

Workshop series "Recontextualising Bismarck"

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„Bismarck. Bismarck? Who is actually being honoured here? Different perspectives on the political figure Otto von Bismarck“

Prof. Dr. David Simo

Monuments in local, national and global narratives

As early as the 1960s, a colonial monument was toppled in Hamburg. In 1961, some students demanded that the university rectorate remove the sculpture of the colonial explorer and politician Wissmann, who had worked in the German colony of East Africa from 1881 to 1898. They justified their demand by saying that the monument belongs to compromising props of Wilhelmine colonialism. They also spoke of its dubious effect on fellow Africans. So after 1960, when decolonisation began and when more and more Africans came to Hamburg to study, one experiences a new awareness among some students and a critical view of German colonisation. After many years of controversy, the monument was toppled from its pedestal by protesting students in 1967 and shortly afterwards re-installed by the city. When it was pulled down again by the students in 1968, the city did not dare to put it back up. Since then it has been stored in a cellar and is only used as a citation in art exhibitions and dispositions.

The public or civic institutions and lobbies that erect monuments certainly have their intentions and design the motifs accordingly. But then they no longer have all the power over their semantisation. So monuments need a pedagogical discourse to maintain their semiotic power because they are constantly being interpreted which can lead to a total inversion of meaning. A hero monument thus becomes for the students a prop of a time in whose continuity they no longer want to live. Instead of creating identification, it generates discomfort and shame. But at least its existence does not make it so easy to forget the deeds it commemorates. The presence of the monument opposite the university forced people to come to terms with colonisation. Thus, the crime of colonisation always remained alive in the consciousness and promoted a perception of some forms of its repetition in the present. It is no coincidence that the monument was so hotly debated during the 1968s. These were the years when demonstrations were held against the Vietnam War but also against the Shah of Persia. The Vietnam War was seen as a contemporary manifestation of imperial desires and colonial crimes. The Shah of Persia was considered a symbol of neo-colonial relations that consolidate the disposal of the mineral resources of weaker states by a powerful imperial centre, namely the USA. The interpretation of the present and the past were mutually conditional and strengthened an awareness of the students' global responsibility. Therefore, solidarity became the key word. Against attempts to perpetuate imperial power relations, it was aimed for a globalisation of resistance. The politicisation of the youth therefore stemmed from the consciousness of continuity or homology between the colonial world and the new world order. In this context, the colonial monument played an important role insofar as its positively intended narrative is now read contrapuntally and becomes the objectification and visualisation of conditions that are no longer acceptable.

Paradoxically, the disappearance of the monument rather favours the forgetting of the past and its banishment into the archive.

After the First World War, the British had already removed the Wissmann Monument from its pedestal in Daressalam, where it had first been erected, and brought it to London before it was returned to Germany in 1922. It was bombed by the Allies during the Second World War and rebuilt after the war. Interestingly, the much larger and more visible Bismarck monument was not hit by any bombs. Coincidence? Perhaps? But in any case an irony of history where intention and coincidence meet and reveal a surprising meaning. Bismarck is, of course, a historical figure whose work affects areas in various fields in a problematic way which is why he can be analysed and assessed from several perspectives. We are particularly interested here in Bismarck as the organiser of the Congo Conference and the colonial politician. But here, too, one notices how many different political strings were coming together - then as now. The Congo Conference was an act of consolidating the newly founded nation state by avoiding a colonial policy that could have caused conflicts between colonial powers, which would have involved Germany in a new war too soon. The Congo Conference was thus a diplomatic act but at the same time motivated by national and domestic politics. It was also the prelude to the division of the world into different geographical camps, where peace in one camp did not exclude war in another camp, but even made it feasible. It was the prelude to the realisation of a geopolitical imperialist world order that had long been thought through philosophically, economically, religiously, culturally and scientifically. Since the Enlightenment and even before, in Europe the idea of a humanity that included all people from all parts of the world had been developed and romanticised. However, humanity was divided into different stages of approach to a teleology of the perfectibility of man, and the European was placed in the exposition of this ascendant movement, from which he claimed rights and tasks for himself. The self-evidence of these rights and tasks was the spiritual basis of this conference.

The idea of a single humanity had to integrate other ideas, which it was naturally contradictory to, such as 'the nation', race, gender and other already established institutionalised practices like state power, capitalist economic order, and so on, which led to intrinsic tensions, social problems, competitive struggles between states. Bismarck's political work is an attempt to find ways of resolving these contradictions in the short term, and in doing so he resorted to available means. What is meant by this is that Bismarck, even if he had an idiosyncrasy, is basically the product and syndrome of processes and ideas that still largely determine the coexistence of people and states today, and these ideas and processes determine the functioning of a global world order that continues to oscillate between solidarity and competition, right and wrong, humanity and cruelty, geopolitical calculation and commonality, equality and hierarchy, exploitation and assistance, combining them into a contradictory equilibrium. This can be observed in the determination and functioning of multilateral organisation.

What has changed somewhat is the emergence of a world public sphere where the economy of attention is not equally distributed, but where, even if only selectively, some voices from the periphery are imposing themselves and becoming unmistakable, as the Black Lives Matter movement has shown, which means that similar discursive practices that exist subliminally but are largely marginalised can no longer be completely suppressed in the centre either. This makes the complexity and interconnectedness of the local not only with the national but also with the global, and thus the continuity of the past in the present, more and more visible even to broad strata.

Is it then necessary to physically remove or even destroy the most visible signs of this interconnectedness, such as the Bismarck monument in Hamburg? I fear that by doing so, one would rather make the conspicuous witnesses and evidence of this interconnectedness disappear from view and encourage their forgetting. I think that one should rather integrate these props into a new artistic and discursive narrative.