The myths of museology: on deconstructing, reconstructing, and redistributing

Les mythes de la muséologie : sur la déconstruction, la reconstruction et la redistribution

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Museology was invented as a way to look at the diversity of museums through a single “scientific” lens. Behind the assumption that museology could be a science – one that was in the foundation of this international committee (ICOFOM) – there was the idea promoted by some of our founding figures that one single branch of knowledge could serve the study of the plurality of museums. A claim of universality, according to which “the embryonic nucleus of museology must have existed since a long time ago” (Sofka, 1987, p. 7) was a founding myth that may hide the fact that museology, as a body of mixed knowledge and methods, can be as diverse as the reality of the museum experience. Based on the recent debates proposed by ICOFOM on the decolonisation of the study of museums, in this synthesis I will suggest that in the process of defining itself as science, museology had to assume a universal and neutral point of view, consequently excluding other subaltern subjects and their situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Its core purpose was the production of one single conceptual basis with defined theoretical centres for the investigation of museums, both in theory and in practice. Decoloniality calls that universality into question.

Looking at the basis of museum theory, I will stress that the decolonisation of museums and that of museology as a disciplinary field is dependent on a three-fold and interrelated process that encompasses deconstructing, reconstructing, and redistributing, necessarily in that order. The problem with today’s discourse on the decolonisation of museums is its restricted focus on the last part of this complex and difficult process, disregarding its more fundamental procedures.
This is a flaw with political consequences, because if you redistribute heritage without rethinking the regimes of value and knowledge in which heritage is produced and preserved – which are marked by coloniality, rationality, and violence – these regimes will essentially and pragmatically stay unchanged.

First, we must decolonise the mind (Wa Thiong’o, 1987), which includes decolonising knowledge and being (Mignolo, 2007), before decolonising museum collections and methods. In this sense, decolonisation cannot be only about restitution or giving the right to some dominated populations to enter the museum and to access their own dispossessed goods; it is about inviting these groups and individuals to change our way of thinking, to reshape our own understanding of cultural heritage and to denounce the violence produced by museums that sometimes are beyond our grasp as scholars and museum professionals of a certain class and ethnicity.

At one point defined as the scientific discipline that studied “the complex of philosophical and theoretical issues related to museums” (Sofka, 1980, p. 67), 20th-century museology pursued the notion according to which “somewhere in the future individual witnessings and annunciations will merge into a compact system”, as suggested by Tomislav Šola in 1984 (pp. 35-36). As has been the case in other social and human sciences forged in Modernity, one of its discursive strategies was to conceive general theories and encompassing concepts, as if knowledge could be compartmentalised into independent systems and limited series (Foucault, 1969/2002). As Foucault demonstrated, if the history of “Western” thought could remain the locus of uninterrupted continuities, as if connections between differences could be endlessly forged, it would continue to “provide a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness”, that way ultimately securing the power of the scientist, “as if we were afraid to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought” (1969/2002, p.13). For some time, museologists were chasing exactly that. They wanted to be sovereigns in their own domain. And they wanted it to be regulated by general rules – some of them invented within this committee.

Since the last decades of the 20th century, museum theory has had to deal with critical studies that have put the museum under scrutiny by questioning its colonial roots. These reflexive analyses, marked by a strong influence from critical anthropologists (Balandier, 1951; Stocking, 1985; Clifford, 1997), have denounced our “colonial legacies” (L’Estoile, 2008) in their urgent need for reinterpretation and renegotiation in the present. The influence of critical thinking and the post-colonial studies on museum theory have also provoked the recognition of museums’ central role in decolonising the past preserved in their collections. Notably, these analyses have questioned the assumption that there is an essence of colonialism, overlooking the actual diversity of colonial projects and interactions, as well as the idea that the inhabitants of a post-colonial world are necessarily passive recipients of this legacy. As Benoît de L’Estoile has noted, these analyses have helped to draw a distinction
between colonial relations in a generic sense and colonisation as a restricted historical occurrence.

Among Latin American authors, a *decolonial* approach was defined between the 1970s and the 1990s, based on the concept of coloniality of power and knowledge forged by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. While in the mid-1970s dependency theory considered the relations between centre and periphery in the political and economic spheres, museology proposed the idea of an “integral museum”, during the Round Table of Santiago de Chile in 1972, amidst a flow of new ideas under the influence of Enrique Dussel’s *Philosophy of Liberation* (1977) and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), both concerned with the worldviews of the oppressed classes. Both these authors emphasised the value of local experiences in the social and political liberation processes, influenced by Marxists’ interpretations as well as by the radical ideas and epistemological shifts proposed by Amilcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Rigoberta Menchú, among others.

By evoking the idea that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin – notably in the constitution of the Americas – decolonial critics point to how relations of power established during the colonial period and the expansion of Europe have shaped the so-called modern world and have been transformed into other forms of oppression and violence reproduced through global capitalism. “Coloniality” serves these authors to criticise the European paradigm of rationality/modernity, stating that coloniality of power is linked to coloniality of knowledge. From the 1970s on, then, in Latin America, decoloniality opened up the path for the reconstruction and restitution of silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternised knowledges and languages (Mignolo, 2007, p. 451).

In parallel to this movement, post-colonial currents based on the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida were also serving to deconstruct the colonial heritage in the social sciences and denouncing relations based on domination and hierarchisation – in the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Hommi Bhabha, for instance. Considering its various ramifications in different parts of the world, postcolonial studies examines the effects of and reactions to European colonialism, analysing its processes from the 16th century up to and including the neo-colonialism of the present day.

In the development of museological thinking, several studies have been presented since the last decades of the 20th century with a critical approach to

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1. Dependency theory was one of the responses from Latin America to a changing world order in the second half of the 20th century that, according to Mignolo (2000), in Asia and Africa took the form of “decolonisation”. The author calls attention to the fact that in the Americas, independence from colonial powers (Spain, Portugal and Britain) was obtained long before what was labelled as the first wave of decolonisation (he recalls the U.S. and Haitian revolutions; Spanish-American independence, and I would add the so-called “independence” of Brazil from Portugal, accomplished by an imperial elite in 1822).
colonialism in museums. In Latin America, the first wave of a decolonial approach to museology—under the influence of *libertarian* ideas disseminated after the Round Table of Santiago and with a Marxist interpretation of the social role of museums—was identified in the works of Waldisa Rússio (1974), Marta Arjona Pérez (1977), and Norma Rusconi (1987), among others. Later, some studies which circulated in the region but were not widely known in the rest of the world would emphasise the relation of museums and power, in a Foucauldian approach (Chagas, 2001), as well as museum’s mestizo nature (“una mirada mestiza fundante”) within the framework of a subaltern museology (Moreno, 2012).

While in the Latin tradition recent works have explored the concept of “coloniality” in museology and cultural heritage studies (Souza, 2018; Pereira, 2018; Brulon Soares, 2020a; Peixinho, 2021), or the notion of decolonisation in political and practical analysis (Chuva, 2013; van Geert, 2017; Bertin, 2019, 2020; Mellado et al., 2018; Mellado & Andrade, 2020), Anglo-Saxon museum studies have presented postcolonial approaches to the same issues (see, for instance, Ames, 1992, 2006; Macdonald, 1998; McCarthy, 2007; Chambers et al., 2014/2017; Onciul, 2015). What these different approaches to colonial legacies have in common is a critique of the sovereign subject of knowledge in its totalitarian and universal presumption, which is still dominant both in museums’ narratives and in museology.

In this triennium (2019–2022), ICOFOM set itself a goal to map the different approaches on decolonisation that were complementary to a critical revision of museum theory in past decades and still are today. The debate has widened, involving other international and national committees, the regional alliance for Latin America and the Caribbean and affiliated organisations of ICOM, with the Special Project “Museums, community action, and decolonisation” implemented by ICOFOM in 2020. This project and other parallel initiatives conducted by several committees and groups show an increased need, within the ICOM organisation and outside its borders, to revise the structure of knowledge and the main concepts of museology. Nonetheless, for this revision to be achieved, museology needs, first, to recognise its own colonial roots and to *deconstruct* its myths in order to *reconstruct* its conceptual basis and, finally, to *redistribute* authority in the museum field.

1. The myth of museology as science

Since the 1980s, ICOFOM has accepted the challenge of defining museology as *science* based on the ideas of certain thinkers from Central and Eastern Europe (van Mensch, 1992), but also on the modern notion that allowed Zbyněk Z. Stránský to affirm museology as “a scientific autonomous discipline whose

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2. Curiously, these different approaches do not intersect, and even though some Latin authors may reference Anglo-Saxon works, the reverse rarely happens.
subject of knowledge is a specific approach of man to reality” (1980, p. 39). The many followers of Stránský’s initial ideas, who have spread his views throughout different schools and training programmes in museology, have introduced the question of science as a relevant matter for various scholars who were trying to have museology established in the academic systems of their own countries. Following his assertion, other theorists such as Anna Gregorová defined the museological subject of study as “specific relations of man to reality” (1980, p. 19), considering the subject of knowledge in its structural differentiation from the totality of reality, and at the same time differentiating itself from the object of observation.

This cognitive notion re-conceived by Stránský, Gregorová and others refers to the modern philosophical assertion that separates man from reality and presupposes the existence of a (material) reality that is divorced from society. First, we must recall that the breach between subject and object is, in fact, fabricated by a particular appropriation of reality. It was initially conceived as an important part of Descartes’ cogito, according to which subjects as “minds” exist as completely separate entities from physical reality. This conception of a mind that is even detached from a physical body and that exists beyond any materiality lies in the foundation of idealistic philosophy and modern rationality. It was further explored by Kant and discussed by Hegel. But it was only after the Enlightenment that Rationalism translated into politics, becoming a central part of the dominant ideologies in the West. In the case of museums, this breach is a historical phenomenon that distinguishes Modernity and characterises a certain a priori for the existence of these modern/colonial institutions.

Modernity, as a construct that was based in a new imaginary of the world system invented to justify the expansion of a capitalist world economy (Wallerstein, 1974), is based on a cultural complex under the name of rationality. Modern thinking, as conceived by Descartes and others, is centred in rationality, established as the universal paradigm of knowledge that serves to produce hierarchical relations between “rational humanity” (Europe) and the rest of the world (Quijano, 1992, p. 440; Mignolo, 2000, p. 59). In the history of knowledge, this epistemological principle was responsible for splitting the knowing subject from the known object. According to this postulated correlation between subject and object – a correlation that is in the foundation of museums as much as in modern sciences – it became unthinkable to accept the notion that a knowing subject was possible beyond the universal subject of knowledge.

According to the Stranskian theory, museums are places where this separation occurs between objective reality and a subject that thinks and conceives of the world as a mind. Therefore, as an institution that fundamentally applies specific relations of man to reality, the museum is culturally and philosophically predetermined. The same separation of subject from reality is at the root of all the thinking sustaining ecomuseology and New museology, international movements of the 1980s with both a theoretical and practical nature. This “new”
formulation was conceived from the well-known triangulation that marks the binaries between the “classical” museum and the so-called “new” museums: building/territory, collection/heritage, public/population).

To question the epistemic geopolitics through decolonial lenses, however, entails denouncing this claim of a universal subject–object relation that is in the genealogy of modern sciences. It means shifting the central scientific assumption “in the frame of epistemic embodiments (geo-historical and body-graphical)” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 460).

That is, museology is founded as an academic discipline or a social science based on an artificial fragmentation of reality that finds its roots in rationality - a separation that, until now, remained unquestioned. To deconstruct museology’s founding myths, then, we must start by dislocating its central epistemological problem from its supposed subject of study to the cognitive frames we use to interpret it. In other words, the museological problem is not having the museum as subject matter, or the man–reality relation, but understanding the museum exclusively through a dated philosophical idea (the Cartesian cogito) limiting all thinking processes to one single perception of reality.

2. The myth of a single museology

From the 1980s onwards several theoretical attempts were made to formulate a single foundation for the study of museums. The contrast between a diverse practice organised according to institutional needs and a possible science with strong foundations is directly addressed in the first issue of the *Museological Working Papers*, published by ICOFOM in 1980. The first conclusion presented in that issue, by Villy Toft Jensen and considering the opinions of several museum professionals from Eastern Europe, was that “a simple common museology does not exist” (1980, p. 9). Coming from a critical assessment of museology, one could ask: does it exist today? And, moreover, should we still be pursuing it?

According to Enrique Dussel, Modernity, as a historical process, has allowed Europe to affirm itself as the ‘centre’ of the world that it created, while defining its ‘periphery’ as a consequence of its own self-definition (1993; 2000). As the field of museums has become an open arena for the emergence of new subjects and groups whose knowledge and beliefs have been extirpated from scientific thinking in the process of formal colonisation and, more recently, through the logic of capitalism, the geopolitics of knowledge that defines museology has

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5. As Mignolo will point out, the continued disqualification and simultaneous appropriation of indigenous knowledge to produce “modern” pharmaceutical drugs is a contemporary example in which the rhetoric of modernity justifies “not only the appropriation of land and labor forces but,
revealed its centres, as recent studies have shown (Scheiner, 2016; Brulon Soares & Leshchenko, 2018). By exposing the effects and consequences of Western imperial and capitalist expansion on knowledge production in the present, these analyses serve to break up the illusion that all knowledge is produced and distributed equally and under the same conditions in different places.

The myth of a single museology, with a universal connotation, inevitably implies the extermination of other forms of knowledge or of making museums in the borders, what has been called by decolonial authors as “epistemicide” (Grosfoguel, 2016) reflected in Eurocentric academic production as well as in the assimilation of colonial heritage, along with its historical silences and erasures, in the collections of the most prominent museums.

Parallel to the configuration of a scientific and autonomous discipline, New museology, as conceived in the minds of certain Central European thinkers in the 1980s, was proclaimed as a movement towards the decolonisation of museums. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in a previous work (Brulon Soares, 2020b), it did not decolonise the minds of those who were making museology acceptable and replicable in universal terms in different parts of the world. New museology quickly became an international movement that was absorbed as “a return to the basis of museology” (Devallées, 1992, pp. 22-23), promoting a radical transformation in museum practices and ideologies, and allowing European authors to make amends for the museum’s colonial past.

The premise of a supposed “rupture” from traditional museology (and its colonial legacy) can be explained by the post-colonial critique of Gayatri Spivak (1994, pp. 66–67), who stated that a radical revision coming out of the West is usually the result of a desire “to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject”. This is the issue behind the current neo-colonisation of knowledge, when the language of decolonisation is used as a shield for dominant voices to maintain their domination. It was partially the problem that some Latin Americans had with the revision of the ICOM museum definition proposed in Kyoto in 2019, when a radical change was stated as part of a self-proclaimed decolonising discourse within a clear European agenda that did not consider subaltern voices. In other words, some decolonial devices can also serve to allow dominant subjects to speak for the others in a condescending and colonising way.

What was defined by some decolonial authors as la pensée unique, produced by colonisation and reaffirmed in capitalism, is a Western way of thinking in the sense that it is, at once, liberal and neo-liberal, but it is also Christian and neo-Christian, as well as Marxist and neo-Marxist. In other words, it is a product of the totality of the three major macro-narratives of Western civilisation, as noted by Walter Mignolo (2007, pp. 455-456). To escape from the logic of coloniality and a totality of thinking, it is necessary, thus, to engage in what

lately and more intensively, the knowledge of “Others” (2007, p. 462).
the author has called “border thinking” or border epistemology, an alternative to Modernity in its colonial sense and to the supremacy of one single way of producing knowledge. In this sense, a reconstruction of museums and cultural heritage from the borders, as a creative alternative to central narratives, could result in a more effective path to decolonisation, rather than “including” peripheral voices in the very centre responsible for their exclusion.

Border thinking is “logically, a dichotomous locus of enunciation and, historically, is located at the borders (interiors or exteriors) of the modern/colonial world system” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 85). It is based on the ideas of a “double critique” or “epistemological Creolization”, according to the discussion raised by Edouard Glissant. The proposed epistemic shift – acknowledged in museology only in more recent criticisms – brings to the foreground other epistemologies and other bases of knowledge production that are undisciplined and unsubordinated to the Eurocentric paradigm: what we call, in the field of museums, experimental museology, as a kind of museology of “liberation” (6), the aim of which is to liberate experience from the subaltern place to which modern science has relegated it. This liberation refers to a process of de-centering the universal subject of knowledge from its own “emancipation” prescribed in the dominant capitalist and neo-colonial discourse. It suggests the reconstruction (which is co-construction) of new knowledge based on the plurality of social experiences, having “pluriversality as a universal project” (Mignolo, 2007, pp. 452-453).

As alluded to by Chimamanda Adichie (2018), the danger of a single story is that it leaves no possibility for humans to connect as equals. Based on Adichie’s central arguments, one can say that a single museology is about power; the power to represent and interpret the material culture of others according to one’s exclusive perspectives and superiority. This is what was at stake when modern scientists decided to discard experience as a trustworthy source of knowledge. A museology based on experience, not on rationality as one single way of thinking, challenges itself to recognise different subjects of knowledge that make museums in their particular and variant ways, outside of the supposed universality of a single and determined political viewpoint and beyond the established models and paradigms.

3. The myth of museum theory separated from practice

By relegating experience to non-scientific forms of creation, modern museums have prioritised rationality and forms of knowledge that behave as a systematised body of theories. As a result, the museum theory produced in certain

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6. In the sense of a Philosophy of Liberation (1977), proposed by Enrique Dussel, using the word “liberation” in direct reference to the social movements of “national liberation” in Africa and Asia, as well as in Latin America. In Walter Mignolo’s (2007) explanation of the term, to attach the word “liberation” to “philosophy” complements its meaning on the revolutionary fronts of political decolonisation.
parts of the world has developed as a superior form of authorised knowledge, in many ways divorced from practice.

When ICOFOM was created, in 1977, it was the result of a long-standing need to develop specific concepts and theories to standardise knowledge in the museum field. The international circulation of museum knowledge within ICOM, through the circulation of ideas and the professionals who produced them, led to a need for the standardisation of museum concepts and rules that would result in the spread of an *authorised normative discourse* – a normative museology. In fact, the conception of a separation between theory and practice was at the centre of this process of making knowledge a standard to all practice, involving the dissemination of concepts defined in Europe to be applicable in other parts of the globe.

It was ICOM director Georges Henri Rivière who first defined *museology* as “the science that studies the mission and organisation of the museum” and *museography* as “the set of techniques in relation to museology” (1960, p. 12). This conceptual separation between science and technique according to Rivière’s initial definitions would be followed by professionals and scholars in various training courses around the world, in some cases up to the beginning of the 21st century. The spread of his ideas was a landmark in the establishment of museology as a discipline with a theoretical basis, as defined by ICOFOM in the following decades, but it also implied a hierarchy between knowledge based on theory (produced by the experts) and other forms of unauthorised museologies based purely on practice or on other (subaltern) experiences of the museum.

As a result of this artificial separation, in the academic structure of overvalued universities, museology promotes theory as the basis for an interdisciplinary corpus of knowledge, almost superseding practice. This artificial separation was sustained by the notion of a “museum philosophy” (“une philosophie du muséal”, according to Bernard Deloche, 2001, p. 37) detached from museums’ practical daily life, which was applied to the teaching of museology as theory in several contexts in the world.

Looking back to the 1980s, when museological theory was internationally established, we can say that ICOFOM believed in a theoretical basis that could serve museologists around the globe, regardless of their specific contextual problems and situated practices – that is still a core issue for this committee when decolonising its own conceptual basis. Today, however, as witnessed in the articles in this issue, there is not one single way to decolonise museology, nor one single philosophy for a postcolonial critique of museums to be exported and applied in our different cultural contexts. As the plurality of voices in this issue show, *decolonisation involves different forms of suffering and different forms of healing*. In fact, this was one of the problems in the proposition of New museology as an international *remedy*, but also of some interpretations
of museum theory as a universal philosophy that can serve us all and shape our ways of thinking.

One of the challenges at the centre of epistemic decolonisation is to achieve a change in theory that results in a change of practices. While the New museology movement might have initiated a change of theoretical content in museology, it still reproduced, in practice, the matrix of colonial domination. For instance, it exported the notion of the “ecomuseum” as a global prototype for new practices of “local development”, constructed as a European concept to be adopted by communities in the peripheries of the globe. A change of terms in theory to achieve new practices is needed because the Western categories of thought have been globalised through the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of modernity, but also through capitalism and the dynamics of an expanded global market.

Theoretical museology, as it has been interpreted and debated in the scope of ICOFOM, should be perceived in its critical ability to assess museum practice as a conscious and systematic reflection on the theory of the museum. As a field built by specialists of the museum world who were both theorists and practitioners, museology today constitutes a specific platform for debate over the definition of its own terms, concepts and paradigms, based on academic research but also on the experience of those making museums from the borders, constantly challenging the colonial limitations of the established theory.

4. The myth of the object/visitor dichotomy

Museums have defined collections as their core component while embedded in colonialism. Descendants of the cabinets of curiosities, where the objectification of “the Other” in the representation of societies was a central practice, they have participated in the colonial system as an important device for the domination of cultures through the accumulation of collections dispossessed from people. Another important myth that constitutes museum modernity, inherited by museology and equally based on the artificial separation between subjects and objects, is one that still persists today: the old dichotomy between the museum’s focus on material objects and that on visitors.

Constituting its collections based on plunder and exploitation, the colonial museum that was reproduced in Europe and spread throughout its colonies helped to define civilised man by objectifying entire populations in showcases detached from the local realities they represented. Such a logic is at the centre of a colonial discourse still present in museums whose main goal is the accu-

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7. When ICOM director Hugues de Varine introduced the notion of the “ecomuseum” to be adopted as a global concept for community-driven initiatives, several other experiences involving social groups had already been put into practice in colonised countries such as México, Cuba, and Brazil. Nonetheless, the French prototype would be mirrored in these other contexts since the 1980s, shaping museum practice and authorising community work. On this discussion see Brulon Soares (2021).
mulation of collections disconnected from their original owners and creators. By reproducing the fragmentation of social reality, colonial museums are narrating the past in a way that preserves certain inherited separations between things and persons, culture and society, heritage and territory, objects and audiences, etc.

A critical point of view was introduced in museology in its reflexive revision in the 1970s, after the modern museum was diagnosed as an institution opposed to the living (Adotevi, 1971/1992), and the European temple was contrasted with a democratic forum (Cameron, 1971) – a dichotomy that would be further explored by museologists engaged in changing the ethos of the museum field. Going back to the discourse of New museology, the concern with a museum oriented to audiences was a direct response to societal calls for its decolonisation and for the deconstruction of a temple for the elites. In this new rhetoric, the definition of the museum as a development tool for grassroots communities (Varine, 2005) was opposed to the old colonial notion that what was preserved in a museum was generally wiped out from underpowered groups. As an immediate result of this wave of self-criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, the French sociologist Hugues de Varine proposed the concept of the “ecomuseum”; a museum without walls, without collections and oriented to a territory and a population – as if the problem was collections and not the violent ways in which they were accumulated over the centuries.

As many authors show, the dichotomy between object and visitor, or the gap between communities and material collections, is an old one in museology (Conn, 2010; van Mensch & Meijer-van Mensch, 2011) – and, as we argue, it has been reinforced by New museology and with the notion of the “ecomuseum”. From the “classical” opposition between “collections” and “populations” proposed by Varine, the ecomuseum was defined as a museum of problems, without material collections (1978/1992). But can museums have collections and still be relevant to the present of living societies? In other words, one could ask: how are these two important aspects of contemporary museums still in conflict with each other?

In a contemporary interpretation of New museology, one cannot ignore its political role in reaffirming traditional inequalities that sustain a hierarchical division between experience and normativity in the museum field (Brulon Soares, 2021). In this sense, the prototype of a “community ecomuseum”, which in the 1970s was opposed to the “institution” with material collections, is based on a false assumption that would mark the short history of several museums defined according to a central dichotomy between persons and things. The new

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8. A central dichotomy for the proposed ecomuseum was immediately unveiled when the Direction des Musées de France refused to recognise a museum with no material collections when the Écomusée du Creusot-Montceau was created. In 1976, the ecomuseum would be attached to the newly created ministry of the environment, obtaining some financial support due to the specificity of this newly invented definition (Debary, 2002, p. 40).
concept helped to temporarily resolve an old identity crisis in the museum sector, a crisis that was to resurface in the polarised debates on the ICOM museum definition in the following decades, resulting in unfruitful discussions and revealing other new forms of colonising knowledge. Before proposing a more nuanced and broader understanding of the museum, museology should consider decolonising its own myths – one of them being the artificial opposition between colonial institutions (based on material collections) and a decolonial forum (driven by “communities”); a dichotomy that is not only colonial in origin, but that is also present in the rhetoric of New museology theorised in Europe.

5. The myth of decolonisation: notes for redistributing the museum

When museums spread throughout the colonised world, a centre and a periphery were assumed as part of Modernity – the centre being a point of gathering, the periphery an area of discovery. Today in the 21st century, societies from different parts of the globe ask museums to be de-centralised, becoming accountable in a way that goes beyond the mere preservation of collections. Perceived as a contact zone, the museum has had its organisational structure as a collection transformed into an ongoing historical, political and moral locus for various power relations – “a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull” (Clifford, 1997, pp.192–193). Museums are, thus, reinterpreted as sites of historical and political negotiations by creating occasions for an ongoing contact (Clifford, 1997) and the emergence of border thinking (Mignolo, 2000) as a means to de-centralise the centre – i.e., to take power or control from the centre and redistribute it. Therefore, museology, as a way of reflecting upon museums, has also been under review.

I argue that in the process of diversifying and redistributing the museum experience around the globe since the late 20th century, museology has delegated to the centre the responsibility to requalify and decolonise its margins, in practical and in gnoseological terms. While more or less clear boundaries between the margins and the centre are stressed, it is easy to maintain untouched the hegemony of central museums and that of “centred” museologists. But on the other hand, museum marginality in the postcolonial world has prompted the rise of counter-museologies: experimental museology, social museology, critical and post-critical museology; postcolonial and decolonial currents inspired by marginal ways to conceive of museums in a constantly changing world.

These revisions from the margins of a postcolonial world are concerned not only with museum collections and repatriation, but also with a deeper revision of paradigms that may lead to the redistribution of authority in the museum field. As we have argued, redistribution does not refer to the exclusive restitution of colonial objects, but the restitution of the museum itself as a device that may be used by communities and subaltern groups to restore their relationship to
the past. But even though museum objects can tell multiple stories and create shared knowledges “in-between” the colonial past and the critical readings of the present, museums must face the fact that there is not only an unequal distribution of material collections but also an unequal distribution of the resources for the preservation and transmission of heritage around the globe. In a general observation, the colonised countries that have been plundered of more of their cultural belongings in the past are usually the nations that find it more difficult to implement effective means to preserve their cultural heritage in the present.

At least since the 1990s, anthropologists and museum professionals have faced the fact that, more than ever before, curators must deal with the realisation that ownership and control over collections have never been absolute. Based on that notion, the museological discourse has confounded shared authority and decolonial mediation with “participation” and “co-curatorship” as progressive notions for the management of museum collections. Meanwhile, how many indigenous curators have permanent and well-paid jobs in museums and how many are just doing temporary collaborations with permanent well-paid white professionals? Are their salaries usually the same? Do they get the same benefits? How are they absorbed into the museum market once the collaborative exhibition is over? How durable are the relationships built in these institutions that can actually change the precarious lives of those involved in their projects? Inequalities can become much greater in institutions and cultural projects of the global North, but the reproduction of colonial relations has proven more acute in the context of colonised countries of the South.

Redistributing authority is never simple and it will always challenge the colonial foundation of institutions. For this reason, active collaboration and sharing of authority must be seen in a critical light. As we witness today, indigenous participation is usually serving to authenticate the curator’s work rather than the other way around. The current calls for museums to display their objects in “a fresh light” are motivated by political and economic reasons. While it has been a positive thing for museums to listen to their audiences’ requests for postcolonial readings of collections, at the same time, the market, driven by a sense of innovation, also influences the need to reinvent the display of old objects, especially when museums lack the resources to acquire new ones.

All these practical and material consequences of colonialism at the present time, as we have shown in this synthesis, are embedded in modern epistemology, hence the revision of museums is strictly connected to the critical revision of museology. This text has reflected on the different approaches to decolonisation from a museological point of view, but it is also proposing decolonising “decolonisation” in a more radical perspective, one that has proven necessary to avoid the neo-colonisation of museum contents and of museologists’ minds.

In a way, people started screaming “post-colonial” and “decolonisation” in museology as if they had found an antidote to the coloniality in museums, when
in fact the decolonial project wishes to propose a critical look at colonisation and Modernity, perceiving those as irreversible phenomena. I ask, then: is it possible to reverse slavery in the Americas? Is it possible to overturn genocide in Africa? What about the exploitation of finite resources through imperial expansion and plunder? Are we going to solve the issue of colonisation once and for all by inventing the idea of a post-colonial museum and getting rid of the traces of this past that haunts us?

Is there a way to escape colonialism in the museum? Or, asking the same question differently, can we make museums while supplanting Modernity? Denouncing coloniality in the museum is probably the only way out from colonialism. But this shift, as we have tried to demonstrate, will not happen through rationality nor in the mind of an abstract universal subject of knowledge detached from social reality. Coloniality can only be denounced with the recognition of difference, friction, and distress. The perspective of the Other, or “an Other thinking”, allows for looking at the world through different lenses, lenses that were forged in the margins, through border thinking and experience-driven methods. After we see museums through the eyes of an Other – that in some cases, are our own – maybe then, and only then, will we conceive of museology in a decolonial mindset.

References


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