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Humboldt Forum, Anthropology, and Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is the claim of a more or less exclusive collective ownership of material and/or immaterial cultural capital, whose origin in located in the past, which contributes to the construction of a group's identity. This basically holds for all present and past societies of the world, although they differ from one another in the manner in which this capital is accumulated and managed, how the past is constructed, and to what extent the construction of identity is articulated or reflected—be it as an expression of a living and continually changing tradition, be it through the preservation of unchanging material documents (including records of actions or events in writing, images, or sound), be it—as in our society—by a never consistent parallel use of both strategies.

The idea developed by nation states of preserving tangible assets and practices to produce a sense of identity, their protection against loss and alienation, endangerment by wars, vandalism, and changing circumstances of life, dates from the second half of the eighteenth century. It was a concomitant of the rise of nation states and was accompanied by the creation or redefinition of concepts such as "nation" and "culture." Museums were added to libraries and archives as places for the bureaucratic administration of whatever was considered worthy of preservation. In the nineteenth century, the protection of monuments extended this idea to buildings, but it was only in the twentieth century that term "cultural heritage" was coined.

Inheritance is not a foregone conclusion but requires its active utilization, as already pointed out in 1808 in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's Faust: "What from your fathers

you've inherited, you must earn again, to own it straight." After the death of the owner, his possessions become an "orphaned asset" that needs to be repossessed by a claimant—or not. The selective acceptance of heritage includes an attribution of value, which corresponds to the process also inherent in collecting. In private inheritance the attribution of value is guided by the personal interest of the heir, while in the case of collective heritage this decision is generally made far from the collective and has to be laboriously and often unsuccessfully explained to the collective.

The Humboldt Forum provides a nice example. A no longer existing building, the Berlin City Castle, is supposed to be turned—with all its inherent contradictions—into an identity-shaping part of the cultural heritage of the Federal Republic of Germany. Even if the majority of citizens does not yet appear to have properly internalized this increase of their collective cultural capital, the federal and state governments and private donors are willing to pay 596 million Euro in real capital (at the price index of II/2011) for this imaginary "bridge between the past and present."

If the FAQ column on the Humboldt Forum's website can be trusted, the concern of the citizens is focused primarily on questions of cost and construction schedule—quite understandable in view of recent experiences with other over-the-top public building projects. The question "What is the Humboldt Forum?" is found on the list only far below "How many different ornamental elements will be used?" and "Will it still be possible to take a walk along the banks of the Spree?" and only just a little ahead of "What kind of wood are the windows made of?" The answer to the question about the contents is appropriately vague, because even at present no clear line can be discerned in this matter. The promised "approach of bringing together the different cultures and perspectives and searching for new insights on current topics such as migration, religion, and globalization" could basically be

viewed as that of a well-run museum of anthropology, were it not for the fact of a lack of professional anthropological competence at the upper decision-making level of the Humboldt Forum, which in this respect is clearly overburdened.

Obviously, this is not a unique situation. In Paris, it had not the least been the neglect by the government that caused the old Musée de l'Homme to fall short of the requirements of the post-colonial twentieth century. Here again, instead of attempting an overdue adaptation of the existing institution to the changed circumstances, it seemed to be politically more attractive to replace it with the new Musée du quai Branly, a building of national self-representation in the manner of the nineteenth century, in which the architecture by Jean Nouvel was assigned the primary identity-shaping function, while the content-based orientation was explicitly designed to be that of a museum with ethnographic objects instead of a that of an ethnological museum. Just as in the case of the Humboldt Forum, the name of the museum in Paris does not offer a clue to the visitor what to expect inside—as if one had to be ashamed of anthropology. It may be a consoling outlook that after the founding of its competitor across the Seine, the Musée de l'Homme has been able with significantly more limited means to reinvent itself and under anthropological leadership to address those questions, which the Musée du quai Branly leaves unanswered.

It is not by coincidence that ethnology as a distinctive discipline had its origin in the setting of the growing importance of nation states in Europe. As a project of the Enlightenment designed to catalogue and explain the word in its diversity, its access to the farthest corners of the earth was indeed facilitated by the colonialist expansion of Europe; at the same time, however, thanks to its insistence on the relativity and equivalence of cultures, the new science from the beginning had a subversive potential questioning the "universalist" (i.e., "ethnocentric") claim of Western superiority—a potential that time and again proved to be effective (such as

in the emergence of modern art).[1]

The extent to which ethnology in German-speaking countries (where it was known as “Völkerkunde” and “Ethnologie” since the eighteenth century) has recently been struggling with its own heritage is illustrated by the deletion of the term “Völkerkunde” not only from the names of practically all museums and university departments, but most recently also from the name of its professional association, in which “ethnology” has been replaced by “social and cultural anthropology,”[2] as if one could evade one’s past by a simple change of words—a “repression of history” likewise blamed on the Humboldt Forum. At the same time, the increasing presentism of social and cultural anthropology has deepened the ditches between anthropologists in universities and museums, because the latter primarily have to devote themselves to the historically accumulated collections under their care and their interpretation for contemporary museum visitors.

In was the ethnographic practice that, by the collecting and preservation of material products and by the textualization and picturization of bodies of knowledge and forms of expression of cultural diversity, has created the reservoir from which today the post-colonial nation states and the indigenous peoples often living at odds with them can make use in their endeavor to claim their cultural heritage. Documents preserved in museums owe their preservation to the traditional bearers of knowledge who passed on to anthropologists the knowledge, in which their own societies had lost interest, at least as often as to their acquisition during the colonial period through predation and/or under unequal power relationships.

Collecting is always accompanied by an alienation of things from the original context of life, which endows them with meaning and function. Thus, objects no longer served a living practice, but became exemplary representations as well as sources of

historical phenomena. This was contrary to the views of the majority of the source communities, who were not interested in the historical explanation of the past on the basis of preserved documents, but in legitimizing the present by reference to a frequently mythical past.[3]

At the same time, the attribution of value made in connection with collecting (quantifiable by the financial effort necessary for their conservation) signaled the transformation of these objects into the cultural heritage of the collecting societies where they represent the value of cultural diversity and the respect for other ways of life—not the most abominable aspect of the Western cultural tradition.[4]

For the Humboldt Forum, which does not want to be a museum but could not exist without museum collections, two pressing problems become apparent from what has been outlined above. First of all, it must not only be recognized that the envisaged bridge between the past and present leads via the Palace of the Republic of the socialist GDR to the imperialist German Empire and its colonial activities, but also that the past is differently constructed in other cultures. The past, in the words of the British novelist L. P. Hartley, is “a foreign country,” which because of cultural differences is characterized by a double alterity. Both with respect to our own history and in engaging with the past of other societies and the latent conflict between tradition and Western historiography, it appears to be necessary to make the reconciliation of the past with the present a strategic priority of an institution such as the Humboldt Forum. How this is to be achieved without the central integration of ethnology (or social and cultural anthropology) and given the dominance of a universalistic-ethnocentric art-historical discourse in the Forum, still has to be explained.

The other problem rests on the fact that the Humboldt Forum (and the ethnological

Campus Museum presumably connected with it) displays and/or preserves hundreds of thousands of things, which are the (at least potential) cultural heritage of dozens of nation states and thousands of source communities, yet at the same time also part of our own cultural heritage. Here as well a reconciliation of conflicting claims is called for, which ultimately can only be achieved in constructive talks between all claimants based on the assumption of their fundamental entitlement of access to their cultural heritage and by looking for creative solutions.[5] There is a valid concern that the resources and competent staffing required for this purpose have not been priced into the operating costs of Humboldt Forums after its opening.

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[1] Admittedly, the recourse of modernist artists to non-Western practices of visual expression is also an example for how this subversive potential was primarily used as a tool to combat Western traditions while contributing little to a better understanding of other cultures (see, e.g., Christian Feest, "Identitäten und Irrtümer." In: J. Hofleitner, E. Madlener [eds.], Kulturen—Verwandtschaft in Geist und Form (Wien 1991: Galerie nächst St. Stephan), 131–148, reprinted in: Wolfgang Lindig [ed.], Indianische Realität. Nordamerikanische Indianer in der Gegenwart [München 1994: dtv], 15–34).

[2] Inasmuch as "social anthropology" is no less distant from British and French than "Völkerkunde" is from German colonialism, the whole exercise has a peculiarly German flavor.

[3] On the different constructions of the past on the basis of the preservation of document, see, e.g., Christian Feest, “On Some Uses of the Past in Native American Art and Art History.” In: Marie Mauzé (ed.), Past is Present (Lanham, MD 1997: University Press of the Americas), 65–79.

[4] On the practices of preservation of objects in source communities, on the historical changes in the culture-specific protocols in handling things, and the polyculturality of ethnographic objects resulting from their transformation into documents of cultural alterity, see, e.g., Christian Feest, “Ethnographic Objects: Polymaterial and Polycultural.” In: Stefania Pandozy (ed.), Sharing Conservation II: Earth (Vaticano 2014: Musei Vaticani), 193–203.

[5] Each is case is a particular one. As an exemplary illustration, however, reference may be made to the Austrian-Mexican project on the Ancient Mexican Featherheaddress (a.k.a. “Crown of Moctezuma”), which conducted on the basis of a mutual acknowledgement oh shared cultural heritage (Christian Feest und Lilia Rivero Weber, “Shared Heritage: The Ancient Mexican Feather Headdress in Vienna”. In: G. Ulrich Großmann and Petra Krutisch (eds.), The Challenge of the Object / Die Herausforderung des Objekts (CIHA 2012 – Congress Proceedings, 4 vols., Nuremberg 2013: Germanisches Nationalmuseum), 4: 1397–1401).