au risque de la mémoire’, in: Étienne François and Thomas Serrier with Pierre Monnet, Akiyoshi Nishiyama, Olaf B. Rader, Valérie Rosoux and Jakob Vogel, *Europa. Notre Histoire L'héritage européen depuis Homère* (Paris 2017) 1293-1309.
- 5 See Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London 1995).
- 6 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721_en.pdf (accessed November 2017).

fraught with pitfalls. What approach is best, at a time when the European project seems so controversial? Between this concept and the opening of the HEH, the situation worsened: the outcome of the UK referendum on 23 June 2016 about membership of the European Union suggested condemnation of the European idea.

The opening of the HEH was therefore not an expression of the growing power of the European project. Rather than evaluating a success story, the various controversies integrated in the museum tour will be reviewed here. The designers envisage the museum as a negotiated reality destined to evolve over time. Another striking difference from the museums founded in the nineteenth century is the essential role attributed to the visitor, who is expected to critique and participate. As a commissioner, Christine Dupont has written that this museum is conceived as a place that questions by posing questions.⁷ The House does not present or impose a closed or contained model but manifests as a tool to open the discussion.⁸ The historical dimensions figure as milestones to improve understanding of contemporary controversies within the EU.⁹

For the project to succeed, visitors will need to transcend their national mindsets. Can they reconcile this European perspective with national histories? Can this perspective be abstracted, e.g. from nationalist interpretations, or be used to define what Luisa Passerini has termed ‘shareable memories’?¹⁰ Such action may prove challenging, first because each country has different ties to Europe, if only because accession to Europe took place at different times and in different contexts. Even though the approach exceeds the confines of the European Union, the EU still determines the framework, which does not have identical legitimacy for all visitors. In the six founding states, the European project has for decades been part of the lives of citizens and has figured in the histories of those states for sixty years. In the twelve countries that joined the European Union between 2004 and 2007 – followed by Croatia in 2013 – these ties with the EU are very different. In the reasoning of the historian

- 7 Christine Dupont, ‘La Maison de l’Histoire européenne: un musée qui pose (des) question(s)’, *Témoigner. Entre Histoire et Mémoire, Revue internationale de la Fondation Auschwitz/ Auschwitz Foundation International Journal* 126 (April 2016) 10-14.
- 8 Proposed by Taja Vovk van Gaal during the conference ‘Mettre en récit l’histoire de l’Europe’, HEH, Brussels, 20 November 2017.
- 9 See Taja Vovk van Gaal and Christine Dupont, ‘The House of European History’, in: *Entering the Minefields: the Creation of New History Museums in Europe*. Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museum: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Brussels, 25 January 2012; Bodil Axelsson, Christine Dupont and Chantal Kesteloot (eds.), *EuNaMus Report n°9*, <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/083/ecp12083.pdf>, 43-53 (accessed November 2017).
- 10 Quoted by Étienne François and Thomas Serrier, ‘Prologue’, in: François and Serrier (eds.), *Europa* (Paris 2017) 13.

Mark Mazower¹¹, this huge enlargement to the east requires considering another history (i.e. that of a less centralised Europe). Certain new member states have a very different relationship with the past and with national history; nationalism is very prominent there and has considerable political support. The debates and the issues of memory are very precarious in these countries. The temptation to transpose them to a European context seems irresistible. The Polish context is the most emblematic in this respect. In the virulent critiques formulated by the Platform of European Memory and Conscience, the HEH has been accused of ‘grave omissions’ and neo-Marxist approaches.¹² Issues of totalitarianism, the Cold War and the crimes of communism are at stake here.

A memory that unites, a memory that divides

As they considered the concept of identity too static and reductive, the designers of the HEH preferred the concept of memory, which both unites and divides. In this respect, the museum has digressed somewhat from its underlying principles¹³, although this change undoubtedly arises from the controversies around the notion of identity. It has evolved from a concept that is potentially receptive to a closed notion, as became clear from debate on the failed project of the ‘House of the History of France,’ which was perceived as an instrument to reinforce the national identity that could be monopolised by the extreme right.¹⁴ This presented the challenge of uniting visitors around a notion (i.e. memory) that opens many different doors.

What are the actual elements of memory that work to the advantage of Europe? The project was conceived as open from the outset. Rather than a precise and restrictive definition of Europe, as the designers of the nineteenth century national museums formulated, openness was indispensable. Over time, after all, the boundaries of the European Union have expanded institutionally, and, above all, the notion of Europe has remained fluid. This principle of openness is striking in the first rooms of the House.

11 Mark Mazower, *Le Continent des ténèbres. Une histoire de l'Europe au XX^e siècle* (Paris/Brussels 2005).

12 Paweł Ukielski, Monika Kareniauskaite and Yana Hrynko (eds.), ‘The House of European History – Report on the Permanent Exhibition’, 30 October 2017, Platform of European Memory and Conscience, [https://www.memoryandconscience.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Report-on-the-heh-by-the-Platform-of-European-Memory-and-](https://www.memoryandconscience.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Report-on-the-heh-by-the-Platform-of-European-Memory-and-Conscience-30.10.2017.pdf)

[Conscience-30.10.2017.pdf](https://www.memoryandconscience.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Report-on-the-heh-by-the-Platform-of-European-Memory-and-Conscience-30.10.2017.pdf) (accessed November 2017).

13 ‘The idea of supporting something such as a European identity is not totally absent in the political justifications expressed at the launch of the HEH’, Taja Vovk van Gaal and Christine Dupont, ‘The House of European History’, 48.

14 See Étienne François, ‘The All-too-brief Existence of the Maison de l’Histoire de France: a Wasted Opportunity’, *Entering the Minefields* (2012) 79-87.

Before reaching the chronological tour, viewers are invited to engage in introspection to discard predispositions and to open up during their visit. The idea is to question the geographical and political meanings of the concept of Europe. Do European values exist? Are those values always positive (e.g. democracy, freedom, emancipation), or can Europe also be regarded as a dark continent that has introduced slavery, colonialism, and extermination? The introspection then transcends the geographic scope. Which elements can forge a European memory? The designers have selected fourteen key elements that they consider representative of European heritage.¹⁵ Each of these elements is depicted by one or more objects inspiring visitors to think. What impact do those elements have on history? How is memory constituted? Which particular elements are being remembered or subconsciously or deliberately forgotten? Memory is a particularly complex and perpetually dynamic phenomenon. Should memory be interpreted as solely positive, or should the 'dark side' be explored as well? The reflection that begins in these first rooms is very stimulating, because along the trajectory of these fourteen key elements, positive perspectives alternate with negative ones. The exercise is certainly complex and its effectiveness for the different segments of the public questionable. The diverse nature of the public may lead to divergent reactions.

Rule of law is presented as one of the fundamental principles of modern Europe. But can such an abstract concept be part of our memory? Are we not inclined to remember more traumatic experiences, more concrete events, elements of national history or even exclusively national dimensions of more general phenomena? This particularly stimulating initial reflection may not fulfil its mission. Does it bring about a different outlook upon entering the more classical chronological tour of the museum? This tour is the conduit of choice. Certainly, although the questions go back to antiquity, the chronological start is at the end of the eighteenth century with the French Revolution. This choice has been deeply criticised by opponents of the HEH, who see this start as a Marxist interpretation of European history and would prefer to start the journey with Charlemagne.¹⁶

Totalitarianism and the Shoah

The HEH highlights the history of the two World Wars in the section 'Europe in Ruins.' Spatially, this wing is almost a museum within the museum. The period after 1945 is not presented from the same perspective and is not displayed in the same sombre and oppressive tone. The space devoted to the

15 The fourteen themes are philosophy, democracy, the constitutional state, omnipresence of Christianity, state terror, slavery, colonialism, humanism, rationalism and the Enlightenment,

revolution, capitalism, Marxism (communism/socialism), the nation state and genocide.

16 See Paweł Ukielski, Monika Kareniauskaitė and Yana Hrynko (eds.), 'The House of European History', 3-4.



The third room of the permanent exhibition 'Europe in Ruins'.
Photograph by Dominique Hommel, 5 May 2017. ©European Union.

wars plunges visitors into semidarkness, from which they emerge only once they have moved from the war section to the one titled ‘Rebuilding a Divided Continent’. In this section, the idea was also to mention ‘replacement of the Nazi tyranny by communist dictatorship under Soviet control’¹⁷, although opponents of the museum find this phrase inadequate. In their view, the criminal nature of the communist regime and its victims merit emphasis.

This issue relates to debates about the problematic comparison between Nazism and communism concerning the macabre body count for the two regimes. In ‘Europe in Ruins’, the two dictatorships appear side by side in the room ‘Stalinism and National Socialism’. Various angles are elaborated: ideology, cult of the dictator, economy, genocide (within the framework of National Socialism) and the mass terror practised by the two regimes. Without putting the two regimes on an equal footing¹⁸, this presentation confronts visitors with the sensitive and difficult question of comparing the different victims and their place in the European pantheon. The hypersensitivity in certain European countries where major politicians convey ambivalence about their own past and European institutions is presented here.

Clearly, this focus on the negative memory of Europe has profoundly preoccupied the designers of the museum, who feature it prominently in the tour. Likewise, Henry Rousso considers the exceptional position of negative memory in present-day Europe, possibly even seeming to justify the establishment of the European Union as a political response to the violence of the twentieth century. Europeans from the West often associate this negative memory with the Second or even the First World War. Europeans in the East and in the South of Europe link the memory to different chronological dimensions: the Spanish Civil War, the Greek Civil War and the wars in the former Yugoslavia, as well as communist dictatorships, not counting the post-colonial and colonial legacy, which has limited exposure in the museum.

The HEH museology also attributes central importance to the Shoah as a vehicle for European memory or, to quote Tony Judt, ‘the recovered memory of Europe’s dead Jews has become the very definition and guarantee of the continent’s restored humanity’.¹⁹ This reflection derives from the ‘negative memory of Europe’ concept mentioned above. Any musealisation of the Shoah is complex and is subject to debate. Even though the Shoah is now central in European memory and an important issue for the European Union, the HEH does not want to be yet another museum showcasing this matter. On the contrary, explaining that the central position of the Shoah has not always been obvious is essential. In conveying this gradual evolution, the national level

17 *House of European History. Visitor’s guide. Permanent exhibition* (Luxembourg 2017) 76.

18 ‘We have chosen to compare these systems and to show their differences. They are actually ideologically opposed to one another

but seem to be very similar as regards brutality and oppression’. *House of European History. Visitor’s guide. Permanent exhibition* (Brussels 2017) 52.

19 *House of European History. Visitor’s guide*, 106.

cannot be neglected. The room ‘Memory of the Shoah’ reflects the perspective of six national memories: those of the two Germanys, of Poland, Austria, Ukraine and France. The display shows in what measure the Shoah was not immediately addressed, in any case not in political discourse or political commemorations by the different states. Regarding France, for example, the HEH displays the philatelist commemoration of the resistance, which was fast, prominent and permanent (as in other European countries), whereas the extermination camps were virtually absent from official European memories until the late 1980s.²⁰ As if to confirm the surreptitious insertion of this memory, the room on the memory of the Shoah is set apart from the main tour, symbolizing its longstanding marginal status. While the display inspires debate, it also seems to convey the transition from the margins to a central position, albeit implicitly rather than explicitly. This approach corresponds with the ambition of the museum to fuel debate rather than to impose a framework for dominant interpretation.²¹

About rebuilding a divided continent and shattered certainties

The history of Europe after 1945 is presented as that of a destroyed and divided continent with millions of refugees, exiles and displaced persons and in need of reconstruction. Yet, the victims of communism are presented not from this general perspective but from ‘confrontation points’, highlighting in particular the uprisings in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). Apart from the communist bloc, a separate space is allocated toward Yugoslavia. In this section (1945 to 1970) the presentation revolves around general themes, e.g. education, consumption, housing and social security, that concern all European countries. In their effort to accentuate the similarities or the convergences rather than the disparities, the designers aim to stress processes and events originating in Europe, spread across the continent and remaining significant for understanding Europe at the beginning of the twentieth-first century.²² Although all countries experience these issues, they respond in very different ways. The original approach to education, for example, using school photographs to demonstrate school life in communist and capitalist European countries alike reveals that pedagogical practices vary within the different member states.

In the layout the main object of postwar mass consumer society, the automobile, appears in a transnational perspective. Featuring a replica of a car

20 Alain Croix and Didier Guyvarc’h, *Timbres en guerre. Les mémoires des deux conflits mondiaux* (Rennes 2016) 98.

21 Yannick Van Praag, *Musées, mémoire et Shoah, Mémoire d’Auschwitz asbl*, March 2018. <http://>

www.auschwitz.be/images/_expertises/2018-van_praag-musees_memoire_shoah.pdf (accessed April 2018).

22 Taja Vovk van Gaal and Christine Dupont, ‘The House of European History’, 49.

produced in Yugoslavia under license from Fiat, the presentation recalls that despite car ownership becoming available ‘to increasing numbers of people’ in Eastern Europe, waiting several years to acquire an automobile remained inevitable.²³

In the fifth theme in ‘Shattering Certainties’, which extends from the 1970s to the present, the rather ambiguous title is ‘Communism under Pressure’. This presentation emphasises the regime rather than the lives of the people, focusing on the contradictions between communist propaganda and daily reality and covering the opposition movements before continuing to the events of 1989. The phenomena are seen from a European perspective, transcending the national viewpoint.

This transnational perspective clearly irks those in present-day Europe who support renationalisation of history. From their point of view, the HEH threatens national identities. With few exceptions, visitors will not find specific elements from the history of individual countries. As different contexts are difficult to integrate in a common melting pot, the history of some states is presented marginally and tends to escape common schemes. Such cases include Greece, Spain and Portugal, which are viewed from the perspective of the end of the dictatorships in Southern Europe.

HEH and BELVUE, projects with opposing aims?

With the exception of some very specific features that cannot be captured in a transnational perspective, the HEH is clearly not designed to enrich knowledge about national history. Remarkably, the opening of the HEH has coincided with a new tour at the Belgian history museum BELVUE since July 2016. Understandably, the BELVUE features a resolutely national perspective. Despite being *a priori* opposite projects, these museums nonetheless merit comparison. In understanding both Belgium and Europe, the complementarity is striking. In both cases, the idea of Belgium and that of Europe inspire debate: what does it mean to be Belgian and what does it mean to be European? Critique and question marks abound in the responses. Debates about the definition of Belgian and European identities are remarkably similar.

Apart from a historical gallery composed of emblematic objects (the material memory of a country), the tour at the new BELVUE revolves around seven topics considered essential for understanding Belgium. Each room is devoted to a single topic. At the HEH fourteen themes are presented briefly without any subsequent elaboration. Before covering these themes, the respective positions of the objects in the two museums merit consideration. At the HEH, they are presented as important symbols of key historical interest. At

23 *House of European History, Guidebook. Permanent Exhibition* (Luxembourg 2018) 102.



BELvue Museum. Photo by Björn Lácay, 27 May 2017.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dustpuppy/523908841/in/album-72157600294026474/>.

the BELVUE, they appear within a chronological progression, illustrating the richness and diversity of Belgium but completely disconnected, even spatially, from any thematic approach. This arrangement serves the target national audience by explaining the function and the history of Belgium. Situated in a wing of the Royal Palace in Brussels, however, the BELVUE also draws an international audience that is probably more interested in a gallery of material memory. A diversified audience is also relevant for the HEH and makes for an infinitely more complex challenge. This tour needs to resonate with all groups within the European Union, Europeans from outside the Union and even non-European visitors.

The seven themes presented at the BELVUE are democracy, prosperity, solidarity, pluralism, migration, languages and Europe. These themes also figure at the HEH, albeit implicitly and in a broader context. Despite the thematic similarities, the perspectives are very different. At the BELVUE, the perspective is largely optimistic, with initially challenging situations culminating in positive outcomes. Such an interpretation of history is resolutely and perhaps overly optimistic. At the HEH, the thread is much more convoluted and the tour less positive, because it becomes entangled in current Europe predicaments. At the BELVUE, for example, the solidarity theme opens with a depiction of poverty and misery in the nineteenth century, when social security did not exist. This presentation culminates in an animated rendition of the benefits of Belgian social security, omitting Belgians who remain at the margins of the system today and live in deep poverty. In another example, the room devoted to migration on the one hand emphasises the plight of Belgians forced into exile during the hardships of the nineteenth century or the war, while on the other hand, Belgium is depicted as welcoming migrant groups. This last aspect is personalised by featuring emblematic objects presented by witnesses. On the wall a map indicates the most common places of origin of migrants arriving in Belgium. Some current aspects are not represented here, including refugee issues and the challenges of a multicultural society. At the end of the HEH tour, the presentation of these same issues is much gloomier, e.g. the shoe of a child locked in a bowl to symbolise the humanitarian disaster of the refugee crisis and the tragic outcome of clandestine immigration. The economic crisis that has shaken the world since 2008 and the subsequent austerity policies frame the explanation of Euroscepticism and the rise of extreme right populist and nationalist movements in several European countries.

Chronology obviously matters in these two sites dedicated to conveying historical messages. At the BELVUE, it is present in each of the rooms but without any thematic alignment to match socio-economic issues with social debate from an unclear political reversal. Situating the classical chronology of Belgian history in the gallery of objects rather than in the thematic rooms makes these parallels still harder to discern. Due to its transnational approach, the HEH has greater discretion. With few exceptions, specific dates carry less weight than long-term developments, since the HEH

revolves around chronological milestones that make sense of widely diverging national realities.

At the entrance to each room in the BELVUE, visitors are invited to listen to witnesses from the three national communities and to testimonies about migration movements that have shaped Belgian society. Their words make us wonder what monarchy represents today. What does social security offer? How can we meet the challenge of an inclusive society? The answers are presented in a concise and lively manner and introduce each of the themes covered. The present serves as a guide to explore the past here and has inspired the designers of the HEH as well. Brief interviews demonstrate to what extent certain questions raise debate in present-day Belgian society. The HEH features testimonies from select renowned intellectuals to inspire reflection. At the BELVUE interviews with people on the street introduce a strategy of identification. At the HEH, visitor impressions conclude the tour. The interactive display 'Europa and you' ask visitors four questions about each of the six themes: defence, democracy, asylum applicants, the expansion, the global market and deterioration at the borders. The results are displayed and are continuously adapted to reflect the input from visitors.²⁴

The two museums share certain questions and certain opinions, albeit on a different scale: how does the state implement the social security system? How is democracy ensured? And how can visitors reconcile multilingualism, respect for differences and minorities with efficiency?

While the HEH cannot incorporate all national histories, the BELVUE marginalises international issues. The HEH addresses the two world wars that have ravaged Europe at great length, but the BELVUE treats them as details, despite the general understanding that these wars weigh heavily on representation and memory debates in Belgium. In this respect, a fissure separates the HEH and the BELVUE. While the HEH allocates an essential role to this negative memory of Europe, the BELVUE leaves it curiously open and marginalises the history of the two world wars. Neither museum addresses culture in detail. Obviously, not one but several cultures would need to be covered raising questions about selection. Moreover, culture may be seen as amply represented at many other museums. Notwithstanding the differences in approach, scope, budget and geographic coverage, at both museums Europe and Belgium alike qualify as a legitimate project.

These considerations aside, both the HEH and BELVUE have succeeded in creating an environment that encourages discussion. Hopefully, such discussion will not be limited to historians but will spread throughout society. These new museums figure in public debates, simultaneously renewing the function of the museum initially conceived to promote a state, an artist or a period. By now, museums participate in the democratic process that takes

24 Information supplied by Christine Dupont of the HEH, November 2017.

place both in Belgium and in Europe. In both cases, choices are made by the designers and confirmed by different committees of scholars. The time has come for visitors to embrace the debate entrusted to them, and for those running museums to listen, casting aside the idea of avoiding at all costs being ‘trapped’ in consensus, since the outcome of the debate, undertaken in respect and receptiveness, may benefit democracy. Or, as the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe expressed it: ‘If one insists too much on consensus and the refusal of confrontation, the result may be apathy and loss of interest in political participation’.²⁵ At a time when museums want to be places of debate, let us not neglect the opportunities they offer.

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25 See Olivier Starquit, ‘Radicaliser la démocratie: de la dimension agonistique de la démocratie’, <http://www.territoires-memoire.be/am/160-aide-memoire-78/1349-radicaliser-la->

[democratie-de-la-dimension-agonistique-de-la-democratie](http://www.territoires-memoire.be/am/160-aide-memoire-78/1349-radicaliser-la-democratie-de-la-dimension-agonistique-de-la-democratie) (accessed November 2017). See also Chantal Mouffe, *L’illusion du consensus* (Paris 2016).