H. Glenn Penny

Exasperation

An Outsider's Take on (some of) the Current Debates Surrounding the Humboldt Forum

Last fall, when the editors of this blog asked me to join their discussions about the Humboldt Forum, I declined. They explained that they wanted to broaden the debate by bringing in outside views. They thought I would be a good candidate, given my past work on the history of German ethnology and ethnographic museums. I was not so sure. It is a strikingly internal debate, and to be quite honest, it's disconcerting on many levels. I cannot touch on them all here; but I can share some of my exasperation.

From the perspective of someone who wrote a book on the history of German ethnographic museums during the period in which they acquired the vast majority of their collections, it is hard not to notice how frequently participants in the last decade of debates surrounding the Humboldt Forum have misrepresented and misused the history of the collections. A striking number of people on both sides of the debates seem keen to instrumentalize those collections and their history for their own purposes. Perhaps that is why history seems to be repeating itself: a giant edifice that transforms scientific collections into a municipal display? A building deemed inadequate before it is complete? Ethnologists and their efforts subordinated to the dictates of politicians and bureaucrats? Bildung usurped by "Schausammlungen" and edification by entertainment mixed with didactic displays? The gift shops and cafes are new. The rest, however, sounds strikingly familiar. So too does the dramatic disjuncture between the funding for the municipal displays meant to impress visitors and the monies allocated to support the museum's staff, their collaborative projects, their on-gong collecting, and their research. When I read the essays on the Humboldt Forum in German newspapers today, I sometimes feel like I am reading archive files on the debates about what to do with Berlin's

Völkerkunde museum a century ago. The mind reels at the similarities.

Consequently, I often wonder how closely the participants in today's debates—scholars as well as journalists and politicians—have read the histories of these museums and their collections. I frequently think about Douglas Cole's 1995 preface to the second edition of his groundbreaking book: Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts. Cole remarked on the surprising degree to which journalists and scholars who had engaged the first edition (1985) persistently underscored plunder and theft. Cole found that alarming. His narrative began with a history of trade in Northwest Coast artifacts that spanned back to the Cook voyages. His accounts of those transactions emphasized the savvy tactics of the Nootka, Tlingit, and other people along the coast who chose to trade with Europeans. Occasionally, thefts by Europeans took place, but they were uncommon. Trade was the usual practice. Generations later, Adrian Jacobsen arrived in the area, where he acquired what remains one of the Berlin Ethnological Museum's most notable collections. While working his way up the coast to Alaska, he too encountered sagacious traders in ethnographic objects among coastal peoples. By this time, however, many of them were well integrated into money economies; they had access to modern tools; some had regular incomes from canneries; and a great many knew the value of their art and artifacts on the international market of material culture. They also knew it was highly valued among ethnologists and tourists. Jacobsen faced a great deal of competition and a lot of hard bargaining.

Thus one of Cole's chief points was that the indigenous people Jacobsen and others encountered in their "scramble for artifacts" were anything but victims or dupes: they understood the value of their possessions as well or better than collectors such as Jacobsen. Still, despite Cole's overarching argument, despite the complexities he identified on the ground and the agency he attributed to these coastal peoples, scholars he characterized as steeped in postcolonial theories were eager to mine his text for moments of deception and theft. Jacobsen collected skulls as well as objects,

and he went into burial sites when he knew it was not allowed. That is not how he collected the vast majority of the objects he brought back to Berlin. Yet those were the actions on which these scholars focused as they sought to use those moments, and ultimately his entire venture, to tell different tales. That emphasis, Cole reminded us over two decades ago, "creates its own deceptive fictions."[1] I would be delighted to see us finally abandon those fictions.

There is a great deal of complexity in these collecting histories, and that complexity matters for current discussions of repatriation and the future of the Humboldt Forum. It is not simply a matter of doling out black hats and white hats to people in the past or the present; it is not just a matter of insisting that some of the people leading the debates around the Humboldt Forum today need to acknowledge that there are objects in the Berlin museum (and other German museums) which are clearly "Raubkunst;" nor is it simply a matter of insisting that many of the people on the other side of the debate also admit that most of the materials in these German museums are not that.

The point is more basic: if we do not understand the history of the collections and the origins of the objects, we cannot act accordingly in the present. Furthermore, if we do understand that history, it becomes impossible to issue blanket statements about either the holdings in the museums formerly known as Völkerkunde Museen (or those waiting to join the rush to abandon that name) or what could or should be done with the objects: today and in the future.

You do not have to trust me. Recently, Chip Colwell described his journey "inside the fight to reclaim Native America's culture." [2] Anyone interested in the debates surrounding the Humboldt Forum or intrigued by Emmanuel Macron's recent political pronouncements about unitary actions by French museums would do well to read his book. Colwell began his career as an anthropologist at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in the years after the Native American Graves

Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 changed the legal contexts in which US museums operated. As a result, he waded into an explosive context. Literally "hundreds of [American Indian] tribes have confronted 1,500 museums over the fate of more than 200,000 Native skeletons and 1 million grave goods and sacred objects (p. 4)." Determined to find common ground, Colwell approached his job with naïve enthusiasm. He wanted to do the right thing. That, however, proved to be anything but straight forward. His revelation is worth quoting at length: "after my first days on the job, I learned that common ground is so elusive because every object contains within it the seeds of conflict that have germinated over the decades between religious freedom and academic freedom, spiritual truths and scientific facts, moral rights and legal duties, preserving historical objects and perpetuating living cultures. When I followed the biography of each object, I saw the bright line between right and wrong fade to shades of gray. I learned that sometimes it was tribal members who stole objects and sometimes curators who wanted to give things back. Sometimes it was Indians who worked for museums and non-Indians who worked for tribes. Sometimes keeping an object in a museum destroyed it, while allowing it to naturally decay gave it life. As I was learning this summer morning, some of the hardest fights are those within a tribe [his emphasis]. Repatriation, I discovered, is a tangled web (p. 8)."

It is not as if the vast majority of curators who work in German ethnological museums today do not know this. They do. It is so odd for me, even upsetting for me, as someone who began working with these people decades ago, to read quips in German newspapers about the need for provenance research—written as if as if provenance research is a new idea: as if many German curators have not devoted much their careers to researching their collections. Many did, and many of them helped me with my dissertation research in the 1990s. Many of them have also written extensively about their findings since then. Indeed, many still are currently, quietly, doing what they can with shamefully small budgets and within stunningly opaque bureaucratic structures to work with repatriation claims and reach out to

non-European communities.

If the news reports are odd, hearing similar statements about provenance research from German academics is deeply disconcerting. There is no need for purposeful reification of ethnologists' efforts either today or in the past. That is not the way to common ground. It won't "save" the museums or art history—not by a long shot. There is rather a need to acknowledge that the most fundamental problem facing these museums lies in an unwillingness to adequately fund those research efforts, to expand those efforts, to allow the museums to become more dynamic, and to create spaces in which, as Colwell wrote about his own experience: "Every repatriation is not an end but a chance for a new beginning (9)."

The fact of the matter is: ethnological museums are treasure troves, filled with historical traces, material objects that are also texts. While those texts contain vast amounts of information about human history, they are more than that. The objects are varied, their histories numerous, and they have much to teach us about different ontologies. They have much to teach us about human difference.

Those histories could be unlocked if the pundits would move themselves out of the spotlight of self-promotion and the focus of these debates could be shifted from admonishment and defensive retorts to a search for common ground and a concerted effort to find that "new beginning." People inside and outside of Europe have been working in that direction for quite some time. It would be fantastic if those successful efforts would receive more attention in a renewed, future-oriented discussion in Germany.

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editor (together with Matti Bunzl) of Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire (University of Michigan Press, 2003), and (with Laura Graham) Performing Indigeneity: Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences (Nebraska University Press, 2014). He is currently engaged in an in-depth study of German interactions with Guatemala and completing a book manuscripttitled: German History Unbound, 1760s-1960s for Cambridge UniversityPress. He is a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin during the 2017-2018 academic year.

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[1] Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts*, (Vancouver: UCB Press, 1995), p. xi.

[2] Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).