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Review of Katrin Sieg, *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum*

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KATRIN SIEG, *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum*, Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 326 pp. ISBN 978 0 472 07510 2. \$80.00

The debate on Europe's imperial past and colonial legacies has intensified in recent years, and museums have become the subject of—and a site for—such discussions. Katrin Sieg provides an overview. Approaching 'Europeanization as a condition of decolonizing postnational community' (p. 11), she looks at local, national, and European museums, mostly in Western Europe, and especially in Germany. *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum* paints a vivid picture of interventions by activists, scholars, curators, and artists in these institutions. As well as addressing the workings of 'colonial aphasia',<sup>1</sup> it draws attention to the agency and resistance of those who were subjected to exploitation, subjugation, and extermination. Discussing several exhibitions, Sieg shows how they 'have activated colonial history for new tales of international, cross-racial connections and cooperations' (p. 37). In essence, museums, exhibitions, and artworks became the ground on which decolonizing efforts are taking place, with culture as 'an arena of struggle over meanings and power' (p. 64).

Following the rich introduction, chapter two presents the main actors involved in initiating decolonizing processes in museums. Delving into the protagonists' endeavours, Sieg distinguishes between two groups. One group advocated changing institutional structures and codes. The other challenged the racial injustice and triumphalist stories that are still prevalent in museums. In both cases, collecting and exhibiting human remains were the most contentious practices of objectification in museums.

Chapter three takes as its subject one example of a museum intervention: the project 'Kolonialismus im Kasten' ('Colonialism in a Box', CiB) at the German Historical Museum (Deutsches Historisches Museum, DHM) in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> Sieg elucidates how the Hegelian philosophy

<sup>1</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France', *Public Culture*, 23/1 (2011), 121–56.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the project (2011, ongoing), see their website at [<https://www.kolonialismusimkasten.de>], accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

of history that positioned Europe as ‘the vanguard of history’ (p. 17) underpinned the design and layout of the DHM’s permanent exhibition. She argues that this approach permeates history museums in Europe, and that by using the method of contrapuntal reading, CiB not only contested grand narratives, but also challenged the museum’s narrow framing of Germany. Sieg unpacks this by making connections between the issues raised by CiB, such as colonial violence against the Herero people, the need for more inclusive institutional practices, and the museum’s potential to play an active role in addressing historical justice. In Germany, these questions became even more pertinent once the decision was made to build the Humboldt Forum, a structure resembling the former imperial palace on whose site it stands in Berlin. In response to the debate the Humboldt Forum triggered, the DHM mounted a special exhibition on German colonialism. Titled ‘German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present’, the exhibition was shown for seven months, from October 2016 to May 2017.

Sieg discusses in detail three sections of this special exhibition in the ensuing three chapters. Starting with the portrayal of historical colonialism (1885–1918), she explains in chapter four that the exhibition moved beyond deconstructive approaches and provided a model that could be adopted by national museums in their efforts to decolonize national history. Invoking Paul Gilroy’s ‘planetary humanism’,<sup>3</sup> she argues that the exhibition featured a ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ which ‘offered glimpses of anti-imperial worldmaking’ (p. 118). Her point resonates with Adom Getachew’s conception of worldmaking as subaltern cosmopolitanism.<sup>4</sup> Though Sieg praises the project for showcasing such endeavours, she indicates that this part of the exhibition – and the glimpses it offered – missed the chance to address critically the economic and political dimensions of colonial violence and their implications for the current world order.

Chapter five brings to the fore Black perspectives and the ways in which Black German curators and community members contributed to the exhibition’s section on ‘Decolonization and Divided Remembrance’.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019).

'Divided remembrance' points to two distinct decolonization processes in East and West Germany. While acknowledging that local communities and activist voices were included in the exhibition, the chapter suggests a limited understanding of colonialism's legacies and how it works nowadays. Sieg foregrounds ways in which the subject of people of colour was reduced to that of Black Germans, sidelining framings of racism that do not follow the colour line. She also mentions the scepticism shown by Black German activists who approach projects such as the DHM's exhibition cautiously because in many instances 'post-colonial Africans' (p. 132) are excluded from them.

Following up on this point, chapter six is concerned with the presentation of 'postcolonial Africans' in the 'German Colonialism' exhibition. Sieg posits that their limited involvement impacted on the way in which the subjects this section tackled – such as education, development, and trade relations – were addressed. She shows how this arrangement resulted in the imperial presence being only partially captured because the effects of neocolonialism were neglected. Looking elsewhere in Germany, Sieg introduces two exhibitions that used video installations and, she argues, captured the imperial presence more compellingly. These are 'Heikles Erbe: Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart' ('Fraught Heritage: Colonial Traces in the Present') at the State Museum of Lower Saxony in Hanover (October 2016–February 2017) and 'Rum, Schweiß und Tränen: Flensburgs koloniales Erbe' ('Rum, Sweat and Tears: Flensburg's Colonial Legacy') held at the Maritime Museum in Flensburg from June 2017 to March 2018. 'Through its *mise-en-scène*', Sieg suggests, 'Fraught Heritage' emphasized 'the eminent importance of attentive listening for the unlearning of Eurocentrism' (p. 164). By juxtaposing the three exhibitions, the chapter brings to the fore an array of ways in which (neo)colonial relations are organized transnationally, with Flensburg's case proving this pattern most vividly. As a binational port city, Flensburg was presented as entrenched in the history of slavery.

The House of European History (HEH) in Brussels is the subject of chapter seven, making Europe – and in particular the European Union – its primary focus. Unpacking the content and design of its permanent exhibition, Sieg critically evaluates the HEH's adherence to what she classifies as Hegelian historiography. She asserts on p. 203 that:

A museum that lives up to the young Hegel's apprehension of freedom would either salvage the moments in which freedom was being actualized, if only fleetingly; Europeans would only play a small part in it. Or it would be a history of European political experiments; the moments when people seized hold of freedom and equality would occupy only a small part of the floorplan. And yet either project could inspire our own decolonizing struggles today.

Artists' contributions to the project of decolonizing museums are a focal point of the book's penultimate chapter, which illuminates how their work differs from the practices of activists and historians. Acclaiming the decentralized structures that the art world developed in the second half of the twentieth century, Sieg elevates artists to experts in deconstructing Eurocentric structures. To support her argument, she draws on David Joselit's analysis of artists as interlocutors of museums and contributors to undoing Eurocentrism.<sup>5</sup> Museums became a target of criticism from artists questioning their attempts to deal with racial injustice, for example. Yet several instances of artists partnering with museums in decolonization projects illustrate how this kind of collaboration might yield positive results. As one such example, Sieg presents the 'Research Workshop on Colonialism' held in Berlin's Schöneberg Museum in 2017. Reflecting on its content and form, she applauds the project for incorporating all the essential elements needed to decolonize the museum, with reparatory justice starting in the institution and possibly continuing elsewhere.

Sieg's monograph makes a valid contribution to the ongoing debate on decolonizing museums. As it is concerned primarily with Western Europe, however, the title does not accurately reflect its geographical scope. The book would have benefited from a broader focus on other parts of the continent. Moreover, while the practices of activists, historians, and artists have been central to the project of decolonizing museums, the contributions and voices of representatives from other fields and disciplines, including anthropology, could have been foregrounded more effectively.

<sup>5</sup> David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass., 2020).

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum* offers extensive insights into how museums deal with colonial legacies. It comes at an important time when the subject seems more apposite than ever.

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