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Between the Stools

The Professional Association of Ethnologists Discusses the Humboldt Forum

"Ethnology in the Humboldt Forum: Quo Vadis Berlin's Mitte District – and with Whom?" was the title of a podium discussion held as one of the highlights of this year's conference of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie (German society for social and cultural anthropology). Moderated by the journalist Thomas Schmidt of the weekly paper "Die Zeit", four researchers took part in the once again heated debate about the Humboldt Forum: Albert Gouaffo (Professor for German Literaturee in Dschang, Cameroon), Viola König (Director of the Ethnological Museum Berlin), Carola Lentz (Professor for Ethnology in Mainz), and Wolfgang Schäffner (Professor for the History of Knowledge and Culture at the Humboldt University Berlin).

The discussion format had a prominent place in the context of the conference of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie. On the same day, the Association of Ethnologists had given itself a new name (previously: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde – German society for ethnology) and scheduled the discussion in the evening just before the conference celebration in the former Ethnological Museum in Berlin's Dahlem district. With events like this, the association's executive board, headed for the last two years by the Berlin ethnology professor Hansjörg Dilger, signaled that it wanted to further open up to societal debates and not avoid controversies. For this reason, in his welcoming address to the event, Hansjörg Dilger indicated that the debates about the Humboldt Forum, the planned new ethnographic museum on Museum Island, will not only be public and controversial, but also address the self-understanding of the discipline and its representatives in particular. The podium discussion clearly showed the degree to

which the Humboldt Forum debate places social and cultural anthropology between the stools.

Seldom has German ethnology been in the public focus as much as in the controversial debates about the new museum in the heart of the capital, moderator Thomas Schmidt remarked right at the beginning of the discussion. But most of the discipline's representatives were not very happy about this unaccustomed prominence, because the discipline's position within this debate is extremely complicated. Two extremely clearly contoured opinions collide here, between which social and cultural anthropology must take a middle position that is complicated to explain. One end of the spectrum comprises those critics of the Humboldt Forum who, from a post-colonially informed perspective, see the danger that a museum with ethnographic objects on Berlin's Museum Island could, if not glorify colonialism, at any rate stabilize post-colonial power relations. On the other side stand those who, usually informed by a conservative European history of art and ideas, want to resurrect in a world-class museum Humboldt's spirit of discovery and enthusiasm for foreign cultures, but also the scientific curiosity of the 19th century. A closer look shows that social and cultural anthropology is shaped in certain proportions by both of these schools of thought and thereby develops a "both-and" rhetoric that both sides of the debate find difficult to accept.

One end of this spectrum of opinion was represented on the podium by the Cameroonian German literature scholar, Albert Gouaffo. In his opening statement, he already criticized that the German state should not be allowed to cavalierly engage in the construction of national identity using ethnographic objects that came to Germany under colonial power relations. The ownership and provenience of the objects would have to be clearly worked out to show that these items are not German objects with which Germany may do as it likes. Instead, Gouaffo pleaded to make the Humboldt Forum a site of decolonization, in which Germany's colonial

heritage must be relentlessly worked through. But on an important question, Guaffo did not become specific: namely, whether this process of decolonization in the Humboldt Forum (quite apart from the justified restitution of stolen objects) should be performed including or excluding ethnographic objects. In other words, can one carry out the decolonization process that Guaffo envisions within the ethnographic museum, or must the format of a museum be abandoned to this end?

The other end of the spectrum was not represented on the podium, but from the audience. The art historian Horst Bredekamp, himself a member of the three-person founding directorship of the Humboldt Forum, spoke up from the audience and made a passionate plea for Humboldt's progressive legacy. He said he could not understand why critics, precisely those from ethnology, so disdain the citizen-of-the-world spirit of discovery in 19th-century Germany. A properly understood interpretation of Humboldt and his contemporaries, as if minus the evolutionism and racism, displays the cosmopolitan core that could become the starting point for a global citizenship. If the Humboldt Forum would embody Humboldt's legacy in the best-understood way, the aim of a tolerant and anti-colonial museum open to the world would be achieved. But here, too, some things remained vague, because Bredekamp did not reveal how a 21st-century cosmopolitanism could be worked out from the German 19th century minus imperialism, racism, and evolutionism. Rather, the suspicion arises that a Humboldt Forum as favored by Bredekamp would end up being precisely what Gouaffo had sketched as an undesirable counter-image: a museum whose point was more the construction of German identity than the ethnography of colonial and post-colonial realities.

An inkling of the degree to which ethnology finds itself between these two frontlines already emerged in the commentaries of Viola König. Visibly wearied from the almost 20-year-old debate, she urged that the described opposition not be seen too rigidly and "to finally open this thing now". She criticized that the Humboldt Forum

was being reduced to primarily the exhibition of ethnographic objects. All the actors were slaving away on the exhibition concept, although the Humboldt Forum also offered other formats in which the exhibition concept could also be critically questioned. König's reaction already indicates that the real question, namely about the status and prominence of the ethnographic objects in the Humboldt Forum is ultimately undetermined. Should the Humboldt Forum be above all or solely also an ethnographic museum?

Astonishingly marginally addressed in the podium discussion was the problem whether the exhibition objects in a Humboldt Forum function solely as a projection screen for debates about identity (with the choice between decolonization in a post-colonial interpretation and for the construction of a world citizenship conceived by Germans) or whether they may appear also as ethnographic objects. Michael Kraus (2015) recently lamented the tendency to neglect scientific grappling with ethnographic objects in the museum. He said this happened either by interpreting the objects – in a not least Eurocentric gesture – primarily as "art" (a rhetoric that carries within it a devaluation of "merely" cultural ethnographic objects from the global South) or by using them solely as illustrative examples of colonial injustice. The customary debates either implicitly or explicitly reject or fail to mention whether (at any rate: also) ethnography can be performed with these objects – in the sense that they can be used (as otherwise ethnographic books or ethnographic films can be used) to describe human life in its diversity. Kraus thus pleads that the ethnographic museum must continue to be allowed to let objects tell the stories of the cultural contexts from which they come – thereby ultimately also defending the presence of ethnology in the ethnological museum. On the one hand, he thereby goes astonishingly against the grain of the customary museum debates. But on the other hand, it is precisely this clinging to the ethnological claim of the ethnological museum that makes the issue so complicated for the discipline.

Carola Lentz's contributions also made this predicament clear. On the one hand, she reinforced Albert Gouaffo's call for the Humboldt Forum as a site of decolonization and und confirmed that, from an ethnological-scientific perspective, which was, after all, deeply shaped by debates about post-colonial theory, there could be no other basic orientation for an ethnographic museum. The ethnologists on the podium repeatedly claimed the position of an anti-colonial (self-)criticism and also argued that social and cultural anthropology demanded precisely this criticism from others, as well – an important component of what the podium discussant, Berlin historian of science Wolfgang Schäffner, termed the "ethnologization of the humanities" on the podium. Thus, Lentz also answered Bredekamp that an innocent curiosity about foreign cultures could not simply be extracted from the German 19th century while leaving out the colonial, imperialist, evolutionist, and racist mainstream. Humboldt's openness to the world could not be separated without further ado from Humboldt's racism.

Nonetheless, it remains undeniable that, in important ways, social and cultural anthropology is itself a child of the European 19th century. Curiosity about foreign cultures is inscribed in the basic idea of ethnology and its research practice, ethnography. Writing about others is always a gesture of power, as the discipline itself has thoroughly reflected and tried to reduce through systematic self-reflection. Nonetheless, ethnologists continue to practice ethnography – a contradiction that cannot be dissolved, but only more or less well endured.

The podium discussion showed that ethnology actually wants three things: to mobilize tolerant, open-to-the-world curiosity about foreign cultures (like Bredekamp); to carry out thorough decolonization (like Gouaffo); and, already based in its self-understanding, not to completely abandon the scientific status of ethnographic objects as material culture. Such a position can be held only with internal contradictions, and its necessary incoherence makes it difficult to explain.

Lentz therefore pleaded also for a Humboldt Forum that must not “be cast from a single mold”, but in which it must be possible to let contradictory interpretations come to expression beside each other. Such a Humboldt Forum, which probably the majority of ethnologists wish for, is surely the most difficult to realize of all the models populating the culture sections of the newspapers. It would be a Humboldt Forum between the stools, and thereby also the Humboldt Forum that brought the greatest benefit.

translated by Mitch Cohen

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References

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