



# Social Capital, Museums, Learning and Social Integration in Europe

Museums and Learning as Tools for Fostering Social Cohesion, Identity, Trust, and Social Capital

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## **Abstract**

Foreigners and other community members can be seen as assets, a source of capital. Social cohesion is determinative to a society evolving into a successful union rather than a mere sum of individual interests. Developing common interests will encourage people to expand their networks and communities. Belonging, or the perception thereof, implies that members consider the benefits of other group members in their utility function. Trust is rooted in the expectation of receiving benefits from other group members or society at large. Reciprocity is closely tied to trust and serves as a potent adhesive for fostering social capital. Social capital is critical for nurturing trust, democracy, and, consequently, well-being and economic development within a society. In this chapter, we propose museums and learning as tools for fostering social cohesion, identity, trust, and social capital. We argue that museums serve as social gathering places within a new paradigm for lifelong learning, emphasising the social aspects of learning and positioning museums as learning organisations that contribute to societal development beyond their physical walls. Therefore, we contend that museums play a significant role in building social capital and promoting social integration.

**Keywords:** Social capital, human capital, social cohesion, trust, democracy, museums, learning, economic growth, social welfare, sustainability

## **Introduction**

Social cohesion can be considered a priority and a positive benefit for any developed society; it is a tool for making a society more successful and sustainable, developing the common interest more so than the sum of individual interests. It is also a way of expanding the identity of belonging to a community, which not only leads to more economic exchanges but also develops a better environment for peace and co-living. A significant portion of the European Union's budget, for example, is dedicated to policies favouring social cohesion within the union, and many of the reforms adopted within the union are also aimed at this objective (Matti et al., 2023). It is important to remember that individual interests recently led an important member to withdraw from the European Union.

Social capital is a resource that can have multiple forms of impact on the objective of achieving a more cohesive society, and museums are a source for generating this resource. Social capital is an intangible value present in society and derives directly from the social relations between the members of a group or community. By translation, the benefit affects not only the individual but also society. A country with a strong social relations network is a country with strong potential for economic development, as well as a society with better indices of democracy, equality, and well-being, as has been shown in many studies (Putnam et al., 1993; Helliwell and Putnam, 1995; Whiteley, 2002; Iyer et al., 2005; Woolcock, 1998; Chou, 2003). The value that social relations bring to a country's welfare and economy is related to the economic capital that is also linked to the value of human capital.

A society with strong human capital will always have more value to contribute to its stock of social capital and consequently to its economic development and welfare. Individuals learn that they can obtain benefits from social relations for their individual economy and quality of life, which favours trust in the rest of the group, which can also translate into increased trust in society if the group develops activities that contribute positively to its development. We see the social capital of an individual as the value of the information and the value of the goods and services to which individuals have access through their social network. This value will be a function of the value of human capital and the value of economic capital.

A person whose social network has greater human capital and, consequently, advanced knowledge will potentially have access to more valuable information that will bring great economic and welfare gains. An individual whose social capital network has high economic

capital also potentially has access to goods and services that provide a higher level of well-being. The value of an individual's social capital is therefore not only a function of the density of his or her social network but also of the value of his or her human and economic capital.

In this article, we develop the concept of social capital as a means of fostering social cohesion, and we offer the use of museums as a tool for channelling knowledge formation and learning.

Museums are a social meeting place where people with common interests can meet in the exhibition halls, cafeterias and restaurants, or outdoor spaces. These can act as a meeting point for different social and ethnic groups and favour the creation of a space for developing social networks and common learning, thus promoting the formation of social capital, trust, and social cohesion.

Learning is always social. Museums as instruments of knowledge and learning are a source of human capital. Learning in museums is an efficient instrument for encouraging socialisation and for favouring and consolidating the formation of social networks. Museums are institutions designed to foster individual and collective social capital and social cohesion. Museums that develop activities focused on learning and cultural exchange are more effective at building knowledge, human capital, and, consequently, private and collective social capital.

Museums are a meeting point where not only can spontaneous social relations be fostered but also those generated by programmed activities. Programmed activities, which focus on learning, bring together people with a common interest in the knowledge being transmitted. If the aim is to develop and foster social relations, social capital, and social cohesion, then museums, as a meeting point for people with common interests, serve as an additional building block in society. Programmed activities reinforce museums' efficiency in their role of forming social capital, as such activities allow museums to focus on favouring points of common interest between different social groups and, furthermore, because through learning and knowledge such activities favour the formation of human capital, which is a source of social capital.

This article begins with a section devoted to developing an understanding of the concept of social capital. The article then develops the relationship with trust, reciprocity, and social cohesion and describes the benefits of developing social capital. Finally, it describes the role that museums can play in the formation of social capital and in the development of a more cohesive society.

## Understanding the concept of social capital

Bourdieu (1986) delineated three forms of capital that an individual must possess and develop throughout their life, and which determine their success, wealth, and well-being: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. **Economic capital** is related to financial and material assets. **Cultural capital** involves the accumulation of knowledge and competencies by way of education and social interaction. Generally, individuals possessing higher levels of economic and cultural capital are afforded greater opportunities for success within society. The third form of capital with a significant influence on an individual's wealth and quality of life is **social capital**. Social capital comprises the actual or potential resources accessible by an individual by virtue of their membership in social networks, whether these networks are institutionalised or informal. These resources may be assets or services, but they also include the information, influence, and support that facilitate access to the employment, educational, and social opportunities that enhance an individual's living conditions. Social capital is considered an intangible concept that generates real benefits individually and for the community.

Social capital takes time to accumulate and to generate a tendency that will persist in the future. Putnam et al. (1993) found that in Italy, regions with high levels of social capital, associated with a high degree of civic engagement and societal trust, tend to have better governance and greater economic development. Corruption, lack of cooperation, and lack of trust are linked with lower levels of democratic development. Putnam concluded that, in general, societies with higher social capital, generated by greater civic participation and higher levels of trust, promote social cohesion and democratic quality. For Herreros (2017), social capital is an intangible resource accessible through connection to a social network. It is information. Like human and physical capital, it is a resource that facilitates the achievement of certain goals. Membership in social networks determines an individual's potential stock of social capital (Sandefur and Laumann, 1988). Closed networks or strong ties can make it easier to obtain information.

Although social relationships are a source of social capital, they do not constitute social capital in and of themselves. Social capital consists simply of derived resources. We regard social capital as more than mere information; it is also access to assets and services obtained from members of the social network. We see an individual's social capital as the value of the information and the goods and services to which the individual has access through their social network. This value will depend on the value of the human capital and the value of the economic capital. A person with a social network that has greater human capital, and

consequently advanced knowledge, will potentially have access to higher-value information that will bring them significant economic gains and well-being. A person with a social network that has a high level of economic capital also has potential access to goods and services that will provide a greater level of well-being. Therefore, the value of an individual's social capital depends not only on the density of their social network but also on the value of the human and economic capital within it.

As regards information, it represents the collective stock of knowledge that circulates within society and is accessible to its members. This knowledge can be utilised for the benefit of individuals, groups, or society. This definition has two components. First, we refer to social capital as a stock; second, we refer to the flow of knowledge within society. A country with a high level of knowledge, derived from substantial human capital and a high level of innovation, can accumulate significant knowledge. However, if the dissemination of this information is poor, the capacity to generate wealth will be limited. Social networks function as the “highways” along which knowledge spreads within a society, creating wealth and well-being. Consider two farmers producing olives in the same valley, with similar conditions and locations. The difference is that one farmer is a member of a cooperative, while the other has chosen to operate independently. A farmer who remains isolated has less potential for generating wealth than a farmer who is part of a community of farmers, where interactions facilitate the generation and exchange of knowledge that will be transformed into well-being and wealth. The farmer belonging to the cooperative gains advantages that can make his business more profitable. Part of his benefit stems from the utilisation of communal resources, such as joint olive commercialisation or shared resources that reduce costs.

However, these benefits may not be classified as social capital. By interacting with each other, the farmers share information about farming techniques or which olive species might be more productive for oil production. This kind of knowledge, which enhances the benefits to farmers who are members of a community, is what we could consider social capital. This concept can be scaled up to apply to a society. Societies with a greater number of civic associations and social relationships increase their knowledge base, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of the country.

On the other hand, the quality of the knowledge shared is also crucial. A society characterised by higher levels of human capital, innovation culture, and development tends to generate greater wealth and well-being. For example, consider two farming cooperatives; a cooperative

located in an area with a long tradition of innovation and higher human capital is likely to produce higher levels of wealth and well-being than a cooperative in a less innovative area with a lower level of human capital.

### **Social capital, trust and reciprocity, and social cohesion**

Sandefur and Laumann (1988) identified three benefits that the formation of social capital may confer – information, influence and control, and social solidarity – to which we could add social cohesion. It takes time for social capital to accumulate and to generate a tendency that will persist in the future. Social capital is also a source of trust generation within society. The formation of social capital helps individuals to trust society and its institutions and motivates them to contribute positively to the community. Corruption, lack of cooperation, and lack of trust are linked with lower levels of democratic development. As to how social capital is formed, Rothstein and Stolle (2008) used World Values data to present evidence of a positive correlation between the quality of state institutions and the levels of citizens' trust in society and institutions. Countries with lower levels of corruption and greater transparency and institutional efficiency generate higher levels of trust among their citizens towards institutions and society in general. Those countries that have implemented policies to reduce corruption and improve institutional efficiency have increased levels of trust, which is crucial for fostering social cohesion and social capital.

For Newton (2001), an important part of social welfare comes from membership in voluntary organisations in the community. Newton described social capital as a factor that promotes social integration, economic efficiency, and democratic stability. In his work, he distinguished between social and political trust. He found that social trust is correlated with high income, education, and social status, which can be found among those he refers to as the “winners” of society. Political trust, on the other hand, is associated with a well-functioning government and economy, low levels of corruption, economic growth, and unemployment. Public policies and their economic impact can also perpetuate the exclusion and marginalisation of certain social groups in favour of others where opportunities for access to education and the equitable distribution of wealth are limited (Loury, 2000).

Societies based on privileges instead of equal opportunities generate inequality and social exclusion and restrict economic growth. To make the economy and society work, citizens must be involved, and how they are involved in society and in the formation of social capital is

related to trust (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). High levels of social welfare are found in societies that also have high levels of trust, such as Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark. While social capital and trust are highly correlated, and both linked to what Newton (2001) called the winners of society – people with high levels of income, education, and social status – these two concepts are not the same.

Trust can be seen as a result or an element of social capital. Trust is an expectation, not a behaviour. Trust is sometimes seen as an element of social capital, and sometimes because of it. Participation in social networks provides access to social capital resources in the form of reciprocal obligations, which generate trust and private information in the hands of a network's members (Herreros, 2017). Trust is grounded in an expectation of the preferences of other people. If we trust others, it is because we think the others are trustworthy and we will face less social uncertainty. This is related to what we expect to receive from other persons. Social capital involves reciprocity. People invest in social relations because they think they will receive benefits from it. These benefits are expected to be received directly from other group members or from society in general. Belonging to a social network is a source of social capital. The generosity of its members is based on reciprocity or altruism and leads to a sense of group belonging, which develops cohesion in the group and favours integration.

Generosity implies that individuals include the utility of other members of society in their utility functions so that their actions benefit others without necessarily generating a direct benefit to themselves. This apparent sense of altruism towards members of one's group may arise because the individual expects to receive benefits from groups other than his own, or because he has already received benefits from society on other occasions that have led to this feeling of reciprocity.

The members of the social network offer their information, their services, and their actions because they have received or expect to receive at some point. This reception may come from other members of the group or from other groups or networks in society. Reciprocity is a source of trust and social cohesion. The expectation of benefits from society raises the individual's confidence and encourages him or her to provide benefit to others. Generosity and reciprocity build trust and increase the feeling of belonging to a group, which builds social cohesion and favours social integration.

The perception of belonging to a group implies that members also expect to receive benefits from society at large and not just from other members. One way to transform individual trust into social trust is through participation in civic social networks. (Putnam et al., 1993). Herreros (2017) discussed how social trust can be built in a society: participation in social networks can lead to an individual's trust in society growing if he has a good perception of his participation in the social network. This can contribute to increased trust in his society. The individual learns to receive signals from his group that he can trust. Interaction between individuals in associations and groups where deliberation and discussion take place is a source of social capital because of the information that is generated. Finally, belonging to a social network where members obtain benefits that are transformed into trust can lead them to their increased trust in the rest of society. The losses they may have experienced with unknown individuals can be compensated for by members of their groups.

### **Benefits of developing social capital**

Increasing social capital is a way to expand economic development, well-being, and social cohesion (D. Lee, 2013; Putnam et al., 1993). The academic literature provides ample evidence supporting the influence of social capital on social and economic development. Indeed, social capital has a significant impact on economic development (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Woolcock, 1998; Whiteley, 2002; Helliwell and Putnam, 1995).

Chou (2006) demonstrated the macroeconomic impact of social capital on human capital development and financial development, through its effects on collective trust and social norms, as well as by facilitating collaboration and business innovation. Rupasingha (2000) found evidence that per capital income grows more rapidly in countries with a high level of social capital.

Knack and Keefer (1997) used a sample of 29 countries to demonstrate that social capital significantly influences indicators of trust and civic norms. These are more pronounced in societies with higher and more equitable incomes, less predatory governance, and populations with better education and ethnic homogeneity. Their findings indicate that trust and civic cooperation are positively associated with stronger economic performance. Contrary to Putnam's findings, they observed no correlation between associational activity and economic performance. Additionally, they found that trust and norms of civic cooperation are more robust in countries with formal institutions that effectively protect property and contract rights.



Utilising cross-country data, Knack (2003) examined the relationship between social trust, group formation, and economic growth in various countries. The study reveals that social trust and social participation exert a positive influence on economic growth. The author posits that policies aimed at developing and consolidating social capital are as crucial as traditional economic growth policies. This leads to the conclusion that, in general, initiatives designed to strengthen social cohesion can yield long-term economic development benefits.

Coleman (1994) produced one of the pioneering works highlighting the role of social capital in human capital formation. Becker (1993) discussed investment in the skills and knowledge that individuals acquire through education and work experience. Investment in human capital has a direct impact on individuals' productivity and income, affecting both their personal well-being and a country's economic development. Becker argued that, like physical capital, human capital can be cultivated and has a direct impact on individuals' productivity and earnings. This investment in human capital influences not only individual welfare but also a country's overall economic development.

La Porta et al. (1997) and Putnam et al. (1993) found evidence that in countries with strong hierarchical religions, particularly Catholic countries, there is a negative correlation with trust, and consequently with the formation of social capital and social cohesion. The reason for this is the imposition of a vertical hierarchical model that limits cooperation. This hierarchical structure tends to inhibit the development of the horizontal networks and trust relationships that are crucial for building social capital. The vertical nature of these religious institutions may discourage the formation of autonomous civic associations and reduce interpersonal trust outside of family or close-knit groups, potentially impacting broader societal cooperation and economic development.

Correspondingly, Klein (2011) found that social capital has a positive effect on well-being and trust, both in other members of a society and in institutions. Hamilton et al. (2016) utilised data from the Gallup World Poll to present empirical evidence that links social capital and trust with levels of well-being. They underscored the importance of social capital as a source of social well-being. Social relationships and social cohesion are pivotal to both individual and collective well-being. Trust in institutions and interpersonal trust are used as indicators of social capital; higher levels of societal trust are associated with greater individual happiness and satisfaction. Increased trust in institutions corresponds with greater well-being. Hamilton et al.

(2016) proposed that inequality can erode social capital and trust. Moreover, more egalitarian societies consistently demonstrate higher levels of trust and cohesion.

Woolcock (1998) suggested that social capital exerts a significant and positive influence on the sustainable economic development of a society by facilitating access to information and opportunities. This leads to greater prosperity, as members are more inclined to collaborate and share resources, which also enhances social cohesion. Woolcock highlighted that building social capital can be achieved by encouraging citizen participation in organisations and associations that promote cooperation and trust. This approach offers an effective strategy for combatting poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. There is no guarantee that social capital will improve well-being if knowledge is used to destroy human or physical capital. Human knowledge can be used to improve life conditions with medicines but also to destroy them with arms and bombs. Olson (1982) argued that not all forms of political and social organisation are conducive to economic development and well-being. Knack (2003) asserted that certain social groups that prioritise individual interests and do not promote cooperative habits and trust in society and institutions can negatively impact economic efficiency and social cohesion.

### **Museums and social capital**

A museum is a social space for learning and eventually for creating social capital, and consequently, social cohesion. Lee (2013) in his work studied how an art experience involving different ethnic and cultural groups turned out to be a source of fostering mutual respect, tolerance towards differences, trust, empathy, a sense of oneness, solidarity, and group cohesion.

There are fewer works to be found that explore the impact of museums on social capital. Camarero et al. (2011) highlighted that collaboration between external agents and museum networks is a primary source for the success of a museum and its capacity for innovation. Murzyn y Dzialek (2013) explored how cultural heritage can be used as a tool to build social capital in a community, fostering social cohesion and community identity. The preservation and promotion of a society's heritage fosters civic participation, a sense of belonging, and collaboration among social groups, promoting the development of social networks. Beel and Wallace (2018) emphasised that cultural practices and heritage facilitate the creation of social networks and therefore capital formation, even when digital platforms are used.

## **The museum institution as an actor in societal development**

The museum is a social meeting place, often with many social spaces, such as exhibitions, cafés, restaurants, and outdoor areas. That a museum is also an arena for lifelong learning is perhaps not as well known. What is probably least known is the connection between the museum as a social meeting place and the museum as a source of lifelong learning.

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), museums are not primarily social meeting places or institutions of teaching and learning (Eriksen, 2009, p. 13). ICOM describes itself as “the international organisation of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world’s natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible” (ICOM, 2023, p. 3).

The museum organisation has traditionally been more focused on monologue than dialogue with the surrounding community. At the same time, ICOM’s own definition contains formulations that include the museum as an institution that engages in education, studies and experiences (Sonne and Banik, 2021, p. 23).

A broader definition of the museum institution has been developed by ICOM’s Standing Committee for the Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials for ICOM’s Executive Board. The proposal showed a willingness to change the direction of museums towards being institutions that engage more clearly in issues such as democracy, inclusion, equal rights, active partnerships, human dignity, social justice, and global equality. The proposal also showed a willingness to develop the museum institution into social meeting places with equal access for everyone to make use of cultural heritage:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

(Steen, 2019; Sonne and Banik, 2021, pp. 23–24)

The proposal goes on to state that

museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret,

exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

(Steen, 2019; Sonne and Banik, 2021, pp. 23–24)

The proposal was rejected in 2019 when it came up for a vote at ICOM's extraordinary general meeting. However, the confrontation within ICOM in the spring and summer of 2019 revealed where the fronts in the global museum world are heading. On the one hand, there is a goal for the museum to be an active player in societal development, such as in relation to the UN's sustainability goals. On the other hand, there is a desire to maintain the museum's role as in the definition that ICOM has already adopted (Steen, 2019; Sonne and Banik, 2021, p. 24).

ICOM's definition of museums is the starting point for museum operations in Europe. The idea that culture, and thus the museum, was a good without extensive political governance has been replaced with result-oriented demands. In the 2000s, the tendency is that museums will no longer just manage, research, preserve, and communicate. They should now know their audience and be a resource in society by being relevant and accessible and contributing to social inclusion and learning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004, p. 152). The British cultural heritage researcher Graham Black goes so far as to claim that "the best museums inspire, excite, empower, give confidence and help individuals and communities grow" (Black, 2009, p. 3).

The museum sector has gone from focusing on management and one-way communication from museum to visitor to having a new awareness of the public's experiences and learning. This implies a recognition of the many paths that knowledge acquisition may follow and the need for museums to be far more responsive to the public (Hylland, 2017, pp. 88–89).

Although many museums are still oriented towards the collections, it can be said that with the growth of market thinking in museums, with a focus on making money, there is a shift in museums' overall orientation to a focus on the public, learning, and, not least, experience. This is a paradigm shift that will have a major influence on museum organisations in relation to what they do and what skills their employees have.

In the wake of this, a recognition has emerged that museums must be seen as a social meeting place and an arena for lifelong learning. This raises questions about what the public is really left with after a visit and how the museum can be relevant to more people. The result is a more systematic way of thinking about learning practices, and the development of special tools for planning and evaluating the informal learning that takes place in such institutions.

Traditionally, the museum is not an educational or learning institution. As a genre, the museum is tasked with collection, preservation, research, and dissemination. As with the concepts of education and learning, the concept of genre has a social aspect to which the museum as an institution has adapted over many years (Eriksen, 2009, p. 15). Conceiving an institution such as a museum in a context of formal, informal, or non-formal learning represents a break with the previous genre of the museum, or at least a break with how the museum was previously seen. However, a changing world means that institutions also change, and that new openings and opportunities arise, even for museums (Sonne and Banik, 2021, p. 27).

An important turning point for museums occurred in 1996, when the new strategy for lifelong learning was introduced by the OECD, and everyone needed to begin working with concepts such as formal learning, informal learning, and non-formal learning within the new learning paradigm. Previously, learning had been perceived as occurring in formal institutions of education, such as schools, colleges, and universities. Learning now became something through which even cultural heritage institutions such as archives, libraries, and museums could define themselves (Sonne and Banik, 2021, p. 28).

The museum does not usually engage in formal learning. Rather, it is a supplement or a contributor to a school or university, where formal learning is organised and structured in relation to clearly defined learning objectives. More typically, the museum contributes to informal learning. This may happen, for example, when visitors walk around the museum and learn new things in an unorganised way, such as by looking at an exhibition or perhaps through casual conversations with others. In principle, the possibilities for informal learning are unlimited (OECD, 2021).

Museums' contribution to non-formal learning is perhaps what extends their original activity the most (Eriksen, 2009, p. 13). Non-formal learning is often organised, but not necessarily via specific training objectives. In addition, the mediator or museum educator is often not professionally trained – for example, as a teacher or a kindergarten teacher. Often the term “non-formal learning” is defined as being between formal and informal learning (OECD, 2021). For museums, being connected with lifelong learning has brought many new development opportunities. The political and social recognition of museums' learning and teaching endeavours has been growing in recent years (*ibid.*). In principle, museums can be involved in all areas of lifelong learning (Sonne and Banik, 2021, pp. 27–28).

In 2006, the European analysis agency KEA submitted a report to the European Commission on the economic, political, and social dimensions of culture (KEA, 2006). Based on the Lisbon Strategy's growth targets and the European Commission's agenda for a digital agenda for Europe, it was argued that the cultural and creative sectors should be included in the Lisbon Strategy's development targets for economic growth and job creation (European Commission, 2018).

Furthermore, Pier Luigi Sacco, an Italian professor of cultural economics, among others, developed the term "culture's generation 3.0", in which respect he argued that culture should be perceived as an integral part of the growth economy based on innovation and as part of lifelong learning (Sacco, 2011, pp. 6–9). According to Sacco, culture can be seen from three different angles: cost-driven, investment-driven, and innovation-driven.

According to Sacco, in generation 3.0, culture generates economic value and can be seen as something that complements other areas of society. This occurs through direct and indirect spill-over effects from culture into other areas of society, such as by creating innovation, entrepreneurship, economic growth, welfare, social cohesion, lifelong learning, identity development, and sustainability (Sacco, 2011, pp. 1–3). Some areas of innovation-driven culture may be capacity-building via lifelong learning and social inclusion. In principle, the possibilities are limitless.

Most importantly, Sacco's contribution equated culture and education by defining cultural participation as a prerequisite for innovation and economic growth in the same way as education. Sacco thus influenced how we usually perceive culture and cultural heritage, shifting it away from something that costs money and requires a surplus in society towards something that is an important cause of innovation and growth, and that society thus cannot afford *not* to invest in (Sacco, 2011, p. 6). As a result of this way of seeing culture, culture gradually became more and more integrated into the EU's strategies for competitiveness and social cohesion (Sonne and Banik, 2021, p. 31).

By 2018, European cultural policy was predominantly focused on cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. However, a strategy document from 2007 pointed out that, as a goal of European cultural policy, it should promote culture as a catalyst for creativity, which was included in the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment. Later, the European agenda for culture received a completely different emphasis. Culture is now increasingly seen as an engine for economic development (European Commission, 2018, p. 4).

Similarly, the social dimension was later emphasised in European cultural policy. Among other things, cultural heritage should be promoted as a resource that can be used to transform society by developing links between culture, education, social areas, urban planning, research, and innovation. This includes creating links between culture, health, and well-being (European Commission, 2018, pp. 2–3).

The European agenda for culture was closely linked to the programme for Creative Europe (2018), with a focus on competitiveness, innovation, and social inclusion. This programme highlighted the importance of culture and cultural heritage in European economic, social, and external cooperation, with a view to strengthening Europe’s competitiveness. There has even been discussion about culture-based creativity related to education (European Commission, 2018).

Culture, including museums, has moved into a new area that is largely about maximising benefits for society, individuals, and organisations via innovation and development that go beyond what the cultural area has traditionally dealt with. Culture and cultural heritage are now more and more about producing added value through innovation. This development largely reflects what Sacco defined in 2011 as culture’s generation 3.0 (Sacco, 2011, pp. 3–4).

Learning is a social activity. Although the individual’s learning is typically the learning we put at the centre, learning does not take place in isolation from a social context. The combination of the terms “social” and “learning” is important to note (Jarvis, 2007, pp. 1–2).

In other words, learning is a process of transforming all of our experiences via thoughts, actions, and feelings, by which we thus transform ourselves as we continue to build perceptions of an external world in our own biography. It is not possible to completely detach oneself from a social context when learning something new. This contrasts with, for example, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that we must detach ourselves from the influence of others to be fully and completely true to ourselves. According to Jarvis, this is not entirely possible, as there will always be social contexts that influence our development and thus our transformations due to learning processes. Learning is thus something social and typically something that is also socially constructed (Jarvis, 2007, pp. 5–7).

We as humans learn new things in social contexts. The importance of the social aspect of learning is recognised in the EU’s strategy for key competences and lifelong learning. The EU key competences include a social key competence, which the EU defines as the ability to work together with others in a constructive way and handle conflicts in an inclusive and supportive

context. Social competence also relates to understanding the widely accepted patterns of behaviour and rules for communication in different societies and environments. The skills include the ability to learn and work with others and seek support, when relevant, and to manage one's working life and social interaction effectively. The individual should be able to communicate constructively in different environments, collaborate in teams, and be able to negotiate. This involves being able to show tolerance, express and understand different points of view, and be able to create trust and feel empathy (European Union, 2006, p. 10). The social key competence is based on a positive attitude to one's personal, social, and physical well-being and to lifelong learning. It is attitudinally based on cooperation, impact, and integrity. This implies respect for the diversity of others and their needs and being prepared both to overcome prejudice and to compromise (European Union, 2006, p. 10).

Situating the museum as a social meeting place for lifelong learning is therefore extremely relevant. Not only is it a good idea in terms of scientific learning theory, it is also linked with political objectives for lifelong learning with a focus on social competence development, which is part of a wider societal development strategy to engender economic, social, and sustainable development. Social capital development and social inclusion are a part of this development.

The museum as an institution is increasingly a social space where people can meet. It is also increasingly an arena for lifelong learning and for formal, informal, and especially non-formal learning. The museum is thus developing into a social meeting place for lifelong learning. It can thus be said that the museum is moving away from the traditional collection orientation towards an audience orientation with a focus on both learning and experiences. Such movement away from being a supply-oriented institution towards being a demand-oriented institution has many advantages, but naturally also many challenges. On the positive side, the museum as a social meeting place and an arena for lifelong learning is more relevant to society. The museum can thus connect to political objectives by contributing to the development of social capital, social inclusion, social cohesion, economic growth, and sustainability (Sonne and Banik, 2021, p. 42). Museums have much to offer in this regard. This is evident from the many policy documents with goals and strategies developed by the EU in recent decades.

Opportunities also entail challenges, such as the challenge of developing museums' own capacity. This transformation is probably well underway in many European museums, encouraged by a European cultural policy that focuses on culture and cultural heritage as having more than just intrinsic value. European cultural policy expects museums to be a part



of the greater overall strategy for society's development, which, among other things, involves development towards contributing to social capital development and social inclusion. This can be described as a paradigm shift in the museum institution's orientation and activities.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have argued that museums are learning spaces that have good preconditions for contributing to social capital development and social integration in Europe. Our point of departure was the concept of social capital, which we argued is critical for nurturing trust, democracy, and, consequently, well-being and economic development within a society. We have proposed museums and learning as tools for fostering social cohesion, identity, trust, and social capital. We have argued that museums serve as social gathering places within a new paradigm of lifelong learning, emphasising the social aspects of learning and positioning museums as learning organisations that contribute to societal development beyond their physical walls. On this basis, we contend that museums play a significant role in building social capital and promoting social integration. Finally, we argue that the more the museum as an institution perceives itself as an actor producing added value and innovation by way of learning, the more the museum institution will be capable of contributing to building social capital development and thus promoting social integration.

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