Claus Deimel

Questions Beyond the Humboldt Forum

Berlin Culture Senator Lederer's remark, "Ethnology is just beginning to deal with its history" (Viola König in her blog contribution of 3 Oct. 17) stands for the uninformed opinions of other politicians, as well. But science's historical experience has accustomed it to such talk and led it to put up with such false depictions of its history more or less with composure, because it knows that politics can seldom deal flexibly with the "general opinion" that is armed for colonial thinking and behavior.

In the case described above, politics claims the authority to interpret diversity and misunderstood or even uncanny alternative concepts. Bashing science and museums is not only a fashion trend often taken up by the media, but also a cliché-bound competence and political lever. Added to this is the lack of interest in grasping the questions raised by the developmental history of the Humboldt Forum as fundamental societal issues; but these questions require more extensive rethinking than if they applied only to a forum or museum. Here, initially just a few questions about this:

In political dialogue, where do collections in other types of museums present what is constantly demanded of ethnology for its ethnographic collections, or even try to begin solving these issues? Where do I receive in Berlin's museums (and naturally not only there) information about the history of their colonial origin? Certainly, there have been and there are exhibitions about colonialism. But did they lead us to question our icons that shine toward us from, for example, the galleries of Old Masters and collections of treasures? Where can a narrative be found, with what money, and on the basis of what colonialist greed and violence, that could lay foundations for the creation of magnificent art and bring it into the museums that are everywhere visibly the historical phenomena of the colonial era? The Atlantic

triangular trade, i.e., the slave trade, fueled the rise of the great European cities and not least Berlin; where do municipal histories tell this to a broader public? Where does the natural history museum relate the history of the theft of natural products and animals from the countries of the Global South and other regions? Where do I hear the story of migration resulting from colonial politics and its extension to this day? Where, outside of specialized periodicals, is the colonial era reflected as violence coming from everywhere in Europe? Of course, the German colonial era cannot be described in independence from Europe. The "national pride" in the colonial heritage and its intensification in brutal nationalism, which are very diverse and contradictory in Europe, would also be a difficult theme for the Humboldt Forum – but a necessary one. Will Neil MacGregor take up this challenge?

That no ethnologists hold significant positions (Viola König in her blog contribution of 3 Oct. 17), but were pushed into the second or third tier, also had to do with the political self-presentation of this science and its museums. In the meantime, their positioning has begun and produces far more ideology than good exhibitions. And internal information is not all that shows that critical ethnologists were not desired when selecting the advisory bodies. This played a part in strengthening the propaganda against ethnological work and in letting "artists and satirists" have a say (cf. Schüttpelz's blog contribution of 24 Oct. 17), who, to bring it to an emotional point, have, with a few exceptions, been able to submit only embarrassing botchery.

The disempowerment of ethnology and the disregard for its wealth of experience accompanies the increase in the number of positionings in the discourse, which seems to have become an ideological organism per se. Positioning against the criticism is thereby presented as what is truly important. Good theater, a good song, a good text, a good exhibition are hardly to be found! As I see it, we have a situation that corresponds to Frank Zappa's mocking of the yakking about music (or art): "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture!"

The point should be to let the objects speak (Bernhard Streck 3 Oct. 17). But so far, we have heard nothing clear about a new concept of showing. At the same time, the discourse will change the demands made on the showing of ethnographic objects, and with them also on the classical showing of Old Masters, collections of treasure, etc. Thus, the debate about the Humboldt Forum will have theoretical and practical consequences for all other types of museums, as well.

In the discourse and its redundancy, however, the subject itself, the object, and its history appear to be valued less than the discourse of the aforementioned "yakkers" about music or art. The existing discourse narrative sometimes seems downright boring to me subjectively and, once again, is becoming desolate bureaucrats' German. Ideas and poetry for the thing itself are lacking (and of course that is my subjective opinion)!

But: "Sing in me, O Muse, and through me tell the story!" I'd like to call out, after Homer! Start singing! (Dylan carried this out in his Nobel Prize speech using the example of music history.) Song is what Erhard Schüttpelz wants to show in his text of 24 Oct. and to which he calls: in a cascade of possible exhibitions with current political-ethnological relevance, he sketches on just one page what all could be, if… yes, if "all the separations that characterize German politics of memory" would end (E. Schüttpelz's blog contribution of 24 Oct. 17).

That such separations, such disciplinary and conceptual boundaries could still fall is hard to imagine, but perhaps it can still happen! **The HUF must have its chance!** (And "somehow" the HUF will be constituted, and then what came before will probably be sound and fury.)

But with the criticism, everything seemed more or less worked through, until

recently. Hermann Parzinger's 2 July 2015 radio discussion on station SWF 2 with Hanno Rauterberg of the newspaper, Die ZEIT ("Schloss für die Welt oder Palast der Verlogenheit?" – palace for the world or of hypocrisy?) clearly shows (literally transcribes[1]) the usual way of speaking in the managing body and beyond it. A record played over and over again; what sticks with the listener is the nasty word "hypocrisy". Until now, when the cross was added, which is intended to herald the last phase, for now, before the opening of the Humboldt Forum, in order to nail down the orientation of the whole thing. The cross stands not only for religion, Christian and non-Christian faiths, and Prussian history in particular; it also stands for Christian science in general.[2] It could be misunderstood as the seal of the preservation of the late colonial canon.

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[1] Deimel 2017: 132-150.

[2] Not in the sense of "Christian Science", the sect that developed in the 19th century in the USA, but in general "the" science that developed in the lap of the Church, that encountered indigenous knowledge with its social structures, and that contributed to its displacement and destruction (... as the great majority of research shows. – This must be a theme!).

Literature:

Claus Deimel 2017, “Des Museums neue Kleider. Die Riten im Museum der Menschen”. VWB Verlag Berlin.

Claus Deimel 2016, “Wer Wind sät. Rufe aus der ‘letzten bildungsbürgerlichen Bastion rassistischen Denkens’”. In: Paideuma 62: p. 261-274.