

FORUM: Social, Cultural and Humanitarian (SOCHUM)

TOPIC: The Issue of Colonial Repayment and Expatriated Cultural Artefacts

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Colonial Repayment

Colonialism is the policy of a foreign political entity (like a state) with authority over other people or territories, generally with the aim of opening trade opportunities. Although this practice is not new it is commonly associated with European Colonialism - starting in the 15th century – and the Imperialism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This topic of debate, however, is not limited to these time periods (unless you decide to define it in-conference)

Many argue that countries like the UK have a moral debt which warrants economic compensation. There is no shortage of atrocities: natives suffered the introduction of foreign diseases, starvation after being kicked off of their farm lands, physical abuse by colonists and the horrors of the slave trade, to name but a few.

An example of the negative impacts of colonialism can be seen in the British reorganisation – and destruction - of the Indian agricultural system to make way for crops intended for European deportation. The historian Mike Davis attributes the death of 29 million Indians during famine in the last few decades of the 19th century directly to this intervention: an event he has termed as the “late Victorian Holocaust”.

Whatsmore, one can point to the injustice of the current distribution of wealth. Colonialism saw the exploitation of indigenous labour and natural resources for the economic development of the Imperial powers while the occupied countries, some feel, suffered economically. Some historians and politicians maintain that poverty in the global south is not a natural phenomenon but has been actively created. Some key examples to look into are the trading relations forced by the British on India and China that have been argued to have trashed their economic power.

However, there is much dispute about the impact of colonialism. In a debate at the Oxford Union on the matter of repayments (worth watching), Professor MacKenzie illustrated the argument that there were benefits of colonisation which were unlikely to have been established under the traditional elites, such as the development of transport infrastructure (for instance, the railway networks in India), manufacturing industries and education and health facilities. Whatsmore, some credit colonialism with creating the beginnings of a middle class in countries where this has gone on to precipitate large socioeconomic improvements.

The argument could be made that despotic government in the interest of the rulers was not a western invention and that events of the past should be left as that, rather than re-addressed in modern context. It is often argued that power and wealth has shifted all over the globe over millennia of history and that its rightful distribution is not one which we can calculate.

These sorts of logistical arguments are common. You may wish to look into different opinion on or proposals for the calculations of reparations and the direction of their

payment – for instance towards the poorer in society or their contribution to economic growth for all.

One could make the case that there are other, better ways to address the issue, such as economic aid and investment (like in growing industries or in social services). It has been said that economic growth and improvements in health and social life must come from support and fair and free trade. Or you could argue the whole way that some of these countries do not need any kind of economic aid (India is a nuclear-armed nation with a space programme and a booming economy and was paid £269 million in aid from the UK in 2013).

A few interesting points that could serve as starting points for your research:

- 2013: the UK paid India £269 million in aid
- [former Italian prime minister Silvio] Berlusconi's agreement with [former Libyan leader Muammar] Gaddafi
- Right now, 14 Caribbean nations are in the process of suing Britain for slavery reparations. They point out that when Britain abolished slavery in 1834 it compensated not the slaves but rather the owners of slaves, to the tune of £20m, the equivalent of £200bn today.

Expatriated Cultural Artefacts

We are addressing 'Repatriation' as the return of looted art or cultural heritage to their country of origin. This usually refers to artefacts of significant 'value' taken by another country during a historic occupation, however you may want to think about how we should be defining both the importance of the object and 'unjust' terms of possession.

The phenomenon of stealing cultural artefacts is one that goes back centuries. How far back should your chosen stance on Repatriation be drawn? Should art from Ancient Greece seized (much) more than a thousand years ago during the Roman empire be returned back? What happens when you steal a stolen artefact – or when the culture it originates from no longer exists (as, in both cases, with the victory stele (decorative stone slab) of King Naram-Sin of Akkad which is now displayed in the Louvre Museum in Paris).

As with the matter of colonial repayment, the argument can be made for the inevitably complicated progression of history which one should not attempt to untangle too much retrospectively.

Additionally, you may want to consider the conditions under which the hypothetically returned object would be placed. For instance, in the ongoing debate about the possession of the Elgin marbles the matter of Athenian air pollution and acid rain – which have damaged the marble and stonework of the Parthenon – has been central. As a result, the New Acropolis Museum was opened in 2009, providing a suitable location for many previously exposed artefacts.

Whatsmore, it is possible to make the argument that such looted artefacts have been protected and preserved where they might otherwise have been destructed. Some point

to cases like the destruction of cultural heritage by ISIS as grounds for resisting the return of such artefacts to politically turbulent countries.

However one may view this as a matter of national sovereignty and question what gives any other country the right to determine what to do with another state's cultural heritage. These are contentious issues and opinions on national and cultural identity differ greatly.

Some Key events to consider:

- The Lieber Code of April 24, 1863, was an instruction signed by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln to the Union Forces of the United States during the American Civil War that dictated how soldiers should conduct themselves in wartime. it legally recognized cultural property as a protected category in war
- In 2003, Britain and Switzerland put into effect statutory prohibitions against illegally exported Iraqi artefacts.
- In the UK, the Dealing in Cultural Objects Bill was established in 2003 that prohibited the handling of illegal cultural objects.
- Multiple Hauge Conventions (eg/ 1907 and 1954) have addressed this topic and attempted to establish some degree of international legal regulation
- The UNIDROIT (International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illicitly Exported Cultural Objects of 1995 called for the return of illegally exported cultural objects
- The 1970 UNESCO Convention against Illicit Export allowed for stolen objects to be seized if there were documentation of it in a museum or institution of a state party.
- You may want to look up some different opinions on global justice and how far we should rectify the past