

How the Berlin museums acquired the Benin Bronzes and battles against colonial culture of museums in the West CORRECTED VERSION

Hari Kumar, January 2022

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After much bluster the Berlin Humboldt Forum finally agreed to return to Nigeria its collection of the 'Benin Bronzes'. What role do the self-dubbed, 'great' museums of the Western world play in colonialism? What are these Bronzes, how did many end up in Berlin? What do we know about their return and the role of anti-colonial activists?

1. World museums gloss over brutal acquisitions

Walking through museums we are often awed by the beautiful artefacts. The most famous museums dub themselves a venue of "the worlds civilisation!"¹ Some believe this and do not see any blood of former owners or makers dripping over the art. But an important image that should come to mind is the violent, physical robbery of the colonies. This was fused into a core racism around enslavement, as Marx put it:

"The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation."²

This 'primitive accumulation', or *looting or stealing*, of wealth from the colonies on an astronomic scale is often recognized. But less appreciation was given to the systematic plunder of specific artistic, religious, artifacts of colonies. Ripped away from context, they were presented as 'art objects' or 'ethnic' resources. Only recently have exhibit plaques hinted at their true history. How did the Benin Bronzes come to be in Berlin? The answer lies in the colonial 'scramble for Africa'.

2. The Niger River and Benin in the 'Scramble for Africa'

A seaman John Lok first brought slaves from Africa to England in 1555.³ But colonists in Africa lagged behind their peers in India or the Americas, and the 'African Company' of England started only in 1588.⁴ In 1712 the slave trade escalated after England secured a monopoly to supply slaves to Spanish colonies. But the trans-Atlantic trade became untenable by end century. Increasingly, several revolts broke out³⁻⁴ (San Domingue 1791 with the short-lived but critical Haiti 'Black Jacobins' of Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1804; Barbados 1816; Guyana 1823; Jamaica 1831). Moreover eager to increase huge fortunes, sugar plantation-owners produced surpluses. Equally important, was the dramatic agitation of English workers urging reforms, including of the slave trade. It was widely appreciated by workers that, as Marx said:

"Labour in white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in black skin."⁵

¹ Neil McGregor

² Karl Marx, 'Capital Volume One' Chapter Thirty-One: Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm>

³ Adam Hochschild, 'Bury the Chains'; New York 2006; p. 13

⁴ A.L.Morton 'A People's History of England'; p. 205; p. 297; New York 1974

⁵ Capital Vol 1; Part III Chapter VIII sec 3.

Chartist literature was replete with references to slavery, for example in his poem 'The Prisoner to the Slave', Ernest Jones wrote:

"From my cell... I think I am not the less free
Than the serf and the slave who in misery dwell...
What fetters have I that ye have not as well,
Though your dungeon be larger than mine?
For England's a prison fresh modeled from hell."⁶

English workers were in part inspired by democratic struggles of the American Revolution and the French Revolution. For several reasons then, English reform capitalists of the Whigs found it expedient to pass anti-slavery legislation in England in 1807, but with enormous "compensation" to the sugar barons. Later came the Reform Act of 1832.⁷⁻⁸

By 1838 the trans-Atlantic slave trade was over for England, France, Belgium, Germany and other Europeans bar colonial rivals Spain and Portugal. 'Abolition' now became a moral high-ground for England, Belgium and Germany - by which to condemn Spain. All colonial states built their own trans-Atlantic slave trade supplied by local African chieftan slavers. While slavery had been present before colonial trading, it was on a much smaller scale and exploitative intensity.⁴ Suddenly former European colonial states professed 'anti-slavery' policies, in reality to increasingly penetrate Africa.

To minimize competition between the colonial countries for pieces of Africa, the Berlin Conference Treat of 1884-5 attempted to parcel out sovereign areas. But this was futile.⁹ Their professed mission was to 'suppress African' slavers tribe-chiefs – while destroying local culture and society. At Berlin, England, France, Germany and King Leopold of Belgium – sounded high moral notes:

"Article 6 Berlin Treaty:

All the Powers ... bind themselves to watch over the preservation of the native tribes, and to care for the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material wellbeing, and to help in suppressing slavery, and especially the Slave Trade. They shall... protect and favour all religions, scientific or charitable institutions, and undertakings... aimed at instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization. Christian missionaries, scientists, and explorers, with their followers, property, and collections, shall likewise be the objects of special protection."¹⁰

What did these "blessings of civilization" look like? The Earl of Cromer (Sir Evelyn Barer) British overlord over Egypt made the diplomatic language explicitly every day:

⁶ Ernest Jones, 'The Prisoner to the Slaves,' 1851; in 'An Anthology of Chartist literature'; Moscow 1956, p.171

⁷ Luke Thoms; 7 Reasons Why Britain Abolished Slavery
<https://www.historyhit.com/reasons-why-britain-abolished-slavery/>

⁸ Robin Blackburn interview: What really ended slavery?" IS Journal; 2 July 2007; [Issue: 115](http://www.isj.org.uk/robin-blackburn-interview-what-really-ended-slavery/); at <http://www.isj.org.uk/robin-blackburn-interview-what-really-ended-slavery/>

⁹ David Levering-Lewis; 'The Race to Fashoda'; 1987 New York; Weidenfeld & Nicholas; p.10.

¹⁰ M. E. Chamberlain, 'The Scramble for Africa'; Ibid; Chapter 14; 3rd Edition; eBook 1 October 2013; London; Routledge p.44;53

“We need not always inquire too closely what these people, who are all, nationally speaking, more or less in *statu pupillary*, themselves think is best for their own interests.”¹¹

In 1870, only one tenth of Africa was under European control, but by 1914 only “about one tenth – Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Liberia – was not.”¹¹ In fact Lenin had a very similar formulation, tied to the pre-monopolization stage of international imperialism. It was still possible said Lenin, for ‘free grabbing’ of territory – but this would end in an intense struggle for re-division of the world:

“When the colonies of the European powers, for instance, comprised only one-tenth of the territory of Africa (as was the case in 1876), colonial policy was able to develop—by methods other than those of monopoly—by the “free grabbing” of territories, so to speak. But when nine-tenths of Africa had been seized (by 1900), when the whole world had been divided up, there was inevitably ushered in the era of monopoly possession of colonies and, consequently, of particularly intense struggle for the division and the redivision of the world.”¹²

3. What happened in 1897 in the kingdom of Benin?

In replacing the slave trade the most important for Britain, became palm oil from the Niger delta.⁷ In 1879 George Taubman Goldie, with the industrialist, and President of the Royal Geographical Society - Lord Aberdare - formed the National African Company. Goldie ensured British monopoly of navigation on the Niger rivers. This had earned recognition of a British ‘protectorate’ at Berlin.^{8, 13}

But France pushed against the borders of Nigeria and other “English’ territories, full English sway was frustrated. To the North was French Sudan, French Dahomey was in the West; German claims were in Kamerun to the East and the so-called Congo Free State of Belgium’s King Leopold lay to the North West.

Force ensued, with a flotilla of 15 warships under Admiral Harry Rawson. This criss-crossed Africa attacking from Zanzibar on the East coast, to the Ashante kingdoms on the West.⁹ After 1886, the Royal Niger Company vigorously pushed forward in search of palm oil and kernel, and rubber for British industry. Local chiefs monopolized this trade, but were forced into subservient treaties. King Jaja of Opobo was simply seized and exiled for resisting. Benin was the capital of the Edo kingdom of the Oba (King) Ovoramwen Nogbaisi or Drunami, who also resisted treaties, refusing to meet British consuls or traders.

In 1892 a treaty was forcibly imposed on the Oba. However by fetishizing commodities (gum opal and palm kernel), and taxes, the Oba continued to restrict trade. Increasingly British officials openly discussed how and when to remove him from any power. As a first step in 1894 the Oba’s ‘Viceroy’ Nana Olomu was seized, following HMS Alecto

¹¹ M. E. Chamberlain; *Introduction; ‘The Scramble for Africa’; 3rd Edition; 2013; London; p.3-4.*

¹² Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “Imperialism, The Highest Stage Of Capitalism, A Popular Outline X. The Place Of Imperialism In History”; at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch10.htm>

¹³ Dan Hicks, *‘The Brutish Museum’; London 2020; pp. 54; 58; 81-83; 64-68; 113-123; 136-139*

bombardments from the river, and land invasions that destroyed surrounding villages. But the Oba still remained intransigent, despite the terror that had been unleashed, surrounding his capital. In 1897 therefore, the Consul James Philips on behalf of the company and the colonial office, drew up an expedition to begin the process of deposing him.

First on January 4th 1897, Philips went in a column with 8 other white people, and 250 local black carriers. Ostensibly the purpose was to remind the Oba of the 1892 treaty. But Philips fully expected to be refused entry, knowing it was a time of ritual isolation. Hence it was always meant simply to form a pretext to invade. However he was ambushed. Details are unclear but Philips and 5 other whites, and 80 carriers were killed, and about 120 black prisoners taken to Benin city.

To the North of Benin separate British army attacks were taking place between January and February destroying the city of Bida with thousands of deaths. A punitive expedition to Benin itself rapidly followed in February, with 5,000 men supported by 2,500 carriers, ten Royal Navy ships and their battalion of 310 marines. All supported by 38 Maxim guns and 1200 regular rifles. Tens of thousands died in the assault, breaching the later Hague Convention, but also the 1874 Brussels Declaration and the American 'Lieber Code' of 1863, and the St Petersburg Declaration of 1868. Again the British justified it as 'suppressing' cannibalism and slavery. Captain Heneker said it was an: "example of how savage nations as rule have to be cowed by ... heavy losses".¹³ No prisoners were taken, all were slaughtered – estimated in the thousands. The city was in the words of Victorian explorer and colonial ethnologist Mary Kingsley – systematically and carefully 'smashed up'.

The injunction of Lord Wolseley was certainly followed:

"Your first object should be the capture of whatever they prize most, and the destruction or deprivation of which will bring the war rapidly to a conclusion".¹³

The looting of the Palaces, houses and mortuaries though not even now tallied, was likely around 10,000 bronzes, ivories and other objects. The Oba was exiled and died there.

4. What law?

Leaving for now the wanton slaughter of humans and 'laws' of warfare as discussed above, what governs the pillage? Surprising perhaps, but there were even then such laws. The Greek historian Polybius (202-120 BC) wrote:

"The laws and the right of war oblige the victor to ruin and destroy fortresses, forts, towns, people, ships, resources and all other such like things belonging to the enemy in order to undermine his strength while increasing the victor's own. But the pointless destruction of temples, statues and other sacred objects is the action of a madman."¹⁴

¹⁴ Folarin Shyllon; "Benin Bronzes: Something Grave Happened And Imperial Rule Of Law Is Sustaining It!"; *Art Antiquity & Law* (Vol. 24, Issue 3)

In the colonial era during the French Revolution, some objets d'art and scientific objects looted were restituted in 1815, by the Duke of Wellington who stated such acquisitions were contrary to the practice of war between civilised nations. Lord Castlereagh wrote a memorandum at a peace conference, saying the Napoleonic removal of works of art to France was "contrary to every principle of justice and to the usages of modern warfare."¹⁴

By 1899 the Hague Convention on the Laws of War were extended by the 1907 Hague Convention on Laws and Customs of War on Land. In Article 47 of the 1899 Convention a bald statement is simply: "Pillage is formally prohibited." Article 56 states:

"The property of the communes, that of religious, charitable and educational institutions, and those of arts and science, even when state property, shall be treated as private property. All seizure of and destruction, or intentional damage... to historical monuments, works of art or science, is prohibited, and should be made subject of proceedings." ¹⁴

Somehow this was never accepted about the Benin treasures. Neither by the states or their museums which housed them. The Benin kingdom still exists today, but it is now part of Nigeria. Since its' formal Independence in 1960, Nigeria with Benin called for return of Bronzes and artefacts. Until recently they were met by blank refusal.

5. The Benin Bronzes and Western colonial museum culture

Lord Wolseley (see above) had hinted at what underlay the cultural thefts – simple domination. Such seizures disempowered the subdued country's past. At another level of course it was a monetary money-grab at one level. These artefacts rapidly became the subject of anxious acquisition and speculation in the auction houses of the West.

Very quickly their exceptional beauty was appreciated, but more perceptive eyes saw deeper. The British Museum Keeper of Medieval Antiquities (1921-1928) Ormonde Maddock Dalton declared the cast brass reliefs: "a valuable manuscript – a new 'Codex Africanus'".¹³ This judgement was correct, although equally he was both racist and incorrect in other statements on the Bronzes (see below). Indeed the Benin treasures are "some of Africa's most exquisite works". But they were and are - much more. For they were never:

"originally meant to be mere museum pieces...They were objects with religious and archival value... They were made only under royal command. Whenever an event of significance took place, the Oba commissioned the Igun-Eronmwon (members of the guild of bronze casters) to make a bronze-cast of it. Thus, the bronzes were records of events... Those... not made for record keeping, were made for a religious purpose and kept on altars... you will be reading, as it were, the pages torn off from the book of a people's life history; you will be viewing objects of our spirituality, albeit, you may not fully understand its import." ¹⁴

Objects taken to the mother country could be rewritten, often labelled 'inferior' to that of the colonist metropolitan culture. The process mythologised how the 'civilized white race' had brought higher values to the colonies to an 'empty past'. As the colonist explorer Sir Samuel Baker told a Victorian audience in 1874:

“Central Africa... is without a history... (a) savage country... no vestiges of the past – no ancient architecture, neither sculpture, nor even a chiselled stone to prove that the Negro savage of this day is superior to a remote ancestor... We conclude that the races of man which now inhabit [this region] are unchanged from the prehistoric tribes who were the original inhabitants.”¹¹

Museum artefacts are immediately de-contextualised. But they also provide a base for intense study, often by genuinely interested scholars. The varied individual stories of these scholars are complex (see below). Nonetheless, regardless of each individual, their collective work for the colonizer nation helped to consolidate power.

King George II enabled the Act of Parliament to establish the British Museum in 1753, when Sir Hans Sloane gave 79,575 objects to the nation. The first objects added were an Egyptian mummy (1756), and objects from Captain Cook’s voyages (1767-70). Next the Rosetta Stone was added in 1802. From inception its conscious aim was to provide ‘an ordered representation of the world in miniature.’¹⁵ An exhibition at the closely related Victoria and Albert museum was hailed by a newspaper in this way:

“No alien, of whatever race he may be - Teuton, Gaul, Tartar or Mongol - can walk through the marvellous collection at South Kensington and look at the innumerable variations of our national Union Jack, without feeling the enormous influence that England has had, and still has, over every part of the globe. (The Graphic 8 May 1886).”¹⁵

Museums throughout Europe displayed a hierarchy where objects evolved in a linear pattern from less to more advanced civilisations.¹⁵ But supposedly the colonial enslaved could not of course have ‘high art’. This proved an initial hurdle with the Benin pieces since they were so extraordinary, overcome by solid scholarship of a contradictory figure Luschan.

6. The complex nature of Western scholars in colonial times

It would be one-dimensional and anti-dialectical to ignore the genuinely scholarly and broad visions of some of the leading ‘Orientalists’. For example those like Sir William Jones who first translated Kalidas of 400 AD (‘the Indian Shakespeare’) from Sanskrit into English. He undertook his studies in India in 1785, in the colony of ‘British india’. He declared Sanskrit ‘more perfect than either Greek or Latin’.¹⁶ It is true he was seen by Edward Said in a more diminished way, than perhaps he deserved:

“In due course he was appointed to ‘an honourable and profitable place in the Indies’, and immediately on his arrival there to take up a post with the East India Company began the course of personal study that was to gather in, to rope off, to domesticate the Orient & thereby turn it into a province of European learning.”¹⁷

Another such individual was Adolf Bastian, the first Director of the Berlin Ethnological Museum - founded in 1873, from the *Kunstammer* of the rulers of rulers of Brandenburg-Prussia. Bastian was inspired by his mentors Rudolf Virchow and

¹⁵Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (Eds), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, Routledge, London, 1997, p11; 23

¹⁶ John Keay ‘India Discovered’; London 1988; p. 32-34.

¹⁷ Cited in Amrit Chaudhuri, ‘Two Giant Brothers’; *London Review of Books*; Vol. 28 No. 8 · 20 April 2006

Alexander von Humboldt, to embrace a vision of a natural science, that could understand a “unitary humanity of the world.”¹⁸ That now contains more than 500,000 objects. Bastian strived to build “a universal archive of humanity,” which he believed was the key to revealing a total history of humanity.”¹⁸ He thought he was consciously trying to preserve the cultures of the world before modernisation (let us call it colonialism) destroyed its traces:

“Adolf Bastian’s mantra became: “the last moment has come, the twelfth hour is here! Documents of immeasurable, irreplaceable value for human history are being destroyed. Save them! Save them! before it is too late!”¹⁸

But though uncomfortable with it, even he was quite happy to accept monies from the German colonial administration after the state entered that game.¹⁸

In contrast to Bastian, his heir **Felix von Luschan** openly avowed an imperialist view:

“Luschan collection of skulls... supported general divisions among Germans or Europeans and the colonized peoples of Africa and the Pacific. That was in part because Luschan eagerly harnessed colonial troops to collect body parts, and especially skulls. That led to many contradictions. For example: during the Herero Wars and subsequent genocide in German South West Africa (1904–7), Luschan argued for the humane treatment of the insurgents, and he advocated for a protected area for the Bushmen (the San) in Botswana. Yet he also asked for colonial troops to collect the skulls of the vanquished following any altercation. While he reminded them that this should be done only in a legal or correct way, it nevertheless led to grisly acts in the internment camps during the Herero Wars, as women were forced to scrape the flesh off the skulls of the dead.”¹⁸

In his book ‘People, Race, and Language’:

“he lamented the loss of the German colonies during World War I. And he hoped the African section (of the) new Volkerkunde Museum in Dahlem... would be “the most beautiful and greatest monument for our colonial troops—a true monumentum aere perennius.” While castigating Belgium’s colonial abuses.. ... He actually looked to the British for an effective model of imperial management. He felt they had had the most success in modernizing colonies.”¹⁸

And yet, Luschan was a divided man. For he also fought *against* racist views in general, impressing W.E.B.Dubois with his lecture in 1911 at the First Universal Races Congress in London, attacking ‘race science’. In 1902, at the German Colonial Congress in Berlin he denounced the myths of racial difference and the putative benefits of European influence, arguing that too often in Africa and Oceania “Civilization = Syphilization” and that European poison was summed up in the four S’s: “Slave trade, schnapps, syphilis, and shoddy goods.”¹⁸

In fact he understood why Benin’s had isolated itself during the nineteenth century, after a long history of active trading with Europeans:

¹⁸ H. Glenn Penny; ‘In Humboldt’s Shadow A Tragic History of German Ethnology’; 2021; p.3;5;7; 47;19;45; 84-86; 91-102

“like almost all African coastal towns, Benin completely shut themselves off from Europeans as soon as they began to understand the tremendous danger they faced from the brutal slave trade of these white savages.”... in both East and West Africa, “European influence acted like a poison that decomposes.”¹⁸

His last book was unequivocal:

“All humanity consists of only one species: Homo sapiens ; there are no ‘wild’ peoples, only peoples with different cultures than ours.”¹⁸

Racists had argued the Bronzes “could not be by negroes” as they were such masterworks. To the contrary, in his book on the Bronzes Luschan simply:

“Dismissed the reports from the leading British scholars O. M. Dalton and C. H. Read of a mysterious “white” man bringing these techniques to Benin centuries earlier” averring instead that: “we have come to know a great and monumental native art in Benin from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which at least in individual pieces, is the equal of contemporary European art, and at the same time is associated with a technique that is simply at the level of the achievable.” Understanding that point, he underscored, entailed “a kind of general and moral meaning,” particularly because of the “always in some circles prevailing contempt for the Negro... “mostly from those who do not think the ‘black savages’ capable of such a skill at all.”¹⁸

Returning to the Bronzes Luschan used glowing praise of them :

“an old indigenous African art [Negerkunst]” and that they could be included among “the most valuable discoveries that have been made in the area of art and technology of Africa.”
 “Benvenuto Cellini could not have cast them better and nobody else either, before or since Cellini... These bronzes are technically of the highest quality possible.”¹⁸

Luschan’s analysis of the Benin bronzes undercut racialized arguments about differences between Africans and Europeans, between “blacks” and “whites”. He undermined colonial ideologies based on notions of biological racism.

6. Berlin’s Ethnological Museum becomes the Humboldt Forum

The Berlin collection had grown in leaps and bounds as shown in the number of objects from African and Oceania - From 1880: 5,845; in 1895, 25,672; in 1905, 59,737. At its peak, it was almost an unrivalled force in acquisition and dwarfed others.

Of the Benin Bronzes, the British Museum received only a few hundred items from the Foreign Office in 1897. Most were sold by the state, but also some from British officers and soldiers looters. The cost rose dramatically on the art market and the British Museum was priced out with: “neither the financial resources nor the networks Luschan was able to harness.”¹⁸ This is how Berlin came to house so many Benin Bronzes.

In 2006 the old Berlin ethnological museum became the core of the Humboldt Forum. Here the newly unitary German state aggressively sought to erase marks of the DDR the

Palast der Republik. That was torn down and the Berliner Stadtschloss re-built.¹⁹ The total cost to do this was an estimated 590-690 million Euro largely from the German state.²⁰ Individual capitalists – like Wilhelm von Boddien, a tractor tycoon from Hamburg, and the widow of retail magnate Werner Otto – also funded some [euro]105m - for the grand plan. Some consider the result a strange place:

“bizarre reconstruction of the baroque royal palace, built at a cost of [euro]680m to ... Like an imposing Disneyland castle minus the fun... to project an image of an idealised past.... an imperial palace, crowned with a golden crucifix, as a showcase for colonial booty.... This was the building, where Kaiser Wilhelm II resided as his troops committed genocide in Namibia and brutally suppressed an uprising in Tanzania in the 1900s. Restored statues of Prussian princes line its echoing white halls, while an inscription beneath the dome exhorts all on Earth to kneel before Jesus.”²¹

The grassroots movement of ‘*No to Humboldt 21! Moratorium on the Humboldt Forum in Berliner Schloss!*’ – issued a challenge:

“We demand the suspension of work on the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace and a broad public debate: The present concept violates the dignity and property rights of people in all parts of the world, and is Eurocentric. The Humboldt Forum opposes the claim of equal coexistence in the migration society.”²⁰

This fight was not successful, but it was part of a change in at least a section of German society.²² The anti-Semitism and vicious genocide of the Hitler fascist regime had been acknowledged in many ways, including on-going compensation to persons and to the state of Israel. Yet a silence on Germany’s role in African colonialism – had effectively been a ‘colonial amnesia’:

“For almost 60 years, from the end of World War Two, the German public had forgotten about its colonial empire. Whereas other European powers experienced the traumatic violence of decolonization, Germans believed that they had nothing to do with the colonial exploitation of large parts of Africa, Asia or South America. They were innocent—so many believed—of the devastations brought about by European colonialism and could therefore engage with the new post-colonial world without the dark shadow of a colonial past. Some observers have termed this a “colonial amnesia.”²³

“In 2004, when the centenary of the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples confronted a wide German audience with German atrocities of a hundred years before. The first German genocide, as it was called, attracted media coverage, and in August 2004 the then German government officially apologized for the atrocities.... the official apology, far from marking closure on a dark chapter in

¹⁹ Thomas Thiemeyer, ‘Cosmopolitanizing Colonial Memories in Germany’

2019 *Critical Inquiry*; Vol.45(4); p.967-990

²⁰ <https://www.no-humboldt21.de>

²¹ Oliver Wainwright, ‘Berlin’s bizarre new museum: a Prussian palace rebuilt for [euro]680m’; *Guardian* Sep 9, 2021.

²² Morat, Daniel, ‘Katalysator wider Willen: Das HumboldtForum in Berlin und die deutsche Kolonialvergangenheit’; *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 16 (2019), S. 140-153

²³ Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer; ‘German Colonialism and National Identity’; London 2021; p.1

German history, sparked... conservative circles (to) denounce the German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, who had delivered the apology, as a “traitor.” Others worried about claims for reparations by the Herero, and the German tabloid BILD asked on its front page, “What will be the cost of the minister’s tears?”—deriding her.”²⁴

The proliferation of anti-colonial sentiments and consciousness in German people, scholars and intelligentsia can be seen from perusing various websites including ‘Berlin postkolonial e.v.’:

“Since 2004, the 120th anniversary of the Berlin Africa Conference marking the beginning of German colonialism, many civil-society initiatives in the Federal Republic of Germany have worked towards a critical public discussion of the German colonial past. In commemorating the 100th anniversary of the genocide in what was once German Southwest Africa and of the Maji Maji War in German East Africa, they demanded that German colonialism and the historical origins of racism within German society be reappraised comprehensively.”²⁵

Anti-racist initiatives have been creative. In one example, a group of artists, dramatists and musicians known as “Kolonialismus im Kasten” - put a downloadable, alternative self-audioguide to Berlin’s Deutsches Historical Museum (DHM) exhibits of the time of the German Empire:

“Colonialism in the trunk?” was founded on the occasion of the anti-colonial campaign “125 years Berlin Africa Conference”, .. in 2009/2010. .. In our museum tours, we have addressed the history of German colonialism, which the local public hardly notices. We have shown that colonialism meant violence, racism and economic exploitation, but also produced fierce resistance. And we drew attention to the problematic presentation of German colonial history in the DHM: the fact that it is almost invisible in the exhibition and is presented separately from all other historical developments, as if there were no connections between colonial history and popular culture, Reichstag debates or the development of science. The aim of our tours was to reveal the multifaceted connections between these phenomena - and is now the aim of this audio guide.”²⁶

Something has changed:

“This growing rumbling of protest in the public echoed the postcolonial discussions that the humanities and social sciences.”²⁷

7. The Current situation

The movements in Germany and Berlin, though unsuccessful on the Humboldt Forum failed in their first goal – to prevent its extravagant building. But neither were they isolated in Germany, or world wide. As early as 1983, the Minister of Culture in Greece, Melina Mercouri, had expressed in very emotive terms why repatriation of stolen art is so

²⁴ Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘German Colonialism and National Identity’, London 2021; p.1

²⁵ <https://www.betterplace.org/en/organisations/333-berlin-postkolonial-e-v>

²⁶ <https://www.kolonialismusimkasten.de>

²⁷ Thomas Thiemeyer, ‘Cosmopolitanizing Colonial Memories in Germany’, *Critical Inquiry* 45 (Summer 2019); 967-990.

important to many nations today:

‘This is our history, this is our soul. They are the symbol and the blood and the soul of the Greek people.’²⁸

Of course this was directed at the so-called Elgin Marbles of the Greek Parthenon, held onto jealously by the British Museum. Yet Neil McGregor –Director of the British Museum (2002-2015) and then one of the three founding Directors of the Humboldt Forum (2015-2018) - rejected that repatriation was even a question even in 2006:

“Repatriation is ‘yesterday’s question... Questions of ownership depend on the thought that an object can only be in one place. That’s no longer true.”²⁹

Obviously McGregor is increasingly out of step now, his imperial pomposity in his popular books shows him as a colonial excusing paternalist. The progressive move in German museum culture has been noted and applauded by Hochstadt in the American Historical Association.³⁰

President Macron of France asked two experts, the historian Bénédicte Savoy and the economist Felwine Sarr to investigate the looted African treasures in France. Savoy and Sarr recommended:

“In 2018 that “any objects taken by force or presumed to be acquired through inequitable conditions” by the French Army, scientific explorers or administrators between the late 1800s and 1960 be handed back — if their countries of origin asked for them... Ms. Savoy said “Europe’s arrogance toward the legitimate desire of Africans to reconnect with their heritage is now a thing of the past.”³¹

France will return 26 objects of the Benin loot, from a separate 1892 French invasion which made Dahomey a French colony.

It is hoped that an Edo Museum of West African Art, will be built for 300 items “on loan from European museums - if the money to build it can be raised... designed by David Adjaye.”³² Germany announced it will return around 11000 Bronzes, scattered around the country, mostly in Berlin. The Dutch has also recommended this, while Belgium’s loot from the Congo is to be returned to the Democratic Republic of Congo.²¹ Britain remains obstinately silent.³³

Conclusion

No doubt some of this repatriation is an attempt to damp calls of racism – perhaps emanating from the banlieus of Paris. However such caviling is not for now. The

²⁸ Emily Duthie: *The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World*; *Public History Review*; Vol 18 (2011): 12–25

²⁹ Charlotte Higgins, ‘Into Africa: British Museum’s Reply to Ownership Debate,’ *The Guardian*, 13 April 2006.

³⁰ Steve Hochstadt, ‘Reckoning With Colonial History - A Berlin Museum Faces the Future’; *Perspectives on History*; Oct 2017, Vol. 55 Issue 7, p50-55

³¹ Farah Nayeri and Norimitsu Onishi; ‘Looted Treasures Begin a Long Journey Home From France’; *New York Times*; Oct. 28, 2021

³² Alex Marshall; *A New Museum to Bring the Benin Bronzes Home*; *New York Times*; Nov. 13, 2020

³³ Alex Marshall ‘As Europe Returns Artifacts, Britain Stays Silent’; Dec. 20, 2021; *NYT*

extensive anti-racist movements of the last decades, and especially since 2004 – has moved the needle. Maybe it has yet to be more implemented in the daily grind of lives of immigrants and diverse peoples, but something has improved of consequence. Even this battle – within the museums – is not yet done of course. As a museum activist Matthew Vollgraf notes - there is still resistance from a co-director of the Humboldt Forum linking with SPD politicians:

“In an op-ed entitled “Fanatics of Purity”, published on March 8 in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), the prominent art historian Horst Bredekamp — a founding director of the Humboldt Forum... declares “postcolonialism” and “political correctness” to be nothing less than a prelude to fascism.... the Social Democratic politician Wolfgang Thierse. In a February 22 article in the FAZ, “How Much Identity Can Society Tolerate?”, Thierse vents his frustration at a heterogeneous group of phenomena which he associates with leftist identity politics, from gender pronouns to the removal of statues and renaming of streets. Although he appears virtually oblivious to the obstacles and inequalities which many minorities face in Germany today.”³⁴

Marxist-Leninists know this struggle over repatriation of art, will not of itself serve to change the life for the better, in the working class and peasant homes of Nigeria. But the general sense of dignity of ex-colonials, Black and indigenous suppressed people of the world – has to be improved by such repatriations.

³⁴ A Response to Horst Bredekamp; Boas Blog; 03/17/21; at: <https://boasblogs.org/autor/matthew-vollgraf/?blog=humboldt>