

Politics of Natural History, or: How to Decolonize the Natural History Museum

International Conference, Technische Universität Berlin
September 6-7, 2018

Natural history museums preserve a considerable, yet often unacknowledged part of the world's colonial heritage. Their identity, collections, exhibitions and, importantly, much of their research activities are based on objects which underwent multifold translocations from colonized territories to museums in the Global North. Natural history museums took advantage of colonial endeavors and were deeply entangled in the exploitation of the colonies. However, natural objects are often displayed as "of Nature" – and framed within a narrative of Western scientific endeavors and rationality. The complex histories of acquisition as well as the political context of the discovery and translocation of objects are thus rendered invisible. The conference takes the growing tension between the entangled history of natural history museums and colonialism on the one hand and the invisibility of those entanglements on the other as a starting point for considerations about decolonization.

Art, archaeological and ethnological museums as well as physical-anthropological collections and their objects have been confronted with their political past. Scientific and political debates on contentious objects, on looted art and human remains are an inherent part of academic and institutional discourses. They have been brought to public attention, perhaps not always intentionally, by large-scale projects like the Berlin Humboldt Forum. These efforts have also led to the development of critical historical, juridical and political concepts and instruments for dealing with collections. It is only very recently that natural history museums and their zoological, mineralogical, paleontological, botanical and geological collections entered these debates.

In response to this awakening consciousness, the conference aims to reflect natural history objects and museums through critical debates on the colonial past as well as cultural and natural heritage. Our objective is to sharpen our analytical concepts for researching, negotiating and displaying colonial natural history objects. What might it mean to *decolonize* natural history museums? How can we discuss the politics of natural history and its collections constructively and productively? How can we historicize natural history objects and integrate their political and economic contexts in scientific, academic and museological practices? What are the practical, juridical, and scientific consequences of decolonizing natural history museums? How can we thereby develop new perspectives on the responsibilities and opportunities of museums of natural history as places of critical debate?

The conference focuses on:

- Translocations – processes of collection, acquisition and appropriation; natural history objects as sites of memory, desire and identity.
- Research – past and current impacts of colonialism on scientific and museum practices; efforts to decolonize data, collections and object handling.
- Discourses – scientific and political concepts of colonial natural history objects; cultural and natural heritage debates; postcolonial approaches to natural history museums.
- Exhibitions – in/visibility of the colonial entanglement; conceptual frameworks for integrating colonial provenances.

We welcome papers from both the humanities and social sciences – like history and sociology of science, cultural and museums studies – and the natural sciences, that present either historic or actual case studies on colonial objects/collections in order to reflect on processes of their decolonization. Furthermore, we warmly invite theoretical and conceptual considerations for critical reflection about decolonization in natural history museums. **Please send your abstract (max. 500 words) and CV to pan@mfn-berlin.de no later than April 15, 2018.**

For further information, please contact Yvonne Reimers (yvonne.reimers@mfn.berlin).

The conference is conceived and organized by the joint project “Dinosaurs in Berlin. *Brachiosaurus brancai* as an Icon of Politics, Science, and Popular Culture”

(<https://www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/insights/science-programmes/dinosaurs-berlin>):

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