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# A Theory of Taking



We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the past into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.

Hannah Arendt, Preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1950

The present moment in which anthropology and archaeology collections find themselves – whether re-branded as ‘world culture’ museums,

or still retaining the old language of ‘ethnology’ – is the same moment as that in which anthropology as a discipline is stuck. This moment in time demands anthropological, rather than more narrowly historical, thinking, because these museums are spaces of knowledge rather than just narrative; they constitute standpoints rather than merely a perspective, existing in the present rather than just the past. These museums are filled with cultural heritage from Africa and across the Global South and American First Nations, taken under the conditions of duress that were ever-present under colonialism. There are new dialogues with colleagues, communities and institutions in Africa. A major risk in those dialogues (apart from the wilful conflation and whataboutisms of press officers seeking always to reduce the debate to the question of the Classical Greek Elgin/Parthenon Marbles) is that the contemporary rhetoric of ‘decolonising’ museums is an attempt at the cancellation of debts that arise from the colonial past. As Sumaya Kassim has observed in the context of the landmark *The Past Is Now* exhibition at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery:

Decolonising is deeper than just being represented. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ or ‘decoloniality’ we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye. Decoloniality is a complex set of ideas – it requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like ‘diversity’. As interest in decolonial thought grows, we must beware of museums’ and other institutions’ propensity to collect and exhibit because there is a danger (some may argue an inevitability) that the museum will exhibit decoloniality in much the same way they display/ed black and brown bodies as part of Empire’s ‘collection’. I do not want to see decolonisation become part of Britain’s national narrative as a pretty curio with no substance – or, worse, for decoloniality to be claimed as yet another great British accomplishment: *the railways, two world wars, one world cup, and decolonisation*.<sup>1</sup>

With no hint of irony, in the first week of class each year, we anthropologists and museum curators introduce our students to the field of material culture studies through the foundational concept of ‘the gift’. Through the continued influence of Marcel Mauss’s *Essay on the Gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies*, published in 1925, the notions of debt, the obligation to receive and the law of reciprocity, and the desire of the gift itself to make a return, are at the heart of our anthropological reflections on material things. The sustained image, which runs across the anthropology of objects, is one of gift-giving as central to the creation of bonds of sociality, and thus also one of objects as central to the constitution of subjects in human cultures.<sup>2</sup> The passage and interchange of objects between people or communities creates lasting relationships, the very fabric of social life, we explain to our students.

As Jane Guyer has pointed out in her new English translation of Mauss’s essay, an immense and nuanced vocabulary emerges, a typology of objects and the social relationships they create: *dons* (gifts), *cadeaux* (presents), *présents* (presentations), *prestations*, *donations* (donations), *échange-dons* (exchange gifts), *salaire-dons* (payment), *contre-dons* (counter-gifts), *les donateurs et les donataires* (donors and recipients), *les données* (data).<sup>3</sup>

And yet those institutions that anthropology has built for material culture research are filled with objects that have not been given, but taken. Compared with giving, we have no such fine nuance in the vague vocabularies of booty, desolation, wasting, ravaging, depredation, plunder, pillage, confiscations, desecration, trophy-taking, spoliation, enslavement, loot, *elginisme*, relics of war.

The facts of the matter in the anthropological museum emerge through process rather than being handed down from the past in a one-way street with no diversion, they emerge as ‘givens’ – that is to say, those things that are taken for granted, and for which there exists the second obligation described by Mauss: a debt. In the museum, each fact – any knowledge that might be made in this place – holds within it constant ties that bind, an obligation or promise, a kind of yearning even, that must be understood, emerging as ‘a mixture

of things, values, contacts, people'.<sup>4</sup> The obligation in these objects is temporal. It is a deferral, a hesitation, and so a duration. As for the whole museum, so for each thing contained within it, each obligation constituted in material form, the knowledge involved is a kind of memory, a re-collection. To our collective disciplinary and professional shame, no anthropological theory of looting, plunder, dispossession has been written.

This paradox of anthropology's focus on gifts despite its history of thefts is surely not unrelated to the paradoxical place of direct violent dispossession in global capitalism and corporate extractive colonialism, famously described by Karl Marx, in the concluding sections of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867, as 'primitive accumulation', the 'brute force' of British colonialism that compressed time and space in the tropics, 'to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation into the capitalist mode':

The discovery of lands of gold and silver in America, the extermination, enslavement and entombment in mines of Indigenous people, conquest and plunder of the East Indies, the transformation of Africa into an enclosure for the commercial hunting of black skins, mark the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the main elements of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels comes the commercial war of European nations, with the whole planet as its arena.<sup>5</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg offered an important corrective to Marx's formulation of primitive accumulation, providing a key definition for understanding extractive corporate colonialism today. In her 1913 study of *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg underlined the role of militarism as not just originary, but ongoing, under colonialism:

Chapter XXIV of *Capital* Volume 1 is devoted to the origin of the English proletariat, of the capitalistic agricultural tenant class and of industrial capital, with particular emphasis on the looting of colonial countries by European capital. Yet all this is treated solely

with a view to so-called primitive accumulation. For Marx, these processes are incidental, illustrating merely the genesis of capital, its first appearance in the world; they are, as it were, travails by which the capitalist mode of production emerges from a feudal society. As soon as he comes to analyse the capitalist process of production and circulation, he reaffirms the universal and exclusive domination of capitalist production. Yet, as we have seen, capitalism in its full maturity also depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and social organisations existing side by side with it. It is not merely a question of a market for the additional product. The interrelations of accumulating capital and non-capitalist forms of production extend over values as well as over material conditions. *The non-capitalist mode of production is the given historical setting for this process.*<sup>6</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg's account of extractive colonialism has been debated and expanded over the past century by a range of other thinkers, not least David Harvey's description of 'accumulation by dispossession'.<sup>7</sup> But her argument, in italics above, about capitalism's need to create and maintain a kind of contemporary past in the Global South has been drowned out over the past century by the sustained geographical focus of theories of development and underdevelopment, from world systems to identity politics. Did global capitalism hold back, allowing non-capitalist economies to persist, or did the West create new distant pasts into which to slot our contemporaries in the Global South, since 'primitive conditions allow of a greater drive and of far more ruthless measures than could be tolerated under purely capitalist social conditions.'<sup>8</sup> Writing from 1913, Luxemburg's words challenge us here and now to consider how Africa was not left as non-capitalist, but performed as 'pre-capitalist'. What do temporal exclusions, prejudices and dispossessions look like? Archaeology and anthropology as academic disciplines emerged hand-in-hand with this process. Welcome to the 'world culture' museum. These are inherently temporal devices, dark rooms crammed with unfulfilled obligations from across the British Empire and beyond, tools in Europe's fashioning of imperial worlds, in achieving this ongoingness, the persistent violence of the (post)

colonial world in material form. The things on display are not melancholy traces but durations in a condition, as Ann Laura Stoler has put it, of *'duress'* – a term that evokes not 'haunting' but a coercive and relentless hardness, a severity and cruelty, compulsion and perhaps punishment even. As Stoler argues for empire as a whole, so quite precisely for the world culture museum, endurance is not mere remnants or leftovers but generative persistence and 'violating absences'.<sup>9</sup>

Anthropology has offered no theory of the 'permanent' exhibition in museums of inalienable culture – things that could never be given; no theory of the curation of what has been stolen. As Mauss wrote: 'To refuse to give, to neglect to invite, just like refusing to receive what is offered, is tantamount to declaring war; it is refusing covenant and communion.'<sup>10</sup> What then of the refusal to give back?

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A contemplative period of anthropological theory in material culture studies is coming to an end. The predicament of African museum collections in particular, whether from Nigeria, from Egypt, from Ethiopia, or across the Continent, is reaching breaking point. Anthropology and archaeology need to take the looting of Africa seriously – not as a side effect of empire, but as a central technology of extractive and militarist colonialism and indirect rule, in which 'world culture' museums were complicit in brutality, and still are to this day. Our notion of dispossession needs to break apart the old distinction, drawn ultimately from Roman law, between portable objects or chattels on the one hand and the 'inalienability' of land on the other. We are accustomed, in the contexts of settler colonialism, to dialogues around land rights and Indigenous source communities. But dialogue about sacred, royal, or otherwise powerful objects, which are equally inalienable in that they could never be given away, takes place in a different register. The pillaging of objects was far from just an opportunistic side effect of what the Victorians called their 'small wars' or 'little wars' of colonial expansion in Africa. Loot and pillage were of central importance to extractive and militarist colonialism, just as land was to settler colonialism, but dominance of settler colo-

nialism as a model for anglophone academic discourse in and about European imperialism has narrowed our conception of dispossession and its place in the ideology of race, in stark contrast with the genealogies of *Raubkunst* – the act of taking supposedly degenerate art from those who are defined as inferior – traced by Aimé Césaire, Sven Lindqvist and others from Africa in the 1890s to the soils of Europe in the 1930s.

‘There are two possible courses to affluence,’ the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins once wrote, sketching out alternatives to market economies: ‘Wants may be easily satisfied either by producing much or desiring little.’<sup>11</sup> Sadly there is also a third: that of violent theft. What kind of a mode of production is theft? Clearly it involves objects, but also images. The act of putting pen to paper, whether drawing a map, filling out an accession register, or writing this book, can represent an act of taking. Clearly, if it is in any way generative, it is a mode of cultural production in that it is predatory, beginning with the most extreme and dangerous forms of what we today call ‘cultural appropriation’. A theory of taking requires us to talk not just about the life histories of objects, but also about killing: of people, of objects, of culture: the ‘death histories’ of objects.