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INTRODUCTION

Forty years ago, a discussion was started in Europe about the restitution of European museums' colonial holdings back to Africa. Yet, the debate fizzled out; talks were forgotten, or rather, successfully repressed. This was perhaps the most important finding that emerged from the work I conducted in 2018 together with the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr on behalf of the French president Emmanuel Macron.[1] Not only did we gain fundamental insights through our work in Africa itself; we also discovered entire reams of documentation buried in administrative and press archives in Paris and Berlin confirming that a detailed debate about collections from colonial contexts in European museums had already been held before, when we were both still children in school, reaching its apex between 1978 and 1982.

During those four years, politicians, journalists, museum and culture professionals all over Europe, "applied their intelligence"—as the inspector-general of the French national museums Pierre Quoniam put it in 1981—to finding a fair and appropriate position on the restitution issue.[2] The impetus came from African intellectuals, politicians and museum professionals just after 1960—the so-called Year of Africa in which seventeen colonies belonging to Belgium, France and Britain gained independence. Whether in Lagos, Kinshasa, Paris or elsewhere, voices pleaded for restitution. Demands were restricted to a few objects but raising them emphasised the role culture played in the decolonial process of shaping newly formed national identities and advocating against merely a Western understanding of the universalism of art.[3]

From the middle of the 1970s, these voices were echoed widely in international organisations like the United Nations. Restitution was discussed on television and in newspapers. Those in the art trade were irritated; museum staff groaned. For example, Stephan Waetzoldt, the director-general of the Staatliche Museen Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin State Museums, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), the cultural umbrella organisation for the Berlin state museums, gave an interview to the magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1979 in which he declared that it would be "irresponsible to give in to the nationalism of the developing countries."[4] For his part, David M. Wilson, director of the British Museum in London from 1977 to 1992, put forward the usual legal arguments against the restitution project: "Everything we own we received legally."[5] The dangers of nationalist desires and good old common law were the arguments put up in Europe in order to rebut demands from Africa, to stifle debate and to derail solutions.

Yet, representatives from civil society, the media and politics in Africa and Europe at the time were not discouraged; they persisted. Archival research shows that the mobilisation for or against restitution forty years ago did not take place simply along national or continental divides (Africa vs. Europe) and it cannot be solely explained by institutional reflexes or political templates (museums against politics, Left against Right). Divisions ran differently, for example owing to real or imagined knowledge about Africa, between generations, even between genders—it was often women in Europe who showed solidarity with the claimant African countries. However, ultimately the efforts of civil society failed.

It is hard for historians to write about a period of missed opportunities, about the stifling and repression of history.[6] Text-based sources are often absent as lobbying with an agenda to undermine often takes place outside the coordinates of written frameworks. In the case of restitution, however, a surprising volume of material lurks under the carpet of oblivion. It allows a glimpse of the actors and structures, arguments and pathos formulas that contributed to the failure of an orderly and fair restitution of the "Third World's" cultural property in the 1970s and '80s.

In many ways, the initial restitution debate in Europe and the collective amnesia of its existence resembled the climate debate, which also gained momentum at the end of the 1970s. In 2019, in *Losing Earth*, the US author Nathaniel Rich reconstructed the history of the failure to take steps to tackle climate change in the face of emerging science, describing how climate change came to be flatly denied until today, with well-known consequences. He showed how scientists in the 1980s tried to make their alarming research understood by political and economic decision-makers to encourage them to take measures, and how they tried to win over public opinion with the help of activists and almost

succeeded—almost.[7] Significantly, in historian Frank Bösch's recently published book *Zeitenwende 1979*, he states that our present world began in the year 1979.[8] This is also true for the question of the restitution of non-European cultural goods, as novel as it may seem to us. Theoretically and methodically, this book's reconstruction of the history of restitution is indebted to those studies.

What role did museums play at the time? Or the press, politics and international organisations? Who were the actors in offices, on the telephone and in committees, who made the question of restitution disappear so successfully? What alliances were formed? At what point did the discussion about the colonial past of collections fall silent? Is it even possible to tie historical mechanisms of forgetting, renunciation and silence to people and institutions? One thing is certain, the restitution debate of the 1970s and '80s disappeared from collective memory so completely that Hermann Parzinger, the president of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, was able to declare in an interview in 2017 that "the provenance of ethnological holdings is a relatively new subject."[9]

However, nothing about this subject is new. In the archives of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz alone there are thousands of pages from the period between 1972 and 1982 about (unrealised) restitutions documented in correspondence, memoranda, strategy and position papers, press cuttings and statements. The same applies to museums in Paris, London, Stuttgart, Brussels and so on. The archives speak for themselves: the twenty-first-century idea to return cultural goods that were taken *en masse* to fill European museums during colonialism, in the spirit of postcolonial and post-racial solidarity, is anything but radical or groundbreaking. We have been there before. The impact of this subject on many societies today is boomerang-like: it is an exponential return to the historical stage of something that had been repressed and cannot be ignored again. Restitution, decolonisation, social justice and the question of racism go hand in hand.

This book is dedicated to the objects of repression. It begins with one of the first calls for the return of art to Africa in 1965 and ends in 1985 on Museumsinsel (Museum Island), in what was then East Berlin, where the non-aligned state of Nigeria made a guest appearance at the Pergamonmuseum with an exhibition of its archaeological treasures—having lost any hope of restitution after a two-decade fight. For the first time, this book attempts to tell the coherent story of a postcolonial defeat, based on a wealth of material scattered across countless European archives and African publications. However, this was a defeat shared by both sides, because the refusal to restitute cultural objects to African countries during the first decades of their independence was certainly not a credit to Europe.

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