

**The Restitution of Looted Artefacts since 1945:
Denazification and decolonization in entangled perspective**

Over the past decades the restitution of cultural property has come to the forefront of both public and academic debates. Besides the well-established provenance research into Jewish-owned cultural property, postcolonial restitution has increasingly become the epicentre of fierce disputes, as in the case of the contested Benin bronzes or the repatriation of the Cape cross stone to Namibia. The controversy over the Humboldt Forum's world collections and BLM protests further exacerbated the matter. As a result, the restoration of material culture has now risen to one of the central facets of post-authoritarian justice, which historians have yet to analyse in more comprehensive terms.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the restitution of Jewish-owned cultural artefacts has come to be interpreted as a *conditio sine qua non* for post-fascist transitional justice, and the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* more broadly. Discourses surrounding colonial restitution, however, are often still marred by racist or orientalist conceptions of conservation, ownership and fruition. The shift from the 'legal' to the 'moral' paradigm which emerged in many Nazi-looted restitution cases is also still rather unusual for post-colonial instances. Why? A certain institutional reticence in decolonizing museums plays a role, for sure, but the issue is mostly *geschichtspolitisch*, as if on one side most ex-colonial powers are still struggling to come to terms with their past, on the other the Holocaust, despite its 'universalization', is still regarded as a unique historical process, which cannot and should not be compared to anything else.

While the glaring differences between the fascist and the colonial experiences are undisputable, the similarities in post-fascist and post-colonial restitution practices and discourses and their political-historical significance beg further inquiry. This appears crucial to better understand not only the political relevance of heritage and its role in memory- and nation-building vis-à-vis the rise of human rights, but also the persistence of anti-Jewish and racist stereotypes in the post-1945 world order and the recurrence of restitution motives in present-day nationalist propaganda.

The aim of this conference is to address this set of discrepancies by historicizing them. Are there any similarities between post-fascist and post-colonial restitution cases, and if so why? Can post-authoritarian restitution be regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* of transitional justice? What role did the rise of human rights and the new international agencies for heritage protection play? How far can 'good-will gestures' be understood as evidence of neo-colonialist attitudes? Can the centrality of property to identity or the shift from community to individual restitution be interpreted as an outcome of the global triumph of

neoliberalism? In order to address these issues, the conference encourages papers on both the discursive and practical aspects of restitution, which examine the themes, the praxis as well as the transfer of knowledge at national, transnational and global level.

While the literature on the subject of restitution has achieved a tremendous growth over the last decades, a substantial part of this impressive bulk of studies focuses on the in-depth analysis of individual actors or the fate of specific collections or artworks. As a result, the field remains highly compartmentalized along national, disciplinary and thematic boundaries. The geographical and chronological spread of studies also still proves rather uneven. This conference aims to overcome these fragmentations by establishing connections between post-authoritarian restitution instances across institutional and national borders since the end of World War II.

We welcome papers on the following themes:

- Restitution and transitional justice: a *conditio sine qua non*?
- Connections and contrasts between post-fascist and post-colonial claims and policies
- Decolonizing restitution: from good-will gestures to 'just and fair' solutions
- Persistence of anti-Jewish or racist motives in restitution debates
- Restitution and identity: heritage, international/national/local power structures and identity politics
- Memories of restitution: the use of institutional and collective restitution debates and their legacy
- Decolonizing the museums: the impact on museums, galleries, art dealing and collecting practices
- Changing definitions of restitution: criteria, motifs and limitations
- Continuities and ruptures: is restitution history structured by political history?
- The interplay between national decision-making processes and international cooperation
- Restitution and public opinion: the questions of conservation, ownership, fruition
- Public history and restitution: which claims capture the public imagination, and why?

The conference language is English. Papers will be pre-circulated two weeks before the conference. **Please send a proposal of max 400 words, accompanied by a short CV, to Bianca Gaudenzi (gaudenzi@dhi-roma.it) by 1 September 2021.**

Dates: **16 - 18 May 2022**

Location: **German Historical Institute in Rome**