

## Round Table Discussion: Subject and Territory

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I would like to take as my starting point a question raised by a recent speech by President Macron, in which he announced that he would be granting legal claims for the “restitution” of old artworks, in particular African artworks that were seized from colonized peoples. What I found uncomfortable was the French term “restitution,” which comes from the Latin *restitutio* and implies the idea of reparation, of rehabilitation, but also the idea of restoring something to its initial state. I am not saying that this is the intention of those who use this word, but in today’s world this ambiguity may be of disservice to the sentiment expressed in the remark. Indeed, there is something fundamentally irrecoverable in the theft of ancient objects. There is an impossibility of restitution, and this is why I prefer to speak of “return.” It seems to me that two different elements overlap here. On the one hand, there is what is fundamentally involved at the level of structure in terms of the subject, and on the other hand, what has to do with the question of the colonies in particular.

Lacan turned his interest to the question of territory. He even saw a first indication of the symbolic in the fact that animals mark out their territory. But he underscored that, even if some animals might efface their traces, or even leave false traces, this has nothing to do with signifiers. The signifier, he said, is when man makes traces that are falsely false, traces that are left to be taken as false when they are actually the true traces. In other terms, animal symbols are never equivocal. Given the fact of the structure of the subject and his very specific relationship to the Other, Lacan noted that when animals overstep the limits of a territory, their attitude changes completely, whereas for man, stepping out of one territory leads him to discover that the territory of the other is the same. And quite rightly: for man, there is no difference between the *Umwelt* and the *Innenwelt*. Structurally speaking, the Other is our birthplace and at the same time the

locus from which we have been exiled. This is what would lead Lacan to assert that only deportees take part in history. Hence the nostalgia that so occupied the Romantics, the “nostalgia of a return to the house of the father,” those same Romantics who wrote *Christendom or Europe* and have served as the feeding trough of the fascisms of yesteryear and the populisms of today. Indeed, there is in man, by definition, a deportation of the body, because the marking out of territory is diverted in him toward the narcissistic relation where the ego is founded. This is what provides the foundation to aggressiveness, the image received as Other because it is articulated as much imaginarily as symbolically, a symbolico-imaginary knotting.

In the modern world, the relationship to the Other, given the fact of history, has completely changed. Here we can refer to Jan Assmann and what he calls the Mosaic distinction. According to Assmann, before monotheism, when one people conquered another people, they integrated their gods, they respected those gods, they annexed them: one never knows the possible power of these gods . . . .

In Freud’s letter to Einstein, he posits that there must have been a first phase of slavery that would have superseded a widespread struggle to the death between human groups. This conception is shared by Pierre Clastres, for whom this struggle was a struggle against differentiation, against the division of tasks and of power: *Society Against the State*. Then, assumes Freud, the victor comes to think that instead of killing his enemy, he can enslave him and make use of his work force. But this slavery came about against the backdrop of a possible reciprocity. If I were a citizen or a soldier of Sparta, beaten by Athens, I would become a slave to Athens on the basis of reciprocity: if the Spartans had won the war, the Athenian would have become my slave. Modern colonization such as it is, bound indisputably to the development of capitalism, has absolutely overhauled all these categories. This is the meaning that Robert Jaulin was to give to the notion of “ethnocide,” which some have called “cultural genocide,” that is to say, the destruction of the culture of a human group. From this point of view, these art objects whose return is being requested are the remains of a culture, but are also what testify to it. Recent ethnology has shown a respectful interest in different cultures, from which it expects to learn what can provide the foundation of an anthropology. But at the same time, constituting a culture as an object of science, of knowledge, does not leave it

untouched, and the very intervention of ethnology is already a destructive act. For Jaulin, “decivilization” is produced by the new alliance between the West and technology, as a breaking of the former patterns of alliance with nature. It will be recalled that, for Braudel, capitalism begins with the trading of spices. It modifies our relationship with nature, which is thereafter “unreasoned,” as Heidegger quite rightly indicated. By the same stroke, contact with Western civilisation is inevitably destructive. Slavery in the form it took after the Renaissance, with the Atlantic slave trade, is linked to the development of capitalism. From that point on, it is not a question of another subject whom I annex, but merely of a labor force, which I appropriate and which is necessary for production. Furthermore, it will be noted that the abolition of slavery, which is attributed to well-meaning figures who have been turned into heroes, coincided with the Industrial Revolution. The risk of capital invested in the body of a slave I have purchased is a greater economic risk than renting his labour force on a day-to-day basis, hence the solution of emancipation and proletarianization, even that of the *Lumpenproletarianization* of populations, that is to say, the pursuit of the massive dehumanization of modern slavery bound to an adaptation to machines, with all that this implies.

Colonization therefore has to be linked to the advance of the discourse of science and its technological effects on the life of societies – in the way that Benjamin called for a new alliance with technology –, its effects of a radical overhaul of belief structures and religious orders. All of this is linked to the emergence and development of capitalism, of which imperialism is just one facet, the same that has apparently been abandoned in our time in order to develop in a different way, following the pattern of what is called globalization.

The African art works that are to be found in French museums, I also came across, personally, in the rooms of my analyst and supervisor Solange Faladé. I remind you that she was the granddaughter of King Behanzin, the king of Abomey, who was defeated by General Dodds and died in exile in Algeria after having sojourned in Martinique. Who was she? She was one of the colonized, who came to France to study medicine. Moreover, her brother came with her. He was the first black, French-speaking architect, while she was the first black, French-speaking analyst. Does this demonstrate

the unifying effect of a single worldwide civilization? Isn't it rather the very example of this hybridization of cultures, this *creolizing*, to use Glissant's word, taken up by Gilroy?

To come back to Robert Jaulin, when he published *La Mort Sara* – because he was the first white ethnologist to undergo the initiation rite of the Sara people in Chad – he came up against two unexpected difficulties. On the one hand, there was the harrowing sense that he had betrayed the secret of the initiation by publishing it, because the initiation was supposed to remain secret; but there was also the hostility of the Europeanized African nomenklatura, who at the time ran the country and wanted no more reminders of this original culture they had abandoned. On this matter, emperor Haile Selassie asked for nothing in return. He said, in English, “We want to be modern.”

These objects, which are often cultural objects, were seized from their function and ended up in museums. If they were to go back to their country, and it is clearly desirable that a return be possible, they will nevertheless not find their place of origin, nor their exact function, even if they are given back to the populations from whom they were taken. They have taken the place of those objects that are objects of exchange, when their first function was to incarnate the reminder of the first objects that each of us dealt with – which Lacan calls the object *a* – these objects that cannot be exchanged. In the dream of restitution there is certainly the fantasy of making up for this double injury – which at the same time is structural for each and every one of us – and simultaneously the effect of the massive deterritorialization linked to the violence of capitalism, the violence of the overhaul of identities, of the fracturing of these crystallizations of identification, which is certainly what we bring about in an analytic treatment but which here has been encountered in a traumatic and intrusive way. Solange Faladé said of Nelson Mandela, and also of herself, that they had made a cut in their history, but that this cut was not a break from their people and culture. There is, therefore, something impossible about restitution; an impossibility that is marked by the stiffness that today goes even so far as to contest the possibility of, for example, speaking about black people if one is not black oneself, about women if one is not a woman oneself, and so on. Behind all this is the dream of restitution, of a return to an origin that has been radically destroyed, when there might perhaps be something to be supported, as Gilroy indicated with regard to jazz, with

regard to something that survives in creolizing and which in a certain way irrigates cultural globalization.

On the other hand, there *is* something to be done. Benjamin said that history is always the history of the victors, and that it annuls the history of the defeated. This is what made him say that “there is no cultural document that is not also a document of barbarism.” Certainly Benjamin hoped for the revolutionary time when, in an instant (*Jetztzeit*), history would write the unwritten history of the defeated. So, if the return is the opportunity for the writing of this history, which moreover is starting to be done, but very little in France for example, little in the West, as shown by the formula uttered by Sarkozy in Dakar that “African man has not sufficiently entered history,” then to this we should add, “in the history of France,” because it is from this place, from the history of colonizers, that this history has been foreclosed. If the return is this opportunity, then the object that has always held a plugging function will not fail to indicate also the structural lack that stems from its first function, which is at once that of a ritual object and that of an art object. But if this return is accompanied by silence, it will be nothing more than a Band-Aid to relieve French guilt, and such a pseudo-restitution shall simply be yet another masquerade. What is at stake is the writing, finally, of this history foreclosed from the West.