

Title

There is no Such Thing as one European Culture

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“En effet, avant même notre indépendance national ... nous n’avons jamais cessé de bâtir notre politique sur le Dialogue. Dans tous les domaines, mais fondamentalement dans celui de la Culture; car la culture est la condition première et le but ultime de tout développement” (Leopold Senghor)

Reflections on changes of cultural policy in post-colonial societies

It was in the 1990^{ies} when representatives of the indigenous people from the tribes of Zapotecs, Tlauhics, Tzotzil, Lakadones, Totonacs, Mixtecs and Chamula from Mexico regularly organised manifestations in front of the main cathedral St. Stephens in Vienna to demand the restitution of the feather headdress of Motecuhzoma, the last emperor of the Aztec people.¹ Since 1575 the crown was part of different aristocratic collections in Europe and in the end became the centre-piece of the so-called “Völkerkundemuseum” in Vienna. The protesters were not successful; anyway the museum with its colonialist labelling was closed and reopened in autumn 2017 with a new name “Worldmuseum” (“Weltmuseum”).² Motecuhzomas headdress is still the most prominent piece in the exhibition. But the museum now announces an agreement with the Mexican authorities to enable a joint Austrian-Mexican research project which lasted from 2010 to 2012, in which the headdress was examined, carefully cleaned, and restored.³

We could think about this controversy as strange remains of an unresolved Austrian and maybe also Mexican cultural policy issue. But we also could take it as a remarkable signal in a fundamental change of the cultural policy context, European societies are facing currently.

Cultural Policy as a Thriving Force of Liberal Democracies is in Danger

To find some hints what this fundamental change is about, it might make sense to remember that European cultural policies – represented in its institutions and initiatives – was seen as an almost natural contribution fostering the implementation of liberal democracies. Enabling best possible access to cultural artefacts and processes for everybody would help the creation of a common middle-class able to appreciate the richness of the diversity of cultural and artistic expressions. But this foundation of cultural policy is gone. Since the penetration of the living and working conditions of the European societies by the neoliberal ideology, the political efforts to further develop the creation of a middle-class as a natural bearer of liberal democracy are forced onto the defensive.

¹ <https://www.zeit.de/1992/21/azteken-vor-wien/komplettansicht> (last access 10th of August 2018)

² <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/> (last access 10th of August 2018)

³ <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/highlights/> (last access 10th of August 2018)

We do not have to follow Fintan O'Toole's interpretation of the actual constitution of European societies as a time of pre-fascism.⁴ But it becomes more and more evident that the attainments of liberal democracy are under considerable pressure, when right-wing populists and extremists all over Europe are knocking at the doors of power propagating their concept of an "illiberal democracy".⁵ And suddenly we find ourselves on a long road to democratic decline - as the Bulgarian sociologist Ivan Krastev has put it in *Foreign Affairs*⁶ - and we have to learn that cultural policy is not any more an appropriate tool to produce effective resistance.

Exemplarily the new Austrian right-wing government shows that their main representatives have no interest in classical cultural policy issues. In contrast to its first appearance 2000 – 2006, when artists and other cultural activists were on the very forefront manifesting against the anti-liberal and xenophobic character of the regime, the political movement as a conglomerate of old conservatives and new xenophobic authoritarians with the young and smart Sebastian Kurz on top seems comparably undisputed. With its broad consent among the Austrian population the current cultural policy simulates continuity and by that keeps the cultural sector – with very few exceptions - quiet.

Shifting the Battlefield

What they really intend is not the destruction of the historically grown cultural sector – which is estimated as politically irrelevant but useful for business and image glaze – but to transfer the culture war ("Kulturkampf") from the cultural sector into the heart of the increasingly unequal societies. In an unexpected perversion of the original concepts of a then "new cultural policy"⁷ as an instrument for integrative societal development right-wing populists are about to gain their "cultural hegemony" by polarizing societies mainly alongside ethnicity and religion. Their main enemy is the proponents of a meanwhile "old cultural policy" in the shape of a liberal elite⁸ celebrating diversity as richness. As preferred defendants their proponents get assumed to have lost contact with ordinary people, who are supposed to have other problems. And so cultural policy is confronted with increasingly aggressive right forces which can rely on an increasing insecurity particularly among those who fear to go to rack and ruin under the neoliberal regime searching for someone who can be made responsible for their predicament.

When it was one of the outstanding attainments of a liberal cultural policy to overcome the idea of "cultural identity"⁹ by accepting the peaceful and mutual enriching and inspiring coexistence of all kinds of cultural expression forms right-wing populists are obsessed in restructuring societies alongside cultural and religious hierarchies. In this process of cultural re-identification the growing extend of voluntary as well as involuntary migration must be seen as a gift from heaven in sharpening ethnicity as the decisive weapon in times of growing social conflicts.¹⁰

⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-trial-runs-for-fascism-are-in-full-flow-1.3543375> (last access 10th of August 2018)

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-28/orban-rallies-europe-s-illiberal-forces-for-2019-elections> (last access 10th of August 2018)

⁶ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2018-04-16/eastern-europes-illiberal-revolution> (last access 10th of August 2018)

⁷ <https://www.kubi-online.de/stichwort/neue-kulturpolitik> (last access 10th of August 2018)

⁸ It was the former candidate in the election campaign for the Austrian presidency Norbert Hofer, who attacked his opponent Alexander van der Bellen to be the candidate of the "Hautevolee" whereas he would have "the people" behind him.

⁹ Julliard, Francois (2017: Es gibt keine kulturelle Identität. Berlin: suhrkamp

¹⁰ Political practices e.g. in Hungary show, that the political reconstruction of Magyar identity ("Ungarntum") can be used against the requirements of the European Union ("Brussels"); in Italy started the Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini a discrimination campaign against Roma and Sinti (<https://www.thelocal.it/20180618/italy-register-census-roma-people-matteo-salvini>) (last access 10th of August 2018) and in Austria the right-wing government in power is permanently downgrading social standards particularly for migrants.

In facing re-ethnicization of cultural policy we have to admit that most of the cultural institutions are not really prepared to stand this massive political challenge. For too long a time their management thought it would be enough to invite new (often interpreted as disadvantaged or far-to-reach) audiences to take part in their programs. The available data show that these efforts did not lead to a principal repositioning of the cultural institutions in the changing local or regional circumstances.¹¹ Even when the absence of the migrant population has been often overestimated¹² the general trend suggests that the offers of cultural institutions are – like in the good old times - over-averagely visited by well-educated and wealthy liberal elites.. So the cultural policy provocation of unequal access is still on the table when ordinary people tend to other leisure activities. In this context it can be assumed that many of these non-visitors simply do not feel addressed by the content of the respective institution, which – most of the time – was mainly used as means of social distinction for a socially and so also culturally homogenous middle-class.

When Cultural Institutions are Confronted with Re-Ethnicization of Cultural Policy

Trying to anticipate the consequences of the current ethnicization of politics, which also has considerable consequences also for cultural policy, it can be assumed that museums in general and museums with an ethnological dimension in particular could have a crucial role in establishing and defending cultural coexistence in increasingly diverse European societies. As places of collective memories they represent the history of societal power structures and their consequences for an everyday understanding of “culture” even for those who never pass the steps of a cultural institution.

When I started my introduction with the claims of some Non-Europeans to get back what belongs to them as natural successors of the original owners, I wanted to make aware, that there was never such thing as *one* European culture with an homogenous set of artefacts exclusively based on local or regional origin. Instead of that and according the colonialist past of most of the European powers the construction of national cultural heritage was from the very beginning based on a huge amount of objects which came from outside Europe (and so became objects of material migration).

Accordingly we might e.g. reconsider that the colonisation of Africa was accompanied with forcible appropriation not only of raw materials and men but also of all kinds of cultural objects including works of art. And all these objects are up to today located in Europe, without sufficient reflection what this might mean for a genuine European cultural self-awareness. And so it still seems to be a taboo to reflect openly when 95 percent of African art is currently in the museums of the European capitals. To give just a few examples: In the British Museum 200,000, in the Musée Royal de l'Europe centrale in Tervuren near Brussels 180,000, at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris 70,000 and in the Berlin Museums 75,000 African objects are showcased or hidden in depots.¹³

In this context the German author Hanno Rauterberg provides us with some food for thought, what this kind of cultural imbalance might mean particularly for those, who are not members of the European societies. He supposes – in the context of the plans for the Humboldt Forum in Berlin - that not Africa, but Europe had been subjugated and the colonial rulers from the south had abducted the *Mona Lisa* and the *Bamberg Rider*, and brought a tiled stove from Belgium, crucifixes from Poland and many other art and cultural things in their countries: And he invites us to reflect the consequences for the Europeans, when now, in Lagos perhaps, a museum for all the trophies would be opened, in a

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/news/20170421-new-study-audience-development_en (last access 10th of August 2018)

¹² Recent research confirms that the belonging to an ethnical group is less relevant than the belonging to a social group which means that education and wealth more counts than ethnicity in terms of cultural participation. E.g. Arbeiterkammer Wien (2018): Studie Migration und Mehrsprachigkeit. Policy Brief 3: Vielfalt der sozialen Milieus p 11 f

¹³ <https://www.zeit.de/2018/30/raubkunst-frankreich-rueckgabe-afrika-kolonisierung> (last access 10th of August 2018)

reconstructed ruling palace, to celebrate African cultural identity as an outstanding place of dialogue. And beyond that give an image of the Europeans as they are seen from an African perspective: troubled, ostracized, and so far away from African living standards.¹⁴

Are there Signs for a Fundamental Change?

When the expert discourse in the field of ethnology in the last years has problematized its colonial implications in depth, ethnological museums up to now reacted comparably reluctant in particular when the restitution of robbed artefacts became an issue. It was the French President Emmanuel Macron, who at the University of Ouagadougou came up in autumn 2017 with the claim to find new standards of restitution of the African cultural heritage during the next five years.¹⁵ Macron assigned the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, professor at the Technische Universität Berlin and at the Paris Collège de France, specialist for the relocation of cultural goods and the Senegalese economist and author Felwine Sarr to explore the conditions under which France could return African art – as he said: temporarily or definitively. Since then, the two experts travel between Paris, Dakar and Bamako and discuss with government representatives, museum directors, collectors, curators, lawyers and activists what can be done to overcome at least some of the persistent colonial implications of French cultural policy.

About Beauty and Decontextualisation

Already ten years before France postulated with the opening of the Musée du Quai Branly an end of an “intellectual colonialism” (Wolf Lepenies).¹⁶ Remarkably the first director Stéphane Martin resolutely contradicted the function of his institution to represent French cultural identity. He saw the main aim of the presentation of selected objects from other parts of the world in their decontextualisation: Visitors should learn to admire and to appreciate the beauty of the objects and forget about the social and political impact. An approach which surely is also inscribed in the character of the architecture by Jean Nouvel: The visitor should enter a strange and magic place, “poetic and irritating, [...] marked by symbols of the jungle, the river and the occupation with death and forgetting”.¹⁷

Both, Martin and Nouvel obviously were affiliated with the ideas of Leopold Senghor, the outstanding politician and artist from Senegal, trained in France, who dreamed of an African version of modernity. With his concept of “Négritude” he wanted already in the 1960th to get rid of the ethnization of cultural objects of the black continent and instead of that – as for him most important means for decolonisation – contribute with a new generation of African artists to a global artistic modernity.¹⁸

Taking the Musée du Quai Branly as a path-breaking example to answer the question in which direction ethnological museums will tend, the conversion into art museums of foreign cultures has quite a prominent tradition.

The Dilemma with the Humboldt Forum

When France disposes of a distinct colonial past, Germany is characterised by a comparably short colonial history. Anyway it was in Berlin 1885 when the 14 colonial powers agreed in the so-called “Acts of Congo”¹⁹ partitioning Africa in “their” colonies, an artificial division which up to now defines the

¹⁴ <https://www.zeit.de/2015/24/humboldt-forum-berlin-richtfest> (last access 10th of August 2018)

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/arts/emmanuel-macron-africa.html> (last access 10th of August 2018)

¹⁶ https://www.welt.de/welt_print/article1858177/Abschied-vom-intellektuellen-Kolonialismus.html (last access 10th of August 2018)

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/27/arts/design/27bran.html> (last access 10th of August 2018)

¹⁸ In this context it is one of the forgotten facts, that Senghor managed to invite prominent European artists like Picasso and Soulages in the 1970th to Senegal to present their work in the Musée Dynamique, the new temple of the arts. Encounters with native artists should bring his concept of “métissage”, the symbiosis of different cultures on equal eye level into live.

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Conference (last access 10th of August 2018)

borders of African countries. Not only this event regained importance, when – after many years of culture policy conflicts – it was decided to reconstruct the “Berliner Stadtschloss” and make it under the name of “Humboldt Forum” the main place, where ethnological collections, mainly from Africa and Asia will be showcased and reflected starting in 2019.

The organizer speak of *the* post-colonial place of Germany, which would make the Humboldt Forum a “Museum of World Culture” (“Weltkulturmuseum”), a “Compass for Global Coexistence”, a “Centre of National and International Radiance”²⁰ or a “Place of radical Tolerance”.²¹ Whereas the opponents talk about a “Palace of Mendacity”²², when behind baroque facades a huge number of ethnological objects will be showcased with the only purpose to make use of them in the staging of German glorification. Unavoidably the architecture in the shape of the reconstruction of an imperial centre of power would stand for Prussianism, militarism, war and colonial expansion; it would be impossible to present ethnological objects, which came by an immense greed in the former colonial metropolis Berlin without solidifying the impression of an ongoing cultural colonialism.

Whoever might have the better arguments the Humboldt Forum has become an ideal battlefield to influence which way German cultural policy under the impression of the current re-ethnicization will go and what will be the relevance of cultural institutions (particularly museums) in a changing cultural policy context.

At the moment German cultural policy decision makers are confronted with a number of unsolved problems. One lies in the fact that no one can say concretely under which inglorious conditions the ethnological collections became Prussian cultural property. Although the cultural politician Monika Grütters²³ already committed the readiness of Germany to give back robbed artefacts there are a number of sheer statutory regulations which might complicate respective efforts. Hermann Parzinger, another founding director of the Humboldt Forum has already dampened too great hopes when he reacted to Macron’s speech in Ouagadougou with a statement that “Africa today might have more pressing problems”²⁴ than receiving some cultural objects which became – since long ago – part of the German cultural infrastructure.

Bénédicte Savoy, Macron’s special envoy for restitution affairs was part of an advisory board of the Humboldt Forum, but stepped down after two years. In opposition to Martin she favours a strict socio-political contextualisation of ethnological objects. As such she was confronted with the fact that no one of the experts in charge was interested in talking about the origin and appropriation of the pieces to be presented. Instead of making them objects of pure art she insisted in the story around making visible the historic context in which the objects were created and brought to Germany: “It is impossible that we cannot read on the museums walls where the objects come from”, Savoy said. Otherwise the non-consideration of the origin of the objects has to be compared with “Tschernobyl” when “300 years of collecting with all its political messes and hopes remain – like nuclear waste – under a leaden cover.”²⁵

The former director of the ethnological museum in Berlin Viola König even went a step further, when she criticized that only around 2 percent of the altogether 500.000 objects will be showcased. Her fear lies in the fact that the decision about the 2 percent will be again exclusively made with European glasses. So you may not wonder that – beyond König’s personal critique - it became an issue of major critique that the three founding directors are all typical representatives of an old male and white expert

²⁰ https://www.iz3w.org/zeitschrift/ausgaben/366_arbeitsrechte/zeller (last access 10th of August 2018)

²¹ This attribution is from one of the three founding directors, the art historian Horst Bredekamp. <https://www.zeit.de/2017/36/humboldt-forum-berlin-stadtschloss-neubau-geschichte> (last access 10th of August 2018)

²² <https://www.zeit.de/2015/24/humboldt-forum-berlin-richtfest> (last access 10th of August 2018)

²³ <https://www.zeit.de/2018/18/kolonialismus-humboldt-forum-berlin-monika-gruetters-hermann-parzinger> (last access 10th of August 2018)

²⁴ <https://www.zeit.de/2018/18/humboldt-forum-berlin-kolonialismus-revolution-monika-gruetters> (last access 10th of August 2018)

²⁵ <http://www.taz.de/!5462973/> (last access 10th of August 2018)

elite. Cultural managers of a next generation see it as a threat of an unconscious colonial continuity when experts from countries out of Europe are not included in the decision making processes.

There is a lament that the existing concept of the Humboldt Forum does not sufficiently reflect the status of a postcolonial discourse which postulates an immediate relationship between cultural objects and those who interpret them. With her fundamental question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”²⁶ the Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak has set an unavoidable provocation to affirm the claim that principally all affected partners must be included in the discourse. In the concrete case it would mean to give those who come from the countries of origin of the objects have equal chances to take part in the interpretation as well as being part of decision making processes.

To counteract this traditional euro-centrism in a first step König proposed the presentation of all objects. Like in a jungle where the objects unfiltered and honestly impress the visitors (wherever they come from) the collections should overwhelm them mentally as well as physically. As such the Humboldt Forum could tell a story of exuberant appropriation but also of exchange, of taking and giving, a story full of brutality, but also a story of mutual engagement and negotiation.²⁷

About a modern Paradox: Artefacts of Colonial times are not Allowed to Emigrate Back - People from Africa are not Allowed to Immigrate to Europe

Following the hypothesis that architecture functions as a third pedagogue we can assume that the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in its contemporary architecture enables another perception of everything that is happening inside compared with the Humboldt Forum in the shape of the reconstruction of a baroque “Stadtschloss”. Jean Nouvel intended to create a magic place, in which the political, social and also ethnical context of the showcased objects should become irrelevant, the historic architecture in Berlin produces necessarily a historic-political context, which irrefutably tells about the power structures in which the objects were brought to Germany up to the time they are selected to be showcased today. As such the Humboldt Forum in its architectural shape becomes a central issue questioning the cultural constitution of the European societies facing considerable demographic changes.

It was the political scientist and philosopher from Cameroon with a strong affiliation to Germany Achille Mbembe who got to the heart of the structural contradiction with which the Humboldt Forum is confronted: “Europe cannot on one hand lock African artefacts in the heart of their cities and on the other hand does not allow Africans the entry on European ground and so refuse the sight of these objects. We all must create a world, in which people and artefacts can move freely.”²⁸

And indeed we are confronted on one hand with Sunday speeches of the proponents of the Humboldt Forum telling about the character of the institution as a centre of dialogue of cultures. And on the other hand politicians outbid each other in the construction of a fortress Europe, which is effective in the prevention of migration is it from Africa or is it from other parts of the world. When daily people on their way to European shores are drowning and at the same time a new generation of ethnological museums in Europe describe themselves as centres of a post-colonial discourse and exchange this contradiction can be easily criticized as an institutional fraud.

Decolonisation not only of the Colonized but of the Colonizers

²⁶ Spivak, Gayatri (2007): Can the Subaltern Speak? Kolkata: Seagull

²⁷ <https://www.zeit.de/2018/18/humboldt-forum-berlin-sammlung-gewalt-aufklaerung> (last access 10th of August 2018)

²⁸ <https://www.zeit.de/2018/11/dekolonisation-achille-mbembe-philosoph> (last access 10th of August 2018) More in detail: Mbembe, Achille (2010): Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée. Paris: La Découverte

Archille Mbembe still sees in European cultural institutions a lot of colonialist remains in power. He interprets colonialism as a cipher for issues like racism and the way, a society is dealing with strangers and with strangeness in general. And there are good reasons to assume that the social intercourse with strangeness goes increasingly the wrong way at the moment on the traditional continent of enlightenment. Against these tendencies of mental narrowing, that is propagated by a nationalistic, antidemocratic and illiberal political right, Mbembe argues for new approaches of decolonisation. Up to now – so his findings as a mediator between different cultures - no single European country really has come to terms with the drama of colonialism alongside with all aspects of dehumanization still embodied in the national cultures infiltrated still with a lot of colonial spirit. This is also true with the concepts of the Humboldt Forum.

One of the main prerequisites for decolonizing European societies would be to accept not any more to be *the* global hub, and the continent not anymore the pivotal cultural place of the world. In reflecting this kind of repositioning of the European cultural status the Humboldt Forum – as a dialogue centre in its true sense – could not only redefine the cultural relations between Germany as part of Europe and the big rest of the world. It could equally appear as a broker of different Non-European cultures, stimulating mutual contacts and exchanges.

In an interview Achille Mbembe indicates what this kind of mental and physical decolonisation could mean. He argues that all the cultural objects, which in the actual transformation process of cultural institutions get in doubt would “belong to all of us”²⁹. This does not mean not to retribute specific objects that have been robbed during an offensive colonialist era. “Belonging to all of us” would also mean the readiness of the Europeans to build adequate museums and institutions on-site in which the objects can be showcased in places of their origin primarily for a local and regional audience.

But even more important would be a new cultural policy approach, which would be led not by national cultural priorities but by a common sense in managing a global cultural heritage, allowing unlimited circulation of artefacts is it in the countries of origin or is it in any other place of the world. In this connection Mbembe proposes temporary exhibitions which tour from place to place to make these objects not any longer belonging to this or that population or state but as something that is “owned by the whole mankind”.

What Mbembe has to say is – admittedly – an utopian concept of global cultural relations to give ethnological objects of a colonial past a new importance. Anyway it would be a possible starting point fighting the implementation of cultural concepts which are based on ethnical and social division and polarisation. It would also defuse the old conflict between “civilisation” and “culture” in which civic attainments are still associated with a specific European cultural supremacy which commits itself to be *the* guiding basis for the rest of the world.

In this context a publication of the Islamic scholar Stefan Weidner "Beyond the West"³⁰ made me aware of the fact, that all kinds of civic values, even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with its euro-centric background do have a cultural bias and cannot be de-culturalized arbitrarily. The only exception of unavoidable cultural diversity even when it comes to the acknowledgement of global civic attainments consists in the “right to rights”. This civic minimum seems to Weidner the only possible consensus to commonly agree on a global level, regardless of any kind of specific interest-guided cultural approaches.

The considerations of Stephan Weidner bring me to the assumption that mankind does not have very much in common even in civic terms. The more the field of “culture” opens a space in which existing unequal power relations can be made transparent and questioned. In a more practical consequence this would mean to give up the belief of the one and only cultural narrative, that is represented by still colonialist infiltrated cultural institutions and applicable by everybody.

²⁹ <https://www.zeit.de/2018/11/dekolonisation-achille-mbembe-philosoph> (last access 10th of August 2018)

³⁰ Weidner, Stefan (2018): *Jenseits des Westens*. Munich: Hanser

There is no Single Valid Story about Cultures in Europe and in the World any more

Like Max Hollein, the new director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York has put it: “In our time of globalisation there is not any more a single valid story about cultures in the world. The task of a cultural institution is not any more to bring all cultures in one place but to tell about all these cultures multiple, different, even parallel stories which might be relevant for equally different audiences”.³¹

When this statement can be read as a farewell to an ultimate big story under the impression of colonialist supremacy Hollein forgot - at least explicitly - to mention that these multiple, different and parallel stories cannot be told by the same workforce that was engaged in the maintenance of colonial structures. So the cultural management challenge will be to involve personal voices also of those who represent the countries of origin and allow to realize a new composition of actors representing all the different geographic, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds that are the prerequisite of the further development of post-colonial cultural institutions.³²

These new approaches do have considerable cultural management implications; not only in terms of including experts from out of Europe which will lead to a new quality of cooperation inside and outside of the institution. Following Mbembe there will be also new cultural policy aims, e.g. when it comes to the construction of cultural institutions in parts of the world outside Europe or the organization of touring exhibitions, leading to new arrangements often with partners who are up to now not involved in the global cultural business.

Taking into account the growing uneasiness in museums confronted with all the changes of cultural attitudes a number of experts in the field of “Kunst – und Kulturvermittlung” (“Arts and Culture Mediation”) came to the conclusion that traditional audience development strategies have come to an end. Instead of further efforts to do the same thing for different people they propose the creation “entirely different formats”³³ which would better reflect the increasing differentiation and its societal consequences not only of the different European societies with their rapidly changing attitudes and expectations.³⁴ In this respect it might be worth to have a closer look at the “Worldmuseum” in Vienna, in which the curators tried to overcome traditional formats of mainly geographical alignment in favour of more thematic approaches, E.g. instead of showing ethnological objects from one group after the next the “Worldmuseum” one part of the exhibition is dedicated to “colonialism” as a global phenomenon.

A lot still has to be done to further develop cultural institutions in the context of colonial past and post-colonial future. This contribution mainly wanted to make aware that in being proactive in the actual cultural struggles - provoked by an aggressive illiberal populism feeling the up winds – cultural institutions could regain some societal relevance. As places, in which culture inequality for a long time found its almost paradigmatic representation their actors have a long lasting experience what this means for the whole of a society and – in the case of ethnological museums – what it means in terms of global imbalances. The particular advantage of cultural institutions lies in the fact that they are not designated to solve respective problems but to make them visible and to search for solutions in a symbolic playground.

Cultural Institutions as a Spearhead against Illiberalism and Post-democracy?

³¹ Hollein, Max (2018): Interview with the Newspaper „Kurier“ 29th of July 2018 p 26 f

³² In a European cooperation project „Brokering Migrants Cultural Participation“ a particular focus was put on the involvement of migrants in all levels of cultural institutions (not only of ethnological museums). <http://educult.at/en/forschungsprojekte/brokering-migrants-cultural-participation/> (last access 10th of August 2018)

³³ “ Griesser-Stermscheg, Martina (e.a.) (2018): „Völlig neue Formate erfinden“ In: Das Unbehagen im Museum. Postkoloniale Museologie. Vienna: Turia + Kant p 185 ff

³⁴ For further reading: Dätsch, Christiane (e. a.) (2018): Kulturelle Übersetzer – Kunst und Kulturmanagement im transkulturellen Kontext. Bielefeld: transcript

It seems that right-wing populists are meanwhile quite aware that the growing importance of a public discourse on de-colonisation might be a danger for their further success story. Their representations in the shape of AfD in the German Parliament recently raised a “Big Parliamentary Question on Dealing with Colonialism.”³⁵ Their arguments on one hand lie in a defense of colonialism: Not everything has been bad, when the Germans considerable contributed to the creation of prosperity in its former colonies. In this line is also the reproach, post-colonial advocates would create the impression, ethnological collections in Germany as a whole would be the result of an adventurous robbery and have to be restituted in its totality. This wrong insinuation would moreover make the European right – as preserving force of the status quo – to victims of assassinations to act as “racists” and as “colonialists”. On the other hand they try to beat the government with its own weapons when the AfD argues that the countries of origin would not dispose of necessary conservational expertise to deal with cultural artefacts in a professional way.

Europe is in danger to get lost of its political and societal attainments, laboriously won and implemented after the Second World War. It is obvious that new political actors of far right-wingers are about to destroy the liberal and democratic foundation of the European societies. In doing so they have detected that cultural policy might play a crucial role in the implementation of a new cultural hegemony. Accordingly they understand cultural policy not only as political will to maintain a more or less well established cultural infrastructure but cultural policy as a procedure to polarize and re-hierarchize the national societies by ethnic and religious differentiation. Their successes necessarily have consequences not only inside the national European societies; they also have a considerable impact in the further development of the international relations, in particular between Europe and its neighbors on the other side of the Mediterranean sea in Africa.

Up to now many cultural policy representatives seem to be not yet aware of the fact that ethnological museums are *the* symbolic representations of the actual culture war.. Nevertheless these institutions dispose like no other institution about the explosiveness of any kind of ethnicization of societies and can give – out of her long lasting experience and occupation – advice how to deal with it its dangerous consequences. Being a mirror of the current societal conditions they dispose of relevant symbolic instruments to make visible what politically is at stake and what that means for all those who are confronted with the consequences.

Insofar these reflections should not be seen as an invitation for cultural institutions to step into the political arena but to make use of their expertise which – in a long and conflictuous process – has made evident that one story is not enough. And that we should not give up to fight for places, in which many stories interpreted by many different people can be told – and can be heard.

³⁵ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/afd-neue-taktik-1.4067399> (last access 10th of August 2018)

