Special Issue Editor: Philipp Müller

Geopolitics of Restitution and the Specter of Colonialism

After a long period of "colonial amnesia" (Zimmerer 2013), a shift in thinking has now taken place for the first time in some European countries, and over the past ten years, an increasing number of European states have announced their intention to "come to terms with their colonial legacy". Important for this process are, not least, the colonial collections of ethnological museums. Large parts of their collections were acquired during the colonial era and are now property of (European) states (or their subdivisions, governmental institutions and foundations). As crisis-ridden custodians of these collections the museums become contested spaces and are trying to address criticism through various 'decolonializing' initiatives, provenance research and cooperations with descendants of the colonized. For the first time in history, objects or human remains have been returned through restitution or repatriation to states, groups, or individuals identified as their rightful owners (also beyond the surface of large media spectacles). While these developments seem encouraging, the way restitutions are embedded in foreign cultural policies raises questions.

As can be seen from the relevant initiatives and coalition agreements of the key government entities in France and Germany, two issues are at stake here: the integration of colonialism into *national memory policies* and the *establishment of new equal partnerships* with the former colonies. However, it is no coincidence that these changes in cultural policy are characterized by a *focus on Africa*, which has once again become geopolitically relevant to European states in many respects (Hamm 2024). For example, new energy projects (like the German-Namibian HYPHEN) in Africa are said to happen in this new mode of "dialogue at eye-level" (Tunn et al. 2025). Thus, in the course of the agreements and restitution measures understood as 'coming to terms with the past' and 'reconciliation', 'new relational ethics' (France) or 'partnerships on an equal footing' (Germany) were to be established with African countries. Meanwhile, the *partners* in the process of coming to terms with colonialism are defined as *(postcolonial) states*. For their part, they are interested in the restitution or repatriation of objects and bodies of the colonized as a means of nation-building but also to enforce their own interests by creating new diplomatic relations with European states. Whether the actual *descendants of the affected indigenous groups* have a say in the process of 'coming to terms with the past and in restitution discussions ultimately depends on their relationship with the state. Those who do not hold positions of power within the state – or have the state on their side – find their interests sidelined, as can be seen, for example, in the criticism voiced by some members of the OvaHerero and Nama regarding the reconciliation agreement between Germany and Namibia which doesn't involves requested reparations (Melber 2024). So far, the debate surrounding restitution is mostly centered on museums and neglects geopolitical dimensions while being framed within the colonial dichotomy of 'us' and 'them', which neglects the fragmentations and contradictions within postcolonial societies. Finally, the political shift to the right challenges these developments again. Right wing parties reject the current approach to 'national remembrance' and are calling for a reassessment along their revisionist views.

As the impact and effects of cultural diplomacy are often difficult to evaluate, it depicts a "messy landscape" (Ang et al. 2015). This special issue aims to shed critical light on the transformation of European states' foreign cultural policies, in all their contradictions and current right-wing modifications, and to situate them within their geopolitical context. Besides, the cultural policy interests of the states in the Global South and their ambivalent relationship with the descendants of those affected is to be analyzed to get a grip on foreign cultural policy changes and the geopolitics of restitution. In doing so, this special issue seeks to reveal who holds the authority to define the meaning of history, for what purposes this authority is exercised, who benefits from it, and who remains excluded.

We welcome papers that focus on the following topics and regions:

- **Policies of national remembrance concerning restitution and/or colonial reappraisal (in Austria, Europe but also beyond)**
- **The relationship between Foreign Policy changes (in general or specific energy projects, migration policies etc.) and cultural policy/restitution**
- **Right Wing cultural policies concerning colonialism, museums and restitution**
- **Political interests of states and governmental actors from the Global South (esp. Africa) concerning restitution, repatriation and cultural politics of museum collections**
- **The power dynamics of descendants concerning restitution within postcolonial societies**
- **The ambivalent political role of museums, museum policies and actors in Global North and South**

Timeline

We invite authors from any discipline to send an abstract (maximum 300 words) including title, author(s), and institutional affiliation to **gor-jep@posteo.at** by **January 15th, 2027**. We welcome both academic as well as non-academic contributions. By end of January, 2027 we will invite authors to write their texts, and will inform all others about our decision. The deadline for the submission of full articles (35,000 characters, including spaces) is **April 15th, 2027.** The special issue will be published in print and online in early 2028.

Guidelines

Please submit abstracts and full papers in English or German. Further information for potential authors as well as our formal guidelines, please see here. For any questions regarding the procedures of publication, please contact sophie.gleitsmann@mattersburgerkreis.at

References

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