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How to move on with Humboldt's legacy?

Re-thinking ethnographic collections

The Humboldt Forum, which is currently being built in the middle of Berlin within the walls of the reconstructed Prussian Berlin Palace and will be hosting the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin from 2018, has become a focal point for debates on these matters in Germany. With the withdrawal of art historian Bénédicte Savoy from the international team of experts of the Humboldt Forum in summer 2017, the conflict reached a new and striking climax. Bénédicte Savoy regards the present shape of the Humboldt Forum as an uncritical continuation of the more than 300-year-old history of colonial collections of "dirty tricks and hopes", which are not spoken about or brought to the public, but held under a "lead lid" (Savoy 2017). Supporters and representatives of the Humboldt Forum, on the other hand, promise a democratic and cosmopolitan space for debating these questions and thereby make use of concepts such as "shared heritage" (Parzinger 2016).

However, not only the Chancellor does not want to see the Humboldt Forum in the tradition of anthropological museums – now often renamed as "Museums of (World)Cultures". Is the "ethnological perspective" in this debate in danger of being reduced to the "colonial gaze" (see Zimmerer 2017[1] and Deimel 2017[2])? The critical examination of the colonial entanglements of Social and Cultural Anthropology, which the discipline has been engaged in since the 1980s, is obviously ignored. Due to the lack of knowledge about the complexity of historical as well as contemporary research activities in ethnological and anthropological sciences, a kind of "othering" is being pursued, which allows the colonial legacy and its ongoing violent effects to be projected onto Anthropology as a discipline, onto ethnographic museums as

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institutional spaces, and timewise into the past (Edwards, 2016). Meanwhile, other disciplines have been far more reluctant to engage with German colonialism. Is Social and Cultural Anthropology being increasingly held responsible for failures in the struggle against German colonialism which go beyond institutional and disciplinary lines (see the blog “Cultural Relativism and Enlightenment”[3])? To what extent has a self-reflection on the history of our own discipline taken place, or the decolonisation of other disciplines or of museums of art and history? Founded as national institutions to educate the middle class, they also have to rethink the relationship between nation and culture in the context of an increasingly plural society (Juneja, 2017).

In fact, university Anthropology in Germany for many decades had very little interest in museums, while at the same time the ethnographic museums departed from the theoretical developments in Social and Cultural Anthropology e.g. in Museum Studies and Material Culture Studies. Looking at permanent exhibitions of ethnographic museums in Germany also shows how slow museums here have been to implement innovative, especially collaborative, museological approaches, such as those developed in the last decades in the former settler colonies – and above all, how little visible these approaches have been made for the public in the past and still today.

It is true that ethnographic collections increasingly seek to work with contemporary artists, especially because of their potential to voice critiques of the institution itself. However, enabling a diversity of perspectives and dealing with historical and present asymmetries of power is only possible with a participation of the affected societies and individuals from which the collected objects originate.. In this context, “multicultural celebrations of encounter” often offer no solutions, but generate new problems. This is especially the case when well-intentioned “dialogues of cultures” are implicitly based on the idea of an elitist-monocultural global society (Hauschild

2009) and/or promote strategic instrumentalisation of culture and ethnicity. Therefore, historical and current identity politics and an increasingly fragmented public must be discussed more comprehensively. The question "who speaks for whom?" has aspects which extend far beyond Europe.

The feuilleton debates on the future of ethnographic collections are currently being carried out mainly among representatives of the institutions involved in the Humboldt Forum, politicians of cultural policy and a few dedicated university scholars. The aim of this blog is to reopen up a space to discuss these questions to a broader participation especially of Social and Cultural Anthropology/Ethnology, but also of other university disciplines, as well as to contributions – especially from former German colonies – and there perspectives on the German debate. Therefore, selected contributions will be gradually translated into English and international interlocutors invited to contribute to the blog.

[1] https://www.ndr.de/kultur/Ueber-Deutschlands-koloniale-Vergangenheit,journal942.html

[2] https://gssc.uni-koeln.de/node/1409

[3] https://gssc.uni-koeln.de/node/1363

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This blog wishes to invite to a broader discussion – both within Social and Cultural Anthropology as well as between Social and Cultural Anthropology and its neighboring disciplines – about the Humboldt Forum and about the future of ethnographic collections in the German-speaking countries in general. Generating a

trans- and international perspective on these questions is particularly vital for this debate. Therefore, selected blog contributions will be translated into English and interlocutors from the Global South, especially from the countries of origin of the ethnographic collections, will be invited wherever possible.

If you are interested in writing a contribution, please contact Anna Brus (anna.brus@uni-siegen.de) or Ehler Voss (V.i.S.d.P., University of Siegen, ehler.voss@uni-siegen.de).

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