Erhard Schüttpelz



# Into the Whirlpool

## Part One: Soft Spots and Blind Spots

Everything has been said about the Humboldt Forum. And it was already said ten years ago. The discussion has long gone around in circles. This year, newspaper culture sections have taken charge, without bringing up any new aspects. The only new thing is the marked pull downward, which is addressed in the two essays by Viola König and Bernhard Streck. Ethnology was excluded from the management level of an ethnological museum or a permanent ethnological exhibition, without discussion and without reasons; and the building will be crowned with a five-meter-high cross, to be understood as a sign of tolerance, so that the heathen traditions can find their place in the Occident. The exclusion looks like a scientific discipline punished by being declared underage, the cross like a satire: those who don't want it are simply not tolerant enough.

But this assessment would be reassuringly harmless. Let's not deceive ourselves: it's much worse. When the new management team was installed, ethnologists were not consciously excluded, but rather left by the wayside because higher authorities couldn't imagine what they could contribute to mastering the coming tasks. To top it all, the German Society for Ethnology has just renamed itself – at the worst possible moment. If in the future ethnologists claim interpretive competence for their ethnographic collections, the nomenclature of social and especially cultural anthropology will stand firmly in the way. We are all cultural anthropologists, the scholars of Cultural Studies will say. The ethnologists? – oh, them; they are no longer called ethnologists. Aren't the philosophers in charge of anthropology?

And when everything focused on the cross, it all happened without even thinking about what would be displayed inside. It even took place with an extensive

acknowledgement of the divine right of kings and the Prussian view of things – a slap in the face of German democracy:

> **The Humboldt Forum is to be a museum of non-European cultures. The critics, including in the city's Social-Democrat/Left/Green senate, say: how can Chinese cave painting stand under the Christian emblem? Can you understand these voices?**
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> **Parzinger:** Yes, of course I can understand that. On the other hand, we have to stop thinking that everything will be subordinated to this cross. This has already been discussed, but the discussion has ebbed somewhat in the meantime, because all the decisions about the Palace have been made. This is a bit of a proxy discussion. You can say, "What does the façade, the Prussian eagle and all the other symbolism that is not Christian, but Prussian, have to do with the content of the Humboldt Forum?" Here, too, no subordination is intended; rather, it was said that the Palace will be reconstructed partly as an affirmation of German, Prussian history, while the interior with the Humboldt Forum will be an institution that shows a different Germany, one open to the world.
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> We are a society that is becoming ever more multicultural, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic, and the interior will express this. That will necessarily relativize the symbolism of the cupola and the other details of the façade. …
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> **You have emphasized that the reconstruction of the Palace, at least of the Baroque western façade, is definitely a reminiscence of the Prussian king. And he, in turn, only placed the cross on the cupola retroactively, 150 years after the Palace got along quite well without a cross; the cupola with the cross was dedicated only after the suppression of the March Revolution, as a sign of the victorious reactionaries in 1854. So, doesn't this cross stand specifically for the unity of the Church and the military in**

**Prussia?**

**Parzinger:** This connection is correct. For most of the time of its existence, the Palace, or at least the Baroque Palace, had no cupola. And as reports in the media have made us aware, the cupola was indeed a reaction to the March Revolution, in which, in the end, the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV was even offered the Emperor's crown. He refused it, because he didn't want to accept an emperor's crown from the hands of these rebellious plebeians. At the time, many enthusiastic proponents of national unity were aghast that he simply rejected it that way and that these early attempts to unify Germany failed so abjectly. And then, certainly also as a reaction to this revolution, he had the cupola set on top of the chapel to symbolize that royal rule was by divine right.

Talk with Natascha Freundel (North German Radio, 23 June 2017)
http://www.ndr.de/kultur/Hermann-Parzinger-ueber-Kreuz-auf-dem-Berliner-Stadtschloss,journal892.html

In this description, the content of the argumentation is as remarkable as its form. After all, no original is being restored here; rather, a restoration is being simulated. Must the King's affront to German democracy be repeated? Why? As an "affirmation of Prussian, German history" that declared us, the heirs of the failed democracy of 1848, its enemies? With what justification? The façade is precisely *not* to correspond with the content, because "a different Germany, one open to the world" is to be visible only inside. This affirmation is hard to distinguish from a declaration of bankruptcy. If the façade and the content diverge so greatly, then it appears that everything else can diverge even more, because the proof of its incoherence can provide justification as well as its coherence.

What can one do in such a case? The die has been cast, the game is lost. The rest is damage control. Before beginning a new game and thinking about a counter-

offensive, let's first analyze how Mr. Parzinger's affirmation and this double affront to ethnology came about. I'm not an ethnologist, I only had the discipline as my minor and later studied its history, but then rather extensively and taking pleasure in historical detail. As for the Humboldt Forum, I was familiar with the discussions of the founding phase and am hardly surprised to see the decline of the institutional concept now, because, as is well known, two different developments combined in the emergence of the Humboldt Forum: a private initiative to restore the Prussian City Palace, which the state tolerated and then finally aggressively fostered, and the decision by Germany's parliament, the Bundestag, to move the ethnological collections from Dahlem to the center of Berlin. Both were out of kilter from the start, but the one seemed like a unique opportunity and the other was sold to us as a gift.

It was a didactic play in fluid dynamics, in three acts. The first stream is idealistic and populist and consists of marketing, sponsoring, and propaganda, of stones and statues that can be bought, of nostalgia and nationalism. This current has no doubt about its mission, because East Germany's Palace of the Republic has already disappeared and a substitute must be installed. The stain of an unpleasant history becomes a wishing machine. Here, one didn't field arguments, but acted on gut feeling, with love and hate and money. Everywhere in the provinces, such beautiful palaces have already been simulated; why not here in our Berlin? In the end, as everywhere in the provinces, one agreed on the Potemkin façade. "Our town should have the most beautiful palace." Something sensible should be inside, preferably a department store with changing offers or an equally variable cultural offering, if you please. In the end, that's precisely what we'll get: a variable cultural offering with correspondingly many grand openings, morsels, and speeches about the most important Prussian site in the world.

The second stream is the Bundestag's mandate that the ethnological collections of the Prussian Cultural Possessions Foundation should move to a museum in the

center of the city, with additional assignments to a university. Here, discussion and argumentation went on constantly, because the mission of ethnological museums has been in a long-lasting fundamental crisis – a crisis directed inward, but that makes everyone an expert. Self-flagellation supplemented by assistance to self-flagellation. This stream is extremely reflexive; after several rounds of talks, it already turns in circles and maelstroms. All the self-critical arguments that ethnologists developed in the course of the 20th century were taken up as a sunken cultural good decades later by outsiders to cast doubt on the discipline. After ethnology spent decades strengthening itself through self-criticism and self-historicization, a surprising immunodeficiency developed that seems to have set in with the end of the Cold War. But the central control room between ethnological self-criticism and today's clichés about ethnology, the "writing culture" debate, already consisted of sunken cultural goods.

It is easy to see the difference if one compares Roy Wagner with James Clifford. In his "Invention of Culture", Roy Wagner wrote in 1972 that every child must cooperatively reinvent the conventions given in every culture, and that also goes for the ethnologist who is a guest in such a culture. This is why ethnologists in their foreignness seem to natives like children, primitives, or even insane people. This comparison legitimizes ethnology, because its "invention of culture" is as old as the world and as quotidian as culture and convention. Ethnological museums aren't as unique as we might think, either. Other cultures have their "cargo cult", and we have a "culture cult", writes Wagner. This ethnological reflection aims at a "reciprocal" or "symmetrical" anthropology; it points out that all comparisons are preliminary and we find ourselves between the cultures in what is unconscious, difficult to translate, and unrepresentable. Ten years later, James Clifford writes about "ethnographic authority". The ethnologist appears as an autonomous author who rigorously shapes his authority after its possible loss by pointing to his unique experiences in the field. Clifford's depiction is neutral, but the next generation understands it as delegitimization: the authority that the ethnologist acquires in the field was stolen

from the natives.

Clifford refused to go into the field himself. Clearly, he did not want to lose his *own* hard-won authority as author. Consequently, this refusal was given a moral charge: it is legitimate to describe how ethnographic authority came about in the past, but not legitimate to share or continue it. After all, we are no longer colonialists. Since then, unlike sociology, ethnology no longer trusts its own classics; it increasingly imports its theoretical challenges from other disciplines; and it yearns to finally be liberated from the exoticism of the past and the exoticism of the present. The lessons of Roy Wagner, which James Clifford learned and which were the basis of his presentation's attractiveness, are forgotten. Ethnology allegedly was no longer shaped by a mutual "invention of culture", but only by a one-sided "writing culture".

As if that would even have been possible.

And as if that had been the methodology, the sense, or the result of ethnology – instead of all the other and indeed unambiguously, methodologically, one-sidedly formulated disciplinary traditions, in particular the historical and philological, but also almost all social scientific traditions. Of all things, the most dialogical of all the humanities – the only one that to this day still unbrokenly follows the Central European paradigm of the intersection of research object and research subject; that bases its methodology on this paradigm; that, unlike its Central European relative, psychoanalysis, was able to establish itself as a university discipline; and that is the only remaining modern justification for adventure and for the researcher's *subsidiarity* to his interlocutors – became the prime example of one-sided scientific ordering and classifying power. Here a soft spot for Prussia meets an astonishing blind spot about ethnology.

In the meantime, the sunken cultural good, "writing culture", is part of the curriculum of social and cultural anthropology and cultural studies. All the others have listened well. Exoticism was theft, and the ethnological collections are based on

exoticism and theft. Ethnology is being delegitimized; one need only push its nose into its own discussion of its past wrongdoing. Ethnology's self-criticism served the search for even more radical ways of shedding existing one-sidedness, so that the natives' ordering schemata and classifications could be taken into account. In its reception by the art scenes and cultural studies, this self-criticism was taken as proof of ethnology's original sin. Ethnology, and in part ethnography, is becoming an expletive. But in no way in order to break up one's *own* methodological one-sidedness by engaging in dialogue with the natives – of whatever provenience – but rather to seal off one's own monologue all the better. Critics of representation please beware to make your critique self-sufficient.

Act three: the first and second streams collide. The City Palace wins, because it doesn't discuss. Ethnology is caught in a vortex it can no longer escape, no matter how it struggles. Since the issue is solely the restoration of the façade, there is no discourse in the camp raising the money, but only affirmation. And those who have to move into the building find it more beautiful every day – what else can they say? The longer the ethnological museum is discussed, the more critical mass its criticizability takes on – even without any practical implementation. None of this seems problematical, but after ten years, pure weariness has shifted the power relations for good. The ethnological museum no longer exists, and the City Palace receives its cross. All that remains of the former ethnological museum is morsels, i.e., variable modules.

Why? The covering and the content seemed so nicely separated and well defined. But ethnology should have been warned. "When a being dons the raiment of something else, it loses its prior essence and actually becomes the other being, living and acting like the latter. The bearer of essence is thus the covering, the outer form. The form is thus identical to the being." – So wrote Fritz Krause in 1931 in his essay on "Mask and ancestor figure: the motif of the covering and the principle of form". There are cultures in which: "The masks are thus the means by which one being is

transformed into the other whose form is given in the mask, in such a way that this other being is real in characteristics, abilities, and effect. … The form of the mask is thus the bearer of essence. When a participant puts on such a mask, he transforms himself into the being in question." And Bernhard Streck elaborated, following Krause: In modern times, a military habitus in particular is donned to train the change of costume on command and to enjoy the change in masks. "Seeing more and the ability to do more release brutality and criminality." (Bernhard Streck, Leo Frobenius, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 207.)

That the covering determines the being and forces its wearer to transform sounds absurd. But this absurdity has happened, and it has its own logic and perhaps even dialectic. If one separates covering and content as extremely as at the starting point of the Humboldt Forum, a demand necessarily results that there must be a content, at least *one*, that appears in the covering. And if Prussia's splendor and glory is not represented, then still "the history of the site" should be. But ethnology, the ostensible content, is not to show itself in the façade. Then, if you please, it should contribute something immaterial to the covering, and thus to the site that is heir to the Palace of the Republic and the victorious Hohenzollern dynasty. The collections, after all, are Prussian cultural possessions, and the Prussian "house" is therewith the possessor. After all, the two are covering and content for each other: the simulacrum of a Prussian palace is to comprise the whole world through its ethnological collections; and ethnology – sorry, the non-European collections – are to outfit or result in a national museum. This mutual transposition was never decided upon; it emerged on its own and in the meantime determines all the newspapers' interviews with the triumvirate of founding directors. It determines the maelstrom of journalism this year and will foreseeably do so until the museum opens.

The palace enwraps the collections, and the collections are to release their undefined national spirit, the Prussian cultural possession cult. The two streams wrap each other and remain in motion, they whirl and create an abyss that, in the

end, will swallow up the founding directors, too, unless they are smart enough to make a getaway – as McGregor plans, at any rate.

Horst Bredekamp recently let the cat out of the bag:

> "The cardinal question is whether German self-awareness can be built up solely on guilt and shame or whether it is permissible or even necessary to provide due scope to all those strivings that were annihilated in National Socialism and its predecessors, precisely for this reason. This is no exoneration of guilt, but its specification, because it places in our field of vision everything that was eradicated and perverted. Such a space for memory would not make its appearance triumphantly, but would refer to something that was lost, but that should be remembered all the more intensely.
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> The current controversies draw their extreme and repeated unnecessarily hurtful modes of argumentation from the circumstance that the legitimization of Germany and Europe in the world cannot come about without a changed understanding of history. The Humboldt Forum has stumbled into this fire, which is why it is sometimes treated as a damage fetish. But even that is a consequence of its purpose.
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> The designated line of tradition on which Johann Gottfried Herder was able to philosophically base cultural relativism found its correspondence in Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of world languages and Alexander von Humboldt's concept of the cosmos. Calling up this past that went before the past to enable us to conceive the future apparently cannot proceed without conflicts, as these figures already experienced."
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> (ZEIT weekly paper of 31 Aug. 8 2017)

The point is thus German self-awareness, with some peculiar stylistic conjunctives.

The role of ethnology remains nebulous. There is only the unmistakable intention to functionalize it. Of course, this patriotic reflection comes with the best intentions and above all with the intention to make the best out of the ethnological collections. It is even called “cultural relativism”. But the point is the “legitimization of Germany and Europe in the world”. How culturally relative can such a legitimization be? Is the old nationalist verse “Am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen” – the world shall heal through German being – to be turned into: German self-awareness shall heal through non-German being?

I respectfully beg to report: there is no such being.

A lot can be learned from non-German non-being, but THE GERMAN SELF-AWARENESS thereby remains a Rorschach test that can be read just as well or even much better from the blotches on a flaking wall. It can be counted on five fingers that Bredekamp’s honorable liberal patriotic position will be only one option among several. If the aim of the Humboldt Forum is “the legitimization of Germany and Europe in the world”, political interventions are inevitable. And they long since determine the game, including the cross and the management team. Can an ethnological museum endure that? In the face of so much self-doubt, can it be the task of an ethnological museum at all to pursue “the legitimization of Germany in the world”?

The conclusion is clear: as the Chancellor has personally announced, under no circumstances will there be “only an ethnological museum” in the Humboldt Forum. This sentence is to be understood as a broad hint: *if* every ethnological museum is “only an ethnological museum”, then something other than “only an ethnological museum” will therefore be suitable – except everything that makes an ethnological museum be “only an ethnological museum”. Neither in its parts nor as a whole. Everything, just not “only” *that*. Anything but that! That’s what our Chancellor says by leaving the conclusion to those in a position of responsibility. The last tender for an “art in construction” project says plainly and clearly:

The Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace will become one of Europe's largest and most modern cultural institutions. It will present the non-European collections of the Prussian Cultural Possessions Foundation; elucidate the history of the site in a permanent exhibition; bring the Humboldt University's research and instruction to public attention; and explain Berlin and its intertwining with the world.

An art in construction project in the central stairway hall, which, as a vertical and horizontal distribution zone, opens up the various museums and event areas, is to convey these new cultural messages of the institution, in particular in regard to the theme of this competition: the Humboldt Forum as "cosmopolitan site" and "site of the world". The aim is to create a suitable artwork in construction in this sense.

I know no ethnological museums any longer; I know only non-European collections and cosmopolitan sites. But this cosmopolitan site, if you please, should also be a patriotic memorial site. The Humboldt Forum is perfectly unsuited for this; after all, it was constructed as the substitute for a real site and as a simulacrum. The building is new and the interior recalls nothing at all, except all the other department-store palaces in the provinces. And so the ethnological collections must serve the impossible: what was fairly certainly not German is to define Germany – Germany and Europe – in the world.

No wonder the collection's colonialism rapidly moved to the center of public discussions this year. The definition of the Humboldt Forum circles patriotic self-awareness on the capital's central site of memory; all the collection can represent anymore is what was German-nationalist about it and about German ethnology, and that was colonialism. This identification goes so far and is proffered with a style as if ethnology had been the only colonial science and as if ethnology were nothing but a compliant colonial science. Both ideas are patently false, as anyone can read who studies the history of ethnology, including German ethnology with its tricky protagonists, texts, and objects. A researcher of art-historical provenience even went so far as to proclaim that all ethnographic objects were potentially

bloodstained. This sounds like an unintentional lingering echo of deeply felt disgust with ethnological collections and their potentially blood-soaked objects. Earlier generations also suspected the tools of fierce acts of violence in ethnological collections. This suspicion lingers under a new sign. For a brief moment this summer, it appeared as if the German newspapers would advocate the unconditional restitution and dissolution of the ethnological collections. But then ethnologists spoke up and pointed out that, for almost all the objects, neither could there be a secured "return" in restitution nor was there a secured provenience, but that there were prominent cases of a bloodless provenience and a whole series of extremely problematic demands for restitution. In that moment, the managing body seemed particularly headless. No wonder: in the course of the years, it had shed its ethnological competence. But the headlessness was not followed by further deeds; ethnology remains excluded from the decision-making level and is torn to pieces in the public media. Up on the roof, watch the nail fetish take shape. Oh the whirl of events!

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*translated by Mitch Cohen*