Achille Mbembe

“The truth is that Europe has taken something from us, which it will never be able to return”*

**Translation from French by Michael Dorrity*

Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr have finally delivered President Emmanuel Macron with a report concerning the restitution of African objects currently held in French museums. For understandable historic reasons, Emmanuel Macron had limited the reach of the mission to previous territories over which the Republic had exercised responsibility. It would be difficult to reproach him for not having extended it beyond the zone of colonial influence in Africa.

Neither was the goal of the mission to attend to the acquisition of patrimony resulting from pre-colonial intra-African conflicts. The resolution of such disagreements where they exist is incumbent upon Africans and Africans alone.

Sarr and Savoy’s report proposes a series of honest, reasonable and realistic recommendations and its gradual implementation requires a sustained critical dialogue between French and African museums. In the absence of preconceptions or prejudices, such a dialogue could open new avenues toward a cultural Franco-African encounter of global significance.

Beyond the material restitution of artefacts, the objective of the report, as the authors have incessantly pointed out, is to recreate the conditions for a relationship based on reciprocity and mutuality. It is not a question of emptying French museums, as has been insinuated by certain malevolent critics. It is a question of rectifying a historical wrong and offering France the opportunity to establish a relationship with Africa built on different foundations, for the sake of what ought to

be called the good of the world.

Regurgitating prejudices

Although the tonality of the report and its conclusions have been positively received by Africans – primary protagonists in this historic conflict–, they have already provoked innumerable debates and controversies outside the continent. With the help of the English translation, the dispute is no longer limited to mainland France.

While the majority of criticisms are muffled, even paternalistic, others are severe and others still, though hidden behind a mild academic veneer, are simply opportunistic. The most strident come from the United States and the Anglo-Saxon world. They are essentially of an ideological nature, tainted with the habitual disdain for Africa and all things African. The procedure is more or less the same in each case, it consists in paying lip service to the principle of restitution while consistently attempting to neutralise its transformative impact.

After the customary genuflection, there follows a lengthy discussion of all the supposed negative consequences entailed by restitution for Western museums whose last line of defence is what the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne calls "overhang universalism" (universalisme de surplomb). The damage already suffered by Africa as a consequence of the confiscation of its objects as well as the damage incurred by non-restitution are quickly passed over in silence.

Numerous critics are content to merely regurgitate the same prejudices that the report meticulously refutes. Such is the case with legal prejudice, in the name of which many recur to diverse variations of the European cultural heritage legislation to demonstrate that rarely is authorisation given for the return of objects to their rightful owners. Nobody would dare to deny that these objects were created by

Africans. And yet we act as though the question of whom they belong to in no way depends on knowing where they came from and who produced them.

Pillage, extortion, predation

In line with colonial cynicism, a cleavage is made between legal property, ownership and usage on the one hand, and the creative act and the subject who creates on the other. The critics of the report highlight in particular that it does not automatically suffice to have created something in order to be its owner. And just as creating something is not equivalent to owning it, the origin of a work is not a sufficient condition to exercise property rights over it.

It is similarly assumed that the conditions under which these objects were acquired weren't the least bit problematic. To this effect, the proven facts of pillage, extortion and predation are minimized and one pretends as if we were dealing, from beginning to end, with transactions between equal parties on a free market, where the worth of objects was determined by an objective pricing mechanism.

They thus come to the conclusion that having been put to the market test, these objects are effectively "inalienable." They are presumed to be the exclusive property of public authorities (which manage them through the museum institutions) or of private individuals who, having purchased them, are entitled to use them fully and without restriction in strict accordance with the law. From a legal point of view, the debate over the restitution of African objects thus has no subject, their presence in Western museums barely being the result of confiscation and as such requiring neither moral nor political judgement.

Others (or sometimes the same) claim that Africa would not have the institutions, infrastructures, technical or financial resources, qualified personnel or know-how to

insure the preservation and conservation of the objects involved. To return these collections to such inhospitable environments would expose them, we are assured, to the risk of destruction, vandalism or despoliation.

Diversion strategies

In other words, Africans would be incapable of taking care of the objects, which they produced and which accompanied their collective lives for centuries before European penetration of the continent. The safeguard of universal heritage would thus demand that we oppose the principle of restitution. The best way to do this would be to conserve African objects in Western museums apart from occasionally lending them to Africans for temporary exhibitions.

Posing the problem of restitution in this way is part of a strategy of diversion and evasion used by those who are convinced that the winner is always right and that force creates law. Opposition to the project of restitution recommended by the report is at times insidious, at others frontal. In either case, the point of the strategy is to empty the concept of its operative force by neutralising any disruptive effects.

The aim is also, particularly for criticism from across the Channel and the Atlantic, and to some extent from institutional and racist milieus in countries such as Germany and Belgium, to smother at birth the international impact, which Macron's initiative could have not merely on the art market but also on a conceptual, juridical, social and even epistemological level.

How to prevent the trivialisation of such an eminently political and moral cause other than by turning our backs on such a cynical conception of law and returning to the essentials? Indeed, in this case, as in so many others, the function of law is precisely not to sanctify relations of force and extortion. It is to serve justice. There

is hardly a law, which could be said to be completely detached from its obligation to serve justice. Wherever law is not in the service of justice, it should be amended.

A practically incalculable loss

Moreover, any authentic policy of restitution is inseparable from a capacity for truth; to honour the truth and thereby create the indispensible foundation of a new bond and a new relationship. The truth is, that for a relatively long time we have been the warehouse of the world, at once its vital source of provisions and its despised subject of extraction.

Thus, of all the human beings on earth, we are the only ones to have been, at a particular point in modern history, reduced to the status of commodities. Who could honestly deny that what was taken was not merely objects but with them enormous symbolic deposits, enormous reserves of potential?

Who does not understand that in paying such heavy tribute to the world, something colossal, almost priceless, has been lost forever? Something which the lives of all our objects in captivity have witnessed, just as it has been witnessed by all those of us incarcerated in the prison landscapes of yesterday and today?

Who does not understand that the appropriation of African treasure on such a massive scale constitutes an immense, almost incalculable loss? Who does not understand that such a loss could not be compensated with mere financial indemnification, given that this loss is the draining of our ability to create worlds, to create other figures of common humanity?

An intractable racist superiority complex

In spite of appearances, history has never been a simple question of power and force. Thus, there is no more powerful nor enduring force than the truth. The truth is that Europe has taken something from us, which it will never be able to return. We will learn to live with this loss. Europe, for its part, must learn to accept its deeds, this shady part of out common history, which it seeks to relieve itself. But if new links are to be forged, it must honour the truth for the truth is the midwife of responsibility. This debt of truth cannot be erased.

The time for sidestepping, procrastination and political schizophrenia has passed. For one cannot, on the one hand, turn the page, close a dubious chapter and move on in the relation with Africa while, on the other hand, confiscating its objects and thereby sustaining an intractable racist superiority complex, which appears to be undergoing a thorough revival all over the globe.

Moreover, one cannot, on the one hand, confiscate these works while on the other hand claiming that they are a burden for museums, that their preservation is expensive and that they are of no interest to anyone anyway.

One must make up ones mind.

Restitution can be neither a merely charitable nor benevolent gesture. The restitution of African objects to Africans is an obligation, the beginning of a new system of circulation, without conditions and on the whole planet, of the general heritage of humanity.

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Achille Mbembe's research interests lie in the social sciences and African history and politics. More precisely, Mbembe investigates the "postcolony" that comes after decolonization. He is especially interested in the emergence of "Afro-cosmopolitan culture". Among Mbembe's most important works are: Les jeunes et l'ordre politique en Afrique noire (1985); La naissance du maquis dans le Sud-Cameroun (1920-1960); Histoire des usages de la raison en colonie (1996); De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine (2000); Sortir de la grande nuit : Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée (2003); Critique de la raison nègre (2013). His seminal work De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine (On the Postcolony) was translated into English in 2001 and published by the University of California Press.

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