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More Ethnology – or rather Social and Cultural Anthropology?

– in the Humboldt Forum! Time for an Intervention

Time is moving on: in 2019, the Humboldt Forum, currently the "biggest and financially most ambitious project of German federal cultural policy", *will open in the heart of Germany's capital. In the view of the organizers, it will/should become a site of encounter, in which "cultures engage in dialog as equals", in order to "acknowledge their diversity*".

Since the summer of 2017, at the latest, we know that the Humboldt Forum, as a project of superlatives and a site for understanding the world, still has a long way to go – if this "Berlin insanity", with its reputed opacity, is ever to reach its goals. With her withdrawal from the Forum's team of experts, the art historian Bénédicte Savoy kicked off a storm of criticism. Most of the arising critique focused on the provenience of the objects of the ethnological collections: only a radical shift in perspective was said to be able to free the Humboldt Forum from the "leaden blanket" that threatened to bury the future cultural institution in the center of Berlin like the "nuclear waste of Chernobyl". The historian Jürgen Zimmerer called for a lasting exploration of and debate about the "colonial core" of the collections and accused those responsible for the Humboldt Forum of "colonial amnesia".

So, is it high time for ethnology – as the disciplined is named at most (social and cultural) anthropological institutes in Germany – to position itself in this debate? After all, it is *our* discipline that threatens to flounder in the storm of indignation when Berlin's Culture Senator Klaus Lederer calls an "old-school ethnological museum" in the capital a "disaster". As early as 2016, Chancellor Angela Merkel also

judged that an ethnological museum in the middle of Berlin ran counter to her vision of the project as a site "where debates about globalization and its effects can be conducted".

It isn't altogether clear where this across-the-board criticism of the discipline of ethnology comes from, which supposedly has not adequately worked through its colonial past. In his "polemical paper" of 19 Dec. 2017 on this blog, Karl-Heinz Kohl showed that this generalization is inaccurate, because precisely the "debate about ethnology's interrelation with the colonial system has continuously accompanied the discipline at the universities since the beginning of decolonization". According to Karl-Heinz Kohl, ethnological museums have "devoted exhibitions [...] to current forms of exploiting the 'Third World' – and in the colonial era itself, ethnologists were not only "collaborateurs". There is therefore no reason, he argues, to permit oneself to be startled by a vehemently articulated general criticism of ethnology as *Völkerkunde* – which he even thinks triggered the "collateral damage" of the changed name of the ethnological professional association in October 2017 ; called the Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde since 1929 and then, since 1938, the *Deutsche* Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde.

Digression: The Ethnological Disciplinary Association's Change of Name as "Collateral Damage"?

According to Karl-Heinz Kohl, the newly chosen name of the disciplinary association, "German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology" (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*), is a historical short circuit that was counterproductive, precisely in relation to the Humboldt Forum: according to him, this term has no recognition value in the public realm, where "Ethnologie" is a firmly established name. He also argues that, on an Internet forum a few weeks before the vote in Berlin, the majority of directors of ethnological institutes had also called for

"Ethnology" as an alternative term. But most seriously, he says, is that "Sozialanthropologie" does not stand solely as an equivalent for British *Social Anthropology* – whereby the history of colonialism has tainted the British term as much as it has "Völkerkunde" – but, as the disciplinary name in Germany at the end of the 19th century, was molded primarily by social Darwinist race theoreticians. In the following decades, at least for part of German-speaking Ethnology, this disciplinary term stood for researches tied to racism and genocide.

But was everyone present at the membership meeting in Berlin, which voted with a 2/3 majority for "Social and Cultural Anthropology" and didn't even want to conduct a big discussion about it, completely oblivious to history and driven by over-hasty political correctness? I don't think so. This would screen out our discipline's many-layered ability to reflect – a discipline that is accustomed to dealing with the complex interaction of the present and history, disciplinary politics and disciplinary history.

The step of renaming was first and foremost a sign that most of our academic representatives could no longer identify with the designation "Völkerkunde" – whose emergence as a discipline was, in part, closely tied to the racist and national-chauvinistic ideology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is indicated not only by the debate about a possible renaming that has been conducted for decades in the professional association and that was based essentially on the same arguments as those presented at the membership meeting in Berlin; but for whose implementation the formal prerequisites were not fulfilled until the conference in October. Equally important, today there is no longer a single institute – or degree – titled "Völkerkunde". That against this background the members moved straight to a vote without prior discussion and "jubilated" over the step taken is thus probably owed primarily to the fact that a historically long-desired situation had become reality. At the same time, it may be astonishing that *Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*

– in this specific combination of names – ultimately found broad support, when one considers that a number of substantial arguments were made for and against this term (like "Ethnologie", by the way, which was also offered as a choice).[1]

One motive for this decision may have been that its supporters perceived this designation as being internationally more visible and more compatible with the disciplines of *Social* and *Cultural Anthropology* in the Anglophone world. For example, the European umbrella association bears the designation *European Association of Social Anthropologists*. But it is equally true that, in recent decades in the German-speaking world, individual institutes and chairs titled "Sozialanthropologie" or "Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie"[2] have repeatedly established their *own* tradition under these disciplinary names – and have never thereby fallen under suspicion of proximity to the race theories of the early 20th century. The main reason why outrage was *not* articulated in these cases is probably that the term today describes precisely what our discipline does: it researches the behavior and ways of life of people in their diverse social and cultural life contexts. At the German Research Foundation (DFG), in turn, Ethnology has for several years had its place within Scientific Council (*Fachkollegium*) 106 under the sub-designation "Social and Cultural Anthropology" – without provoking significant criticism from the discipline itself. Finally, I see the fact that the professional association is not governed solely by the preferences of our discipline's professors and institute directors less as an occasion for concern than as a sign of our discipline's strong capability to integrate the younger generation.

Ethnology, Social and Cultural Anthropology, and the Humboldt Forum: A Window of Opportunity for Dialog?

But what about Karl-Heinz Kohl's worry that renaming the professional association as *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie* (DGSKA) has negative

effects on the discipline's recently renewing dialog with the Humboldt Forum? In July 2017, the Executive Board of the DGV/DGSKA wrote a letter to Monika Grütters, the State Minister for Culture and Media, in which it criticized the lack of integration of specialized social and cultural anthropological perspectives in the project of the Humboldt Forum. The Board also formulated its call for a *comprehensive* integration of the discipline in the ongoing planning process at a meeting of the Executive Board with the Founding Directors of the Humboldt Forum in November 2017 – where, at the same time, the Board members emphasized the great importance of specialized social and cultural anthropological perspectives on both the substantive and the organizational levels. How can a cultural institute that will exhibit ethnological collections of this size manage without significant disciplinary expertise in its leadership? Would this obvious gap – which extends as far as the Humboldt Forum's international advisory body[3] – be imaginable in (art) historical museums, and with what justified outrage would these disciplines react?

The results of the meeting in November were, first, the Founding Directors' general acknowledgement of the importance of specialized social and cultural anthropological perspectives for the Humboldt Forum and, second, the agreement to hold a regular dialog with the professional association about possible collaborations. This may not be very much, initially – considering that, with the proximity of discipline and collections, such cooperation ought to be a matter of course. But at the same time, it is remarkable that, after several years of standstill in the communication between the discipline at the universities and the Humboldt Forum – for whatever reasons – now a new window for dialog has opened that ought to be used if our discipline does not want to insist on a position as critical outsider. There would be reason for such a positioning – to the degree that the discipline wants to relate primarily to its supposed "disempowerment at the hands of the Humboldt Forum and disregard for its wealth of experience", to cite the point Claus Deimel put on it in this blog.

Despite a certainly justified skepticism about the project of the Humboldt Forum *per se*, I nonetheless think that we should not shut ourselves off from the newly opened window of opportunity to collaborate in shaping – on the final stretch – this venue's approach to exhibitions and objects from the diverse perspectives of our discipline. It seems to me to be of minor relevance whether we do this as ethnologists or as social and cultural anthropologists: after all, students, lecturers, and researchers have worked in the discipline in the German-speaking countries for years under both designations, without developing significant divergences pointing beyond the inherent (and necessary) diversity found within an academic discipline. But what should be *implemented* are the kind of collaborations whose *framework* only the professional association can create, primarily by the representatives of the discipline at the universities and in the museums and in cooperation with other disciplinary and cultural-political actors.[4]

Whether debate about the colonial past, which Katharina Schramm recently postulated as being "bitterly necessary" in relation to the ethnological museums, has already been conducted with all its consequences within ethnology or social and cultural anthropology itself, as Karl-Heinz Kohl asserts, can certainly be discussed. But it is certain that, in recent years and decades, the discipline has formulated impetuses that are central for the Humboldt Forum's consideration of the ethnological collections, as well as with themes like religion, migration, and "culture" in today's world. This includes not only research on ethnological provenience, which, within the discipline, comprises not only the history of the acquisition or collection of objects, but also their *current* significance for the societies from which they come. At issue are also the conditions of collaborative work in postcolonial contexts and reflection on the production of knowledge and language politics in a present that has complex potentials for social and cultural upheavals. To be mentioned, finally, are the diverse impetuses that the discipline has formulated regarding ontology, materiality and material culture, memory politics and cultural heritage, but also

affectivity and emotion in the constitution of present-day societies. Today, all these debates have profoundly affected other disciplinary contexts and are the basis on which ethnology or social and cultural anthropology can and should demand a central place in the Humboldt Forum – and equally in the planned research campus (*Forschungscampus*) in Berlin's Dahlem district.

...But do Ethnology and Social and Cultural Anthropology even "Need" the Humboldt Forum?

If, then, the Humboldt forum needs the perspectives of our discipline in order to achieve a conceptually adequate approach to its objects and collections – does this equally mean that Ethnology or Social and Cultural Anthropology at the universities need the Humboldt Forum?

In my opinion: yes. The Humboldt Forum can not only make the content of our discipline visible for a broad public, but at the same time also deliver important impetuses for the discipline at the universities where these were historically much more closely tied to the ethnological museums than they are today, and not only in Berlin.[5] That the discipline must not thereby be reduced to the role of a short-notice idea generator for the realization of a cultural project that is currently under heavy fire is self-evident, in my view. The current window of opportunity for discussion with the Humboldt Forum should, rather, be used to work toward creating critical impetuses in the *continuous* accompaniment and codetermination of this institution, which will house in the heart of Berlin one of the most important ethnological collections.

The current debates in the discipline thereby show – far beyond our discipline – that it is no longer possible today to take up the traditions of ethnology as *Völkerkunde*,

with its humanist and universalist approaches, approaches that shaped the development of the discipline *beyond* ethnic-chauvinist or colonialist ideologies. In a postcolonial and decentralized world, the Humboldt Forum can function only if it opens itself up to the many-sided reflections about the ruptures and opportunities that, historically but also presently, characterize the encounters between societies, cultures, objects, and academic disciplines. As Bénédicte Savoy most recently showed, these encounters currently include in particular also the many-sided debate about restitution that French President Macron's position on "cultural objects from Africa" has revived in politics and among intellectuals and activists – and that must specifically include close dialog with African researchers, communities, and politicians. Within our discipline, only ethnology or social and cultural anthropology, and not "Völkerkunde", stands for this critical "polylog on equal footing".

Against this background, should we turn back the clock in regard to the renaming our professional association, as Karl-Heinz Kohl asks at the end of his polemic? I don't think so: there will be no "perfect" designation for our professional association – as was made clear by the discussion that led to the renaming. Not least, we have also learned from the "writing culture" debate that our discipline profits from fundamental introspection – but not if we focus *too much* on ourselves. Let us instead intervene at those points where ethnology or social and cultural anthropology is so urgently needed in order to help shape encounters, representation, and action in a globalized world!

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translated by Mitch Cohen

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[1] The step of renaming had been intensively prepared over a period of two years. At the membership meeting itself, a handout comprehensively listed the pro and contra arguments for the three options for the name of the professional association. This handout will be published together with the minutes of the membership meeting in the next notices on the homepage of the professional association.

[2] Or in the sequence "Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie" at the corresponding institute in Vienna and at the department in Marburg.

[3] Only a single ethnologist is part of the Humboldt Forum's international team of experts, which is otherwise composed primarily of (art) historians.

[4] *Within* the professional association, interactions and debates with ethnological museums and collections are carried out primarily through the *Arbeitsgruppe Museum [Working Group Museum]* – whereby two further plenary sessions at the 2017 DGV/DGSKA conference underscored the significance of this working group and its relevance for the Humboldt Forum. On this, see the reports by Jonas Bens and Duane Jethro. In the discipline's sister discipline, European Ethnology, the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Cultural Heritage at the Humboldt University Berlin should be mentioned as a central actor in these debates.

[5] One exception is the Georg August University Göttingen, where the Ethnological Collection is part of the Institute for Ethnology. At the same time, there are initiatives in research and teaching at individual ethnological institutes that provide points that the overarching disciplinary discussions of the Humboldt Forum and of ethnological collections can take up.