Karl-Heinz Kohl

Collateral Damage. A Polemic

“Europe is a master of criticism. If it doesn’t criticize, it disappears. What it fears most is nonexistence. I tried to criticize it, too, because it demanded this from me, but I wasn’t able. At most, I could repeat its self-criticism.”[1] These sentences by the Japanese author Yoko Tawada occurred to me when I read some of the blog texts. Yoko Tawada is referring to Europe, but she really means Germany, the country she has lived in for so long.

How apt her remarks are in relation to the discussion about the Humboldt Forum is shown by the echo triggered by the perhaps somewhat unthinking utterance of the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy. As she said in an interview, the one thing she wanted to know was “how much blood drips from a work of art”. With this remark, intended as a provocation, she triggered a veritable storm of agreement. The Berlin “No-Humboldt21” platform, which emerged in 2013 as the union of various groups of political activists and had not appeared in public for a long time, immediately took up this criticism as its own. They had heard from a professional voice the same thing they had said themselves: the collections of the ethnological museum, the future foundation of the Humboldt Forum, was nothing but colonial looted art. Many ethnologists, too, agreed with and took up Bénédicte Savoy’s moral verdict. But what she had to say is anything but new for the discipline. Ethnology’s debates about its own colonial past had already begun before this past was completely past.

One of my own first publications was a review of *Anthropologie und Kolonialismus*, the German translation of the French ethnologist Gérard Leclerc’s book pillorying the way British social anthropology had allowed itself to be used in the service of the colonial administration. The debate about ethnology’s intertwining with the colonial system has accompanied the field since the beginning of decolonization. For

politically engaged ethnologists, it provided the grounds for unreserved activism against US neocolonialism and the war in Vietnam. Exhibitions in ethnological museums were devoted to current forms of exploitation of the "Third World". In France, as well, the debate made waves in the 1970s. Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs made it known in 1980 in Germany with his edition of Michel Leiris' writings critical of colonialism. His diary of participation in Marcel Giraule's Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931, newly republished also in France at that time, is still regarded today as a key witness to the ruthless practices that were customary in acquiring museum objects.[2] Since the end of the 1960s, under the impression of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, US ethnologists vehemently criticized their discipline's cooptation by Euro-American imperialism. But these debates moved into the background when, in subsequent years, cultural anthropology was dominated by neo-evolutionary and cultural-materialistic theories inspired by Marxist approaches Under the key phrase "writing culture", the debate was taken up again in the 1980s. Cultural anthropology thereby took a significant turn. Since then, postcolonial politics has an established place in it.[3]

As Erhard Schüttpelz has shown in his differentiated paper, already in the past, ethnologists were in no way exclusively colonial collaborationists. Since the beginning of decolonization, at the latest, their partisanship was unambiguous. But perhaps each generation really does have to reinvent the wheel. Or was it merely a lack of historical knowledge that startled many of the discipline's younger representatives when the criticism of the Humboldt Forum suddenly led to a general critique of ethnology? Those responsible for the Berlin project were probably even happy about this. The demand for a strictly postcolonial orientation of future exhibitions finally provided them with the concept they had sought in vain for ten years.

The attempt to fend off the unexpected attacks did not remain without collateral

damage, of course. By chance, the biannual conference of the German Society for Ethnology was held at a point in time when the discussion triggered by Bénédicte Savoy had just reached its climax. For many years, demands had been heard to replace the discipline's German title "Völkerkunde" (the lore of peoples), originating from the time of the DGV's founding, with the term "Ethnologie". The Berlin executive board then in office had suggested as another possible choice "Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie" (social and cultural anthropology) and had placed the issue of renaming on the agenda for a vote. Just a few weeks before the conference, an extensive discussion of this question developed on an Internet forum of the institute director. The tenor thereby was unmistakable. The vast majority of participants called for "Ethnologie". That would have corresponded with the fact that 17 German institutes already bore the designation "Ethnologie", while so far only four had decided for "Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie". Nonetheless, according to eyewitness reports, the participants at the members' meeting jubilated as they voted for "Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie" without any substantive discussion. They apparently hoped this would finally rid them of the burdensome odium. They also counted on the new term for the discipline finally resulting in greater international recognition. "Kulturanthropologie" was regarded as a German equivalent of the American term "Cultural Anthropology", while "Sozialanthropologie" seemed to be the most adequate translation of the British disciplinary term "Social Anthropology". Paradoxically, one was hardly bothered that the new name was historically much more deeply mired in colonialism than German "Völkerkunde" had been. For this reason, people in many African countries have nothing good to say about Social Anthropology. "Sociology for you, anthropology for us": this was how people there turned against "academic colonialism" as early as the 1970s.

But what is worse: in this renaming exercise, the members of the DVG either did not know or simply ignored the decidedly darker prehistory of this name for the discipline in Germany. The term "Sozialanthropologie" was coined near the end of

the 19th century by Social Darwinist race theorists. One representative of this direction was the "eugenicist" and "racial hygienist" Eugen Fischer (1870-1964), who is regarded as one of the most important precursors of National Socialist race theories and who took part in formulating the Nuremberg Race Laws after the Nazis took power. Fischer had gained his first "scientific merits" in 1908 with his "social anthropological" investigations of "racial crossings" in what was then German Southwest Africa. In 1937, he advocated the forced sterilization of the so-called Rhineland bastards who, during the French occupation of the Rhineland, had been born the children of African soldiers and German women. In 1930, under pressure from Nazi parliamentarians, the government of the state of Thuringia in the city of Jena established the first "Professorship for Social Anthropology". This chair was held by another renowned representative of Nazi race ideology, namely Hans F.K. Günther (1891-1968), the author of *Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes* (race science of the German people), which appeared in 1922; several signed copies of it were found in Hitler's bookcase. Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring were personally on hand on November 15, 1930, when Günther founded the discipline in Germany with his inaugural lecture "Die Ursachen des Rassenverfalls des deutschen Volkes seit der Volkerwanderungszeit" (the causes of the racial degeneration of the German people since the time of the Völkerwanderung).[4] Günther, whose adherents celebrated him as the "race pope", saw social anthropology's most important task in contributing to the "Aufnordung" ("northerning up") of the German people through a systematic "eradication" of all "inferior elements".

Wilhelm E. Mühlmann, one of the most influential ethnologists of the postwar period, who had long known how to conceal his chumminess with the Nazis, initially wanted "Sozialanthropologie" to be the name of the discipline he represented starting in 1955, first in Mainz and then in Heidelberg. But he renounced it because, as a student of Eugen Fischer's, he knew the racist prehistory of this term all too well. For his direction of research, he chose instead the term "Ethnosoziologie", coined by

Richard Thurnwald. Since then, of course, a lot of water has flowed down the Rhine, the Neckar, and also the Spree. But has the term, which, with the blessing of the "Führer" himself, found entry in the *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, really been able to wash itself clean? During the Berlin conference, Carola Lenz rightly spoke of the "Protestant pride in one's sin", including among ethnologists. In their striving to accommodate the discipline's moral critics as much as possible, they merely drove out the Devil with Beelzebub. Preferred to the old term coined more than a hundred years before Germany's entrance to the colonial competition was a name that arose in the era of Social Darwinism and that connoted racism, extermination, and genocide.

Okay, one could object that the vast majority of those voting didn't know this and that those who did know it should have expressed themselves more proactively from the start. Isn't it legitimate to appropriate terms burdened and abused in the past and to fill them with new content? And in the new disciplinary name, hadn't they combined "Sozialanthropologie" with "Kulturanthropologie", which has no etymological burdens?

But the renaming of the professional association undertaken in Berlin comes at precisely the wrong time. The executive board of the DGV had rightly protested to the State Minister for Cultural Affairs that the call for applications for the position as Director of the Humboldt Forum did not mention ethnology at all, even though it was ethnological expertise that one urgently needed when reconfiguring the ethnological collections. And initially the board got a hearing. But would the association have success with such complaints even if it made them in the name of "Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie"? For outsiders, it must first be explained that what lies behind the expression is ethnology. But it could be further asked: where does museum ethnology remain? The collateral damage has been done. It can be doubted that it is outweighed by the stronger connection to English-language academic

terminology.

After the renaming, some members of the former DGV spontaneously declared their resignation from the Association. As a former Chairman of the Association, I hesitated to take this step, out of old solidarity. But one really has to think twice about being a member in a scientific association whose name can be traced to progenitors like the “racial hygienist” Eugen Fischer or “race Günther”. Or can the clock be turned back again after all?

Karl-Heinz Kohl *taught Ethnology from 1988 to 2014 at the Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, the New School for Social Research in New York, and the Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main, where he also headed the Frobenius-Institut from 1996 to 2016. From 2007 to 2011, he was Chairman of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde (German Society for Ethnology). Since 2005, he has been a regular member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.*

translated by Mitch Cohen

————————————————————

[1] Tawada, Yoko, Talisman, Tübingen: Konkursbuch-Verlag, 1996, p. 48.

[2] Cf. Leiris, Michel, Phantom Afrika. Tagebuch einer Expedition von Dakar nach Djibouti 1931-1933, 2 vols., ed. by and an introduction by Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1980. One year later, Heinrichs, at the time a Hamburg University full professor, released in the same publishing house a critical investigation of the colonial prehistory of the museum he headed there: Fischer, Hans, Die Hamburger Südsee-Expedition. Ethnographie und Kolonialismus, Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1981.

[3] Cf. for example the strong resonance of the article by Kathleen Gough, “Anthropology and Imperialism”, in: Monthly Review, 19/11 (1968), pp.12-27, which later circulated under the title “Anthropology – Child of Imperialism“. Another important work from this time: Talal Asad (ed.), Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter, Ithaca Press: London, 1973. Both studied in England, but taught in the United States.

[4] Cf. Hossfeld, Uwe, “Die Jenaer Jahre des ‘Rasse-Guẗnther’ von 1930 bis 1935: Zur Gruẗndung des Lehrstuhls fuẗr Sozialanthropologie an der Universitaẗt Jena”, in: Medizinhistorisches Journal, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1999), pp. 47-103, here p. 74.