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Ethnological Collections and Municipal Displays

On September 14, 2018, Manuela Andreoni and Ernesto Londoño published an essay in the *New York Times* on the recent destruction of artifacts and records at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. They titled it: "Loss from Brazil fire felt like a 'new Genocide'." Their first major point was that this museum had housed irreplaceable records – material objects as well as texts – that both Brazilian scholars and representatives of Brazil's many indigenous groups had been using to learn about their pasts. As those records burned, so too did their access to those human histories. The world, they made clear, has been impoverished by that loss.

The extent of the loss is hardly fathomable at this point. Among other things, it includes the life work of Curt Unckel, who was born in Jena in 1883 and became, as João Pancheco, the museum's curator of ethnology remarked: "the premier Brazilian ethnographer." Unckel changed his name to Nimuendajú after he was adopted into a Guarani tribe in the state of São Paulo. Following his passing in 1945, his life's work was placed in the museum. It included detailed maps of the cultures and languages he had encountered during yearly research trips over a lifetime and much, much more.

Such links to multifarious human histories can be found in ethnological museums everywhere. German ethnological museums, which were the largest collecting museums in the world by the end of the nineteenth century, contain a great deal of them. The value of their collections, however, is often misunderstood and underestimated by the city officials under whose auspices they so frequently languish. Consequently, these collections too often have suffered neglect. The tragedy in Brazil might remind us of the history of that neglect, and the ways in

which it has informed the story of the Humboldt Forum as it unfolded over the last fifteen years.

As Anreoni and Londoño also make clear, this most recent loss in Brazil could have been prevented, if the state's priorities had been in the right place. To underscore that second major point in their essay, they juxtaposed the neglect of the Brazilian National Museum, its collections, and its staff, with the $59 billion poured into the Museum of Tomorrow, a futuristic edifice designed (of course) by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. Workers broke ground for the building in 2015, and the state allocated a yearly budget of $4 million to maintaining its spectacle. Meanwhile, the Brazilian National Museum was awash in vermin; its artifacts were left in jeopardy. The funding allocated to the care of the collections and the research that the staff and others did with them was only a tiny fraction of what was directed into the new, self-aggrandizing municipal display.

Such misplaced priorities have been common in the history of ethnological museums. They plagued Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde almost from the outset, and that continued even after the museum changed its name in 2000. The mind reels, in fact, at the disparity between the 600 million Euros poured into the Humboldt Forum in the city center (not including any of the costs for content) and the limited budgets allocated to the collections, staff, and research in the Berlin Ethnological Museum in Dahlem. Despite politicians' and promoters' frequent allusions to the brothers Humboldt, their priorities are similar to their counterparts in Brazil: Bildung has taken a back seat to civic self-promotion.

I am hardly the first to point this out. I would like to add, however, that the budget disparities, the neglect of the Berlin Ethnological Museum and its staff, and the division of the collection into a modern Schausammlung meant to adorn Berlin's city center and a depot in Dahlem are not new. In fact, as Berlin's ethnologists were first thrown into a debate about the division of the collections at the turn of the twentieth century, much of what we have witnessed in the last fifteen years already

took place. Even the effort to fold the Asian ethnological collections into the Asian Art Museum harkens back to Wilhelm von Bode's early conceptualizations of the "Asiatische Museum" and his arguments about how best to integrate the Völkerkunde Museum's collections into his vision for the Berlin museums. Bode advocated for a division of the ethnological collections, for their reduction, and for the creation of a Schausammlung in the city center with a storage area or research center in Dahlem. Currently, both of those dreams are coming true.

Bode's arguments shocked the museum's director, Adolf Bastian, his assistants, and the ethnologists who succeed them during the interwar period. The museum's first generations of ethnologists regarded ethnological museums primarily as workshops, places for the production of knowledge based on the traces of human histories preserved in their collections, rather than institutions built merely for public edification or entertainment. For them, accepting Bode's proposals meant distancing themselves from the very purposes of their profession. Thus, for more than a decade, from 1900 until 1912, the Berlin museum fell into a kind of stasis as city and museum bureaucrats fought over allocations and budgets and the scientists refused to give ground.

Space was a perennial problem for the museum. That problem predated these turn-of-the-century discussions by over thirty years. The need for adequate space was central to Bastian and his supporters' lobbying from the 1860s through the 1870s for the creation of a self-standing museum. That museum finally opened in 1886 on what is today Stresemann Straße, next to the Martin-Gropius-Bau. During the opening, set in the Museum für Völkerkunde's Lichthof amidst palms and other tropical plants, framed by statues from Java, Laos, and Siam, with an ancient Indian Tor and bright gold Chinese banners behind them and a large Prussian flag hanging above the entire scene, diplomats and ministers made a series of speeches from the carpeted podium to the dignitaries and royalty who had gathered for the opening day. As they spoke, they consistently lauded the character of the museum, exalted its mission,

and praised its benefactors and founders. They were delighted by this addition to their museum complex, by their newest municipal display.

This moment, however, was long in coming, and it is hard not to wonder where that ministerial excitement had been over the previous fifteen years. The guide Bastian created for the ethnological collections a decade earlier, in 1877, had already championed many of the same intellectual goals as the one for the newly opened Museum für Völkerkunde: the need to collect, the need to maintain a geographical organization of the collections, and the desire to use the collections and displays as scientific tools that would expand their understanding of human history. In 1877, however, none of that could be achieved because of the grim conditions in the rooms allocated to the ethnological collections in the Neues Museum on the Museum Island. Already in 1872, the "Kleiner Katalog" Bastian's predecessor had issued underscored the lack of space and bad lighting, which made useful displays difficult to create. By 1877, Bastian's guide had to acknowledge that useful displays were completely impossible to create or maintain, but he also wrote with determination about the collection's potential and what could be done if sufficient "Raum und Licht gegeben sein können."

He never imagined, however, that it would take over a decade to gain more "Raum und Licht" in a new building. Fights over potential locations, debates with the fire marshals, never ending problems with funding: they repeatedly brought construction and planning to a standstill, making it impossible for Bastian to fulfill his goals. In fact, every time he went abroad between 1877 and 1886, he returned dismayed by the lack of progress. In December 1879, for example, an exasperated Bastian wrote from Batavia to the *General-Verwaltung der Königlichen Museen* asking if it was really true that the new museum building "noch gar nicht angefangen ist?" Agonizing over lost opportunities while negotiating with recalcitrant officials, he had delayed his latest trip for months in order to ensure that they would get started. Yet they did not, and when he returned to Berlin in the spring he found that the museum he expected to

be almost completed, „noch nicht einmal begonnen ist." His dismay is understandable: as a result of those conditions, almost all of the collections he and others had obtained for the museum over a fifteen year period remained in limbo: "unausgepackt in den Kellern gelagert," where they could not be put to use.

Despite the long road to completion, the rush into the building also took much longer than anticipated. There were tens of thousands of objects! Not everything could be moved, unpacked, catalogued, and displayed in such a short period. As a result, the 1887 guide produced by Bastian and his assistants was only partial, offering visitors an introduction only to what they had managed to set up on the first two floors.

Yet it was worse than that. By 1900 everyone knew their secret – the building that had taken over a decade and a half to complete was a disaster. It was completely misconceived, inadequate for the tasks of their science. International visitors praised the look of the edifice and marveled at its collections, but they condemned the displays; fire marshals threatened to close the museum because there was not even enough space for visitors to maneuver through the hallways and stairwells; and government offices watched their files fill with testaments from Bastian and his assistants attesting to the chaos ruling their collections and undermining their scientific project.

In 1907, the Baupolizei declared the museum a fire hazard, and in fall 1911 they demanded it be closed until enough material could be removed from the museum so that at least two people could walk abreast through the halls and stairwells. That led to a series of further meetings among government ministries and museum administrators and ultimately to some stunningly direct language in the halls of the city government and Berlin newspapers. We are lucky the museum did not burn down during this period.

In the end, everyone agreed that the building was inadequate. As Wilhelm von Bode

continued to press his points, hoping to use the disaster to his advantage, Abgeordneter Dr. Hauptmann (Zentrumspartei) called him to account at the 46. Sitzung of the Abgeordnetenhaus on 27 March 1912. He explained to that meeting of city officials that the Völkerkunde Museum had become a "Schmerzkind" in the city, neglected and misunderstood by the art historians in charge of the Berlin museums. He pointed his finger directly at Bode, and he demanded action before the plague of rats that had long overcome the museum consumed the collections. A year later, the Abgeordnetenhaus approved a plan for an entirely new complex of four buildings, one for each of the four non-European continents represented in the Museum. In 1914, they finally broke ground in Dahlem, and for a short period Berlin's ethnologists thought they might finally get a building worthy of their collections, one suitable for the production of knowledge they hoped to pursue.

At first, Bode also felt a sense of victory. Workers began constructing the first of these buildings, which was meant to house Bode's long-desired "Asiatische Museum." Then, World War I stopped the construction – funds and manpower were reallocated to the war effort. When the Imperial Government and the German economy collapsed at the end of that war, completing even that first building became impossible. In 1921, the new city government decided to cut its financial losses by simply putting a roof on the part of the building they had completed and turning it into a storage facility for the overburdened Museum für Völkerkunde.

Still, there was a notable success for Bode wrapped up in that failure: after decades of effort, he had managed to transform the Museum für Völkerkunde – forcing it to conform to his museum ideal. By 1923, Berlin's ethnologists were recasting Bastian's museum building downtown into a space that made little sense to most of them: they transferred the vast amount of their collections into the newly won yet terribly cramped space in Dahlem, while leaving only enough objects in the museum downtown for a Schausammlung. There, in direct opposition to Bastian's vision of an ethnologists' workshop, they tastefully arranged arresting and unique objects in a

manner that pleased Bode's aesthetics and ostensibly communicated to visitors ethnology's latest insights into the cultures represented by these airy displays.

This might sound familiar to readers who have been following the fifteen-year saga of the Humboldt Forum. There were protests from the ethnologists across the 1920s and even after the opening of the new displays, most notably from Konrad Theodor Preuss. Financial pressures and promises of space in Dahlem and elsewhere, however, silenced those protests. Yet the ethnologists and their collections never gained the space they were promised before or after the war, and the vast majority of their collections remained in storage (excepting those that were destroyed by fire or taken as war booty during World War II). At the same time, funding for their collecting and for research with their collections was continually curtailed. Meanwhile, the Schausammlung, meant to disseminate the field's latest insights, remained largely unchanged while gathering dust in the city center until it was packed up at the outset of World War II.

For decades following the war, much as during the decades that preceded it, Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde fell into a kind of stasis as collections languished in boxes while a succession of ethnologists' proposals were passed over by city officials who made but seldom fulfilled promises about improving the museum's conditions. Even after the creation of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz in 1962, it took another decade until the collections could be moved into the new museum complex in Dahelm. Yet once again, the promises of space were not met with adequate allocations. Through the rest of the twentieth century, a culture of making do developed among the staff as they became used to ongoing funding cuts and unfulfilled promises of renewed space. That persisted right up to the initial negotiations for the creation of the Humboldt Forum. Here again, during those initial negotiations, promises of a museum building downtown and adequate research facilities led the museums' ethnologists into the familiar disappointments of the last fifteen years.

It is hard not to wonder what might have been achieved if even 20 or 30 percent of the 600 million Euros that have underwritten the municipal display called the Humboldt Forum had been allocated in 2000 in support of the Berlin Ethnological Museum, its staff, and research with the collections. The kinds of working relationships that Anreoni and Londoño describe in Brazil could and should be happening in Europe as well. Berlin's collections are incredibly rich and underutilized. Those include over a half million objects from around the world, the vast majority of which have languished in storage for over a century as a result of persistent neglect and the decline of museum ethnology during the second half of the twentieth century. It is not too late to free those collections and redirect future funding from a focus on Schausammlungen and glitzy municipal displays to collaborative research and the production of knowledge. I suspect we all know what the Humboldt brothers would do today, and what they would have done at the outset: they would prioritize funding research over erecting another edifice in their name.

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