

Decolonization and restitution

Ricardo Roque

ROQUE, Ricardo (ricardo.roque@ics.ulisboa.pt), Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9304-4103>.

INSTITUTIONS AND PRIVATE COLLECTORS IN EUROPE ARE CURRENTLY in possession of a great number of cultural artifacts, historical documents, and human remains, many of which result from Europe's invasive occupation of numerous territories in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. These collections are a troubling legacy of European imperialism and colonialism. The inquiry into the origins of this heritage in the past requires attention to the history and concept of colonialism. The inquiry into the ends of these collections as colonial legacy in the present demands reflection, in turn, about the history and concept of decolonization. The concept according to which the restitution of objects is a means to repair and to terminate colonialism implies the concept of "decolonization" is a historical figure of contemporary significance, an event to develop and deliver today. Thus, the temporal concept of decolonization as a process inherent to our present times, rather than located simply in the past, lays at the core of the project of restitution of colonial collections. In this sense, decolonization and restitution form a conceptual pair. However, "decolonization" is also, by now, a complex, amorphous and multifaceted concept. What it means in the context of the project of restitution, to which it seems intimately associated; how the pair "restitution and decolonization" connects historically, conceptually, ideologically; what methodologies might help to realize and bring these two processes closer, deeper, together, are questions that should prompt reflection.

The idea of a sovereignty transfer of state power from Western colonizers to new nations is the conventional meaning of the term decolonization. "The withdrawal from its former colonies of a colonial power; the acquisition of political or economic independence by such colonies" – thus, the *Oxford English Dictionary* summarizes the meaning of decolonization.¹ For historians, the validity of this notion might stretch back at least to the late 1700's, when several European settler colonists in the New World – such as the US, Brazil, and other Latin American countries – began to break ties with the metropole. This "first wave of decolonization", as some historians see it, led to new independent nations governed by former white settlers, who developed their own rapacious types of internal colonization of indigenous lands and peoples (Hopkins 2017; see also Kennedy 2016). However, most of Africa, Asia and the Pacific continued under direct European domination until 1945. After World War II, European colonial rule in these territories formally ended. Following more or less violent struggles, colonial sovereignty legally transferred to native ruling parties, giving birth to a plethora of new independent nation-states. In effect, it is with reference to this postwar development of indigenous self-determination leading to African and Asian independencies that the concept of "decolonization" as historical event

1 "Decolonisation", in <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=decolonisation> (last consulted February 2026). An overview of the history of the word is Raymond F. Betts (2012).

is most commonly used. Within this historically confined understanding of the term, some might see the concept of decolonization emptied of further significance when the former European colonies achieved statehood after 1945. The chronological closure of colonial state rule, in this narrow view, determines also the chronological end of decolonization.

This is not the understanding of many scholars and intellectuals who reject this correspondence, and claim that not only colonialism did not simply disappear as also decolonization is, in various ways, open-ended, unfinished, ongoing since the outset of independencies. Hence, the Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, for instance, influentially observed that, for the ex-colonized peoples, decolonizing “is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space” (Thiong’o 1986: 4). From this perspective, on the one hand, decolonization is an ideology and a combative process of sovereignty retrieval and reparation of past injustice that does not end with the birth of independent states; and, on the other, its potency as concept of wider social and theoretical import does not exhaust in the political domain of the state. In effect, over time the notion retained attractiveness and expanded considerably its conceptual scope to encompass facts of culture, language, mind, and so forth, well beyond the sphere of the state. More recently, moreover, especially since the 2010’s, decolonization rhetoric and a variety of decolonizing or “decolonial” approaches firmly took hold across a broad spectrum of subjects and fields in the social sciences, indigenous activism, arts, education, including in the museum and heritage sector.²

“Decolonization” is present-day reality; as both a historical process and as an ideology and critical concept cannot reduce to national independence or transfer of state sovereignty. The term might sometimes appear loosely defined, pointing to seemingly distinct things, but it seems clear “decolonization” no longer refers simply to past events of mid-20th-century anti-colonial struggles. It retains contemporary potency in the 2020’s and for now, at least, it is here to stay. It is within this expanded understanding of “decolonization” that one can understand the recent upsurge of restitution discourse in Europe. The indigenous cultural heritage that persists under the control of European former colonizers, in fact, constitutes a vivid and tangible manifestation of both the continuity of past colonial phenomena and the incompleteness of past decolonization. This material legacy of colonial extractivism in European soil indeed adds to the perception that decolonization, even at its most basic

2 See, for example, “Thematic section: decolonizing heritage” (2019), International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), available at: <https://www.iccrom.org/news/thematic-discussion-decolonizing-heritage> (last consulted February 2026); ICOM (2023); “Advancing decolonization in museums”, available at: <https://icom.museum/en/news/advancing-decolonisation-in-museums/> (last consulted February 2026).

meaning – say, as transfer of state sovereignty over colonized property initiated in the post-war years – is still unfinished. In effect, there is a power that the colonizers only reluctantly, or rarely, if ever, transferred, surrendered, or decolonized. This concerns the right to hold, possess, and control the manifold material items, once rightful possessions of “the colonized”, that the Europeans appropriated in the course of colonial activity and took away to their home countries. For decades, especially since European colonies became independent nations after World War II, authorities in Europe received recurrent requests (from either national representatives or indigenous communities) for the return of these materials that they generally downplayed, or simply ignored.³ Restitution requests often started as early as the establishment of national independencies (sometimes even before) and continued for decades.⁴ Recently, however, the attitude of the European authorities seems to be changing. Following the impact of the so-called “Macron Report”, by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, in 2018 (Sarr and Savoy 2018), restitution discourse came to occupy the frontstage of public debates and entered the discourse and government policies of several European countries. Hence, the historical novelty today perhaps is not the existence and recurrence of restitution demands from indigenous groups or post-colonial nations. What seems relatively new is the willingness expressed by a number of European governments since the late 2010’s to actually contemplate and accept these requests, and even to institutionalize the restitution of colonial heritage as a legal norm and an official policy. Restitution in this context seems to configure a kind of Western decolonizing mission; an opportunity for Europeans to actually accept and come to terms with the darkest legacies of national colonialisms, and thereby to fulfil the decolonization promises that former European (de-)colonizers failed to accomplish in the past. A trend towards the restitution of collections of colonial origins from Europe to its former colonies is therefore recognisable but this is no easy road. Contemporary restitution *praxis* is a tensional political force field. Perspectives and interests often collide. The multitude of actors involved, whether located in Europe, Africa, Asia, or elsewhere, face difficult challenges.

3 Of course, the case for restitution is not exclusive to colonial and decolonization histories. Restitution and reparation requests targeting colonial heritage are part of a broader and longer-duration global history of reparatory mechanisms introduced in international relations for the resolution of post-conflict situations, especially after World War II. See Barkan (2001); Bhabha, Matache and Elkins (2021).

4 Histories of continuing national restitution requests that take decades to find effective resonance in European circles include Indonesia, since 1949, examined by van Beurden, or Algeria, since 1962. Besides inter-state requests, indigenous repatriation claims have also a long history within settler nations – van Beurden (2024: 38-51); Slyomovics (2021: 202-219); Turnbull and Pickering (2010).

ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT RESTITUTION

I was motivated to write the reflection above after reading *The Empty Showcase Syndrome*, the new book by the Dutch restitution researcher and advocate, Jon van Beurden, who is also the force behind the news platform *Restitution Matters*.⁵ “Restitution matters”, to appropriate the author’s fortunate expression, may be another way to suggest “decolonization matters” but, to be fair, this is not a book about restitution and decolonization. The identification of difficult challenges in current restitution *praxis*, and the need to find ethically suitable responses to these challenges, is the main theme of the book. However, I think the question of how to consider conceptually, and how to develop methodologically, restitution and decolonization together is among the most interesting and difficult questions inspired by Jos van Beurden’s thought-provoking work. A premise of the project of restitution is that it constitutes a meaningful method, I suggested above, to continue and to produce decolonization in the present. But is the other way around possible? Could decolonization turn into a method to produce the project of restitution; or, can, or should, restitution itself be decolonized? How to (re)define decolonization in that context? How restitution enriches and self-transforms by means of suitable decolonizing methodologies – and what decolonizing methodologies should these be? These are broad questions to which, obviously, I have no ambition to respond in this text. Yet, they provide the specific angle from which I would like to share my reading of this book.

The Empty Showcase Syndrome examines the recent rise of restitution discourse in the Netherlands since 2020. The focus is mainly on Dutch colonial-era heritage from former Dutch Asian colonies, but it also pays occasional attention to other comparative examples that illuminate developments in restitution *praxis* elsewhere. The empirical basis are the author’s personal experiences as at once restitution researcher, observer, and advocate, from a Dutch standpoint. In this vein, van Beurden’s book is a work of reflexive activism that does not simply examine contemporary restitution phenomena. It aims to intervene in and transform the historical process it describes; it seeks to improve the (European) ethics and practice of restitution. The study starts from the suggestion (which inspires the book’s title) that regardless of their different interests and positions regarding restitution, all the actors (governments, museums, researchers, diaspora groups, ethnic minorities, restitution opponents, and so forth) share the same sense of fear or anxiety about absence or loss of colonial-era collections – a kind of “empty case syndrome”, analogous, the author conjectures, to that medical-psychological condition known as “empty nest syndrome” (van Beurden 2024: 12-13). This notion risks medicalizing and

5 Available at: <https://restitutionmatters.org/>.

flattening out the power disparities and different sociocultural perspectives in the process, namely those that pertain to indigenous and non-European cultural idioms. Moreover, the bulk of the book does not develop the notion initially advanced.

In fact, the ensuing argument, it seems to me, shifts course to become principally a passionate call for the “decolonization” of present-day restitution *praxis* in what concerns three main domains. These domains correspond to what the book identifies as the “most difficult questions in the restitution discourse” and revolve around three main issues. That is: (i) the direction and control of provenance research; (ii) knowledge about and control of private collections and antique dealers in Europe; and, finally, (iii) ownership and destination of the returned collections in the countries of origin. At the core of these three “tough questions”, the book’s argument implies, are problems of sovereignty and control over colonial collections on the path to restitution that demand resolution through some action of decolonization. “Restitution”, van Beurden observes, “is part of the broader concept of decolonization”; “decolonization is about dismantling unjust structures” (2024: 54, 75). These are statements, vague and dispersed through the book, suggesting the notion of decolonization (paired with restitution) is at once prevalent in the work and lacking in reflexive density and analytical clarity. In fact, I feel the concept of decolonization, though used to a rhetorical effect, is taken almost at face value. Given its significance to the argument, it could, perhaps it should, have been further interrogated and analytically elaborated upon.

Let’s consider, for instance, how the notion of “decolonization” appears in the arguments advanced for the three main questions identified above. Are those three problematic domains of restitution in need of decolonization, similarly, and how? The book argues vehemently for the “decolonization of provenance research” meaning “to give countries of origin the lead in researching their own ancestral property”, but in reality offers little clue about the direction, the contents, the methods that would follow and support this “radical change” (van Beurden 2024: 77). It is also unclear, for example, whether this argument is considering the delicate question – observed by the author, as I note below, only in relation to the control of collections – of who (the state? The communities? The descendants?) should control and lead such research in the countries of origin. The book criticizes opacity in the world of private collectors and antique dealers to argue that “[i]f collections in the private sector are not similarly decolonized [like collections in the public sector], the restitution process can never be fully completed” (van Beurden 2024: 11). What “similarly decolonized” represents in this context is not clear. One wonders, for instance, if this means European state power and restitution law should increase and expand over the private sector; or, instead, state jurisdiction and leadership over the control of collections in the private realm should be handed over to

the countries of origin (similar to what is proposed for provenance research). Finally, the book raises the interesting question of power “frictions” between the national state and local and regional authorities in what concerns the ownership of the returned collections. The prevailing “state-to-state approach” in restitution processes is apparently criticized because it “can be at the expense of old royal families, local authorities, as well as ethnic minorities in a former colony”, who “feel passed over and not heard or sufficiently included” (van Beurden 2024: 11). To be sure, decolonization is not an explicit proposal here. However, the reader is left wondering if the author’s critique here is also a call for the decolonization of restitution within the country of origin – namely, as regards the dominance of the national state over ethnic and other minority authorities. In effect, to make an argument on the significance of decolonization of or within decolonized countries would be a possibility, considering the common accusation of nationalist governments of post-colonial independent states having failed to accomplish decolonization and, instead, continue European forms of dominance in neo-colonial ways.

DECOLONIZING: A METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

The Empty Showcase Syndrome targets a general audience – “interested lay people and people from the heritage sector” (van Beurden 2024: 13) –, and this can explain in part the effort to avoid lengthy incursions into expert debates, literature, and terminology. Nonetheless, deeper engagement with this literature would have benefitted the argument and enhanced the book’s contribution to wider scholarship on colonial legacies. This is the case, in my view, as argued above, of the concept and problem of decolonization. The latter concept haunts this work as a conceptual shadow that the reader never clearly sees in the flesh. The book asks questions that, I believe, will be meaningful to many restitution actors and researchers. However, the question concerning restitution’s umbilical link to decolonization is implicit to the book’s inquiry but not openly addressed and conceptualized. To ask whether the process of restitution can or should be decolonized; how, or even if, restitution itself should become the object of transformative decolonizing methods are important questions provoked by this work – but these questions, ultimately, are left in the air. Perhaps the difficulties to address this question translate the deficit of elaboration on the complex conceptual pair decolonization-restitution. To consider decolonizing methodologies for restitution requires imaginative concept and methodology work. It can include but it hardly reduce, I believe, to a method of single-handed sovereignty transfer of control and leadership over research or over collections. To think through this difficult question, restitution actors would benefit from further engagement with a burgeoning field of discussion about “decolonizing methodologies” – to evoke here the indigenous

scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal term – concerning sensitive colonial pasts (Smith 1999).

Decolonizing methodologies, for sure, are not one, but many. Even if in principle committed to giving away Western political and epistemic hegemony; to empowering indigenous viewpoints and self-determination; or to finding ways to develop research relations of equitable and mutual significance, they can be varied and multifaceted. They are not also a straightforward and uncontentious matter. Historians and anthropologists in and/or outside Europe play a relevant part in this decolonizing challenge. “To escape from the representations and the lack of reflections about [the] past [of colonial heritage]”, Sarr and Savoy (2018: 35) observed, “requires a work of history as well as the imaginaries of a relation that, as well, needs to be decolonized”. A rigorous “work of history” can become a decolonizing method and I believe my own historical and ethnographic work on colonial collections trails in this direction (*e.g.*, Roque 2010, 2023). Empirically meticulous, conceptually informed, and critical histories of colonial collections (independent of utilitarian “provenance research” concerns) are also required to move the decolonizing methodological imagination forward in restitution work.

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