

DEMOCRATIZATION THROUGH VANDALISM: NEW ANSWER TO DEMANDS FOR RESTITUTION OF CULTURAL ARTEFACTS?

“You must understand what the Parthenon Marbles mean to us. They are our pride. They are our sacrifices. They are the supreme symbol of nobility. They are a tribute to democratic philosophy. They are our aspiration and our name. They are the essence of Greekness”.

Melina Mercouri (1)



Parthenon Marbles, Greece, now in British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

After a long period of studying the question of restitution of cultural artefacts, I thought I had heard all the arguments that could be advanced for or against restitution. However, I received a jolt of surprise when I saw an article by Michael Kimmelman entitled “Who Draws the Borders of Culture?” in which, among other contestable statements, he wrote concerning the dismemberment of the Parthenon and its scattering outside Greece, the following:

“Over the centuries, meanwhile, bits and pieces of the Parthenon have ended up in six different countries, in the way that countless altars and other works of art have been split up and dispersed among private collectors and museums here and there. To the Greeks the Parthenon marbles may be a singular cause, but they’re like plenty of other works that have been broken up and disseminated. The effect of this vandalism on the education and enlightenment of people in all the various places where the dismembered works have landed has been in many ways democratizing.” (2)

I must confess that I have never thought of the possibility that the act of vandalism by Lord Elgin which has resulted in decades of dispute between Greece and the United Kingdom could be justified in this way. My first reaction was to dismiss the article as one of the many strange articles we read on restitution but then I noticed that it was discussed by Paul Harford who correctly summed it up as “*pure imperialism*”.(3) However, Derek Fincham thought that Kimmelman “*manages to make some thoughtful observations*”. (4)

Kimmelman, I learnt, is Chief critic of the *New York Times*, a respectable American newspaper and so may be considered to be representing some parts of the American elite. The views he expressed must therefore be seen as a serious matter since the USA is home of many of the worlds important cultural objects.

Democratization through vandalism? If one follows the underlying logic of the argument it implies that any act of vandalism which spreads parts of the vandalized objects in the world could be seen as initiating a process of democratization in so far as it enables more people to view objects which might otherwise be intact in their original location and accessible only to those who visit the original location. If we were to accept this argument, there would be few cases of looting, vandalism or illegitimate appropriation, as far as cultural objects are concerned, that could not be defended as having a democratizing effect, if by democratizing one means making subjects accessible to more persons.

This way of reasoning would justify what most of us would consider as absolute evils: slavery and Nazism. Following Kimmelman’s logic, one could argue that the Atlantic slavery that caused the scattering of Africans in many countries of America was a democratizing process since it enabled other countries and peoples to participate in the African heritage which is also a heritage of mankind. Surely, an American author would shrink from justifying *ex post facto* the evils of slavery. Could he also see how his argumentation would shock the Greeks and others who view Lord Elgin’s vandalism as a destructive act that cannot be accepted?

More worrying is the effect that such arguments could have on others, especially the impressionable youth, both from the Western world and non-Western world. Convinced of striking a blow for democratization, some may feel they are doing humankind a service by trying to dismantle monuments or tearing down parts of objects such as the Statute of Liberty so that they could be seen by the rest of the world and not only by US Americans. Is Kimmelman still with us? Would he approve of people taking parts of the statute of Lincoln and other US national treasures in the name of a democratization process? What would he think if some young Africans went about taking pieces of looted African sculptures that

are available only in Western museums? They might think they are bringing authentic African culture to people in Africa who do not have the opportunity to visit museums in Amsterdam, Paris, London, Berlin, New York and Chicago.

Many arguments or statements presented by Kimmelman appear to distort the issues rather than bring enlightenment. Take for instance this statement: *“The Greek proposal that Britain fork over Elgin’s treasures has never involved actually putting the sculptures back onto the Parthenon, which started crumbling long before he showed up. The marbles would go from one museum into another, albeit one much closer. The Greeks argue for proximity, not authenticity. Their case has always been more abstract, not strictly about restoration but about historical reparations, pride and justice. It is more nationalistic and symbolic.”*

So the Greeks are motivated by nationalism in seeking to recover their Parthenon Marbles. What about the British? Are they nationalists by wanting to retain the objects in the British Museum, London? What motivates them in their stubborn refusal to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece despite UNESCO, United Nations and international conference resolutions? For Kimmelman, as apparently for many US Americans and the British, nationalists exist everywhere except in the US and Great Britain. (5) Kimmelman makes the British custodians of world heritage and not nationalists:

“The British Museum is Europe’s Western front in the global war over cultural patrimony, on account of the marbles. The pamphlets give the museum’s version for why they should stay in Britain, as they have for two centuries — ever since Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Sublime Porte at Constantinople, and with the consent of the ruling Ottomans (not to mention a blithe disregard for whatever may have been the wishes of the Greek populace), spirited them from the Acropolis in Athens. The pamphlet stresses that the British Museum is free and attracts millions of visitors every year from around the world, making the sculptures available to, and putting them in the context of, a wide swath of human civilization.”



Nefertiti, Egypt, now in Neues Museum, Berlin, Germany

Not surprisingly, Egypt and Zahi Hawass come under attack:

“It isn’t to belittle a deep-seated connection to such works to point out that claimants to far-flung patrimony may have various motives. When Zahi Hawass, Egypt’s chief archaeologist, who made the recent fuss about the Rosetta Stone, also demanded that Germany hand over Nerfertiti, the 3,500-year-old bust of Akhenaten’s wife, he chose the moment when the Neues Museum in Berlin opened with the bust as its main attraction.

This was just after Farouk Hosny, Egypt’s candidate to run Unesco, the United Nations cultural agency, was defeated in a vote that Egyptian leaders considered a diplomatic slap. Mr. Hawass used Egypt’s only real weapon on the international stage, its cultural patrimony, to lash out by proxy at the perceived enemies of Mr. Hosny’s candidacy and pander to the wounded egos of Egypt’s ruling elite.

It was a public relations gambit. Practically speaking, Egypt had to know there was no immediate shot at getting Nerfertiti back. The sculpture served in a passing form of political theater common these days, with Egypt playing plucky David to the West’s Goliath.”

Kimmelman seems to be aiming at creating a bad image of Zahi Hawass and Egypt. The requests for the return of the Rosetta Stone from the British Museum and the bust of Nefertiti from the Neues Museum, Berlin are described as

making fuss. I do not know what meaning the writer attributes to “fuss”. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* offers the following explanations, inter alia: “*excessive commotion, ostentatious or nervous activity, treatment of trifles as important, abundance of petty detail, busy oneself restlessly with trifles.*”

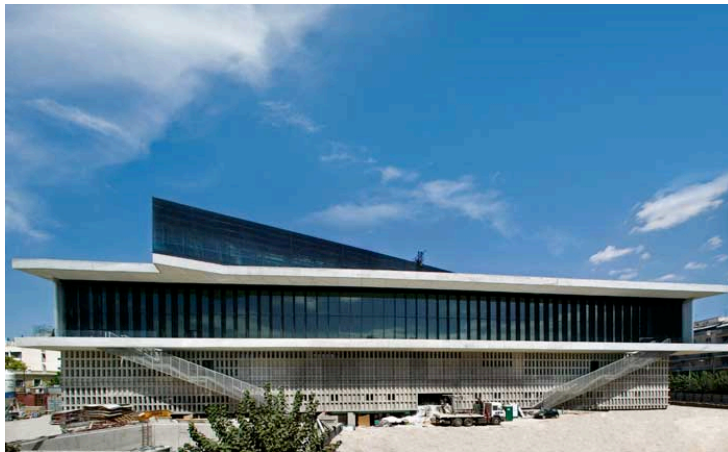
Whether one can describe a demand for the restitution of two cultural objects considered by many as important icons in Western museums as making fuss, is a matter we leave to the judgement of readers. Egypt’s demand for restitution is presented as motivated by revenge against those responsible for the failure of an Egyptian to secure the post of the Director-General at UNESCO. Kimmelman presents Egypt’s motivation as seeking “*to lash out by proxy at the perceived enemies of Mr. Hosny’s candidacy*” but when we look at the references the author gives, we do not find Germany and Great Britain presented as enemies of the Egyptian candidacy. For which countries then do Germany and Great Britain serve as proxies? True the author refers at the beginning of the article to “*the Rosetta Stone which Egyptian authorities just lately have again demanded that Britain return to Egypt*” but the reader is not told that the first demand was made long time ago. Egypt’s demands for restitution of the Rosetta Stone and the bust of Nefertiti are not from yesterday. When Ludwig Borchardt brought the bust to Germany in August 1913 it was kept secret for some ten years and not exhibited so as to avoid the Egyptians getting to know about it. Finally, in 1923, after a decade, the bust of Nefertiti was shown in a book by Borchardt “*Porträts der Königin Nofretete*”. After this publication, the Egyptians started demanding that the bust be sent back. But the Germans have refused to return the bust. (6)

Kimmelman is a man of the media. What did he expect the Egyptians to do when everybody was talking about Nefertiti in view of the opening of the Neues Museum, Berlin? Did he expect the Egyptians to remain silent as if the discussions about Nefertiti did not concern them? One could imagine that if the Egyptians had not said anything at the re-opening of the museum but did so only long after the event, the same critics would be saying: “*It is surprising that the Egyptians did not make their claim at the opening of the museum. It seemed at that time they had accepted the futility of such demands. But why are they now putting in a demand ?*” At whatever time the Egyptians repeat their demands, they will be suspected by some as being motivated by factors other than the fact that they seek the return of Egyptian objects taken away during the heyday of imperialism. It almost seems as if some could not imagine that the Egyptians are genuinely interested in Egyptian cultural objects. Instead of wondering about Egyptian motivations, Kimmelman and others could perhaps also concern themselves a little with the motivations of the British and the Germans in wishing to hold on to objects nobody disputes are Egyptian. They could also examine the arguments that have been advanced by the retentionists.

Kimmelman refers to the unforgettable Melina Mercouri having participated in a modern repatriation campaign which was part of a nationalist programme. He could have told his readers a little bit about the visit of the great actress to London and the disgraceful behaviour of David Wilson, the then Director of the British Museum. When the charismatic actress went to London to discuss the issue of restitution, David Wilson described as cultural fascists all who advocated the return of the Marbles to Athens. (7) It is very difficult for a non-Westerner to understand the motivation behind insulting a person or people whose cultural artefacts you are holding. Nevertheless, the politics of insults seem to continue. We have had the present Director of the British Museum saying that in removing the rest of the Parthenon Marbles to the New Acropolis Museum, the Greeks were following in the steps of Lord Elgin.(8)

His partiality for the British or rather the dislike of the Greek position goes so far that Kimmelman even attacks the New Acropolis Museum as “*forbidden and frankly ugly*”, not without first taking a swipe at the Greek economy:

“For their part the Greeks, before their economy collapsed, finally opened the long-delayed New Acropolis Museum last year to much fanfare: it’s an up-to-date facility, forbidding and frankly ugly outside, but airy and light-filled inside, a home-in-waiting for the marbles, whose absence is clearly advertised by bone-white plaster casts of what Elgin took, alongside yellowed originals that he left behind.”



New Acropolis Museum, Athens

It is true that the availability or otherwise of adequate museums may be relevant to a discussion on restitution but is the beauty or elegance of the building itself relevant? If the new museum which Kimmelman himself describes as “up-to-date facility” is ugly, what does he say about the British Museum’s architectural design? Nothing. The article puts the Greeks and the Egyptians under scrutiny

for daring to demand restitution from the British. Their motivations must be examined. The assumption of the whole article is that the Greeks and Egyptians must establish their worthiness in reclaiming their cultural objects. The British who are holding onto the contested objects need not establish any grounds for their conduct in refusing restitution. In other words the burden of proof is put on those seeking repatriation

Kimmelman's comment on the new museum at Athens recalls that of Neil MacGregor who after the opening of the New Acropolis Museum declared that the location of the Parthenon Marbles was never an issue:

"The real question is about how the Greek and British governments can work together so that the sculptures can be seen in China and Africa". (9)

Kimmelman's statement that the Greeks do not propose putting the marbles in the Parthenon is an echo of the insulting remark by MacGregor that the Greeks were following the steps of Elgin. Kimmelman declares that:

"The Greek proposal that Britain fork over Elgin's treasures has never involved actually putting the sculptures back onto the Parthenon, which started crumbling long before he showed up. The marbles would go from one museum into another, albeit one much closer. The Greeks argue for proximity, not authenticity. Their case has always been more abstract, not strictly about restoration but about historical reparations, pride and justice. It is more nationalistic and symbolic."

Neil MacGregor put this more directly:

"The Greek government has simply continued Elgin's practice and removed the rest [of the Parthenon Marbles] now from the building, because you can't see them on the building. When those sculptures came to London, for the first time they were at a height where people could see them and they were in a place where tens, hundreds of thousands of people could see these were great objects" (10).

Kimmelman, like most retentionists is anxious to present any argument that could remove the question of ownership from restitution discussions and does not shrink from statements which cannot stand close examination:

"Art is something made in a particular place by particular people, and may serve a particular function at one time but obtain different meanings at other times. It summons distinct feelings to those for whom it's local, but ultimately belongs to everyone and to no one.

We're all custodians of global culture for posterity.

Neither today's Greeks nor Britons own the Parthenon marbles, really."

Are we to take seriously a declaration that art "*ultimately belongs to everyone and to no one*"? Can we affirm that a work of Picasso "*belongs to everyone and to no one*"? How came that some persons are selling and buying for millions works of Picasso that *belong to everyone and to no one*"? The absurdity of Kimmelman's statement is obvious. Without rights of ownership and control we could hardly have any dealings with art objects.

Kimmelman is obviously under the spell of James Cuno whose ideas he conveys throughout the article without acknowledgement. In order to deny the Egyptians of their rights to Egyptian cultural objects like the bust of Nefertiti and the Rosetta Stone, Cuno goes so far as to deny that there is any connection between present Egyptians and ancient Egyptians:

"What is the relationship between, say, modern Egypt and the antiquities that were part of the land's Pharaonic past? The people of modern-day Cairo do not speak the language of the ancient Egyptians, do not practice their religion, do not make their art, wear their dress, eat their food, or play their music, and do not adhere to the same kind of laws or form of government the ancient Egyptians did." (11)

Once we apply the criteria enumerated here to France, Germany, Great Britain and other States we realize immediately that hardly any modern peoples eat the same food as their ancestors, follow the same religion as their forbearers or dance to the same music as their ancestors and on this basis could be denied any right to cultural objects found on their lands.

Kimmelman writes as if the United Nations, UNESCO and several international conferences had not requested the return of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. UNESCO is mentioned only to be blamed for the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas because the organization allegedly refused to authorise the export of artefacts. The writer does not seem to understand the role of UNESCO in cultural matters nor does he appear to be aware of the fact that it is for governments to authorise or deny the export of cultural objects from their territory.

Kimmelman who appreciates the spread of democracy through vandalism totally ignores the fact that the majority of the British people have always spoken in favour of returning the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles to Greece. Recent polls by the Guardian have confirmed this 94.8 5% were in favour of returning the Marbles to Athens and only 5.2% were against. (12)

Do people like Kimmelman really care about the opinion of the British people or indeed of any people? They talk about democracy but are the first to trample on the democratic rights of others or support those responsible for such violations. It is obvious that depriving any people of their cultural artefacts is a violation of their human right to cultural development and to enjoyment of their cultural objects.

Kimmelman does not mention the Benin bronzes, the Ethiopian Treasures and Asante Gold Treasures. Perhaps he realized it would be rather difficult to sell the idea that despite the violence in the invasion and looting of Benin (Nigeria) in 1897, Maqdala (Ethiopia) in 1868, Kumasi (Ghana) in 1874 by the British Army, the spread of the national treasures can be considered as democratization process. He surely would not want to say to the Nigerians, Ethiopians and Ghanaians: *“It is true that your cultural objects have been taken with violence in unjustified wars prompted by the greed of the British imperialists. But you should appreciate that your cultures are now well-known in the world and the spread of those objects has made them accessible to a large number of people rather than to a small ruling elite. A truly democratic enjoyment of culture.”*

If the Parthenon Marbles, the Rosetta Stone, the bust of Nefertiti and the Benin bronzes were returned to their countries of origin, the museums would still have more than enough objects to display. Indeed most of them have space problems and cannot display the many objects kept in depots. British, French, German and other Western cultures can survive the departure of the looted, stolen or disputed artefacts. So who is holding back all these artefacts against the will of the owners and against the will of their own people? There is small cultural elite, including some experts and museum directors who have built their careers and lives around such artefacts and cannot contemplate, even for a second, the departure of such objects. It is the kind of elite that has developed its own values, far removed from those of the average citizens. It is the elite whose values would justify paying \$ 106 m for a painting in a world where many have to live on less than \$1 a day. (13)

Since Kimmelman is interested in motivation research, one may wonder what his motivation was in writing his article at the time he did. Was he perhaps motivated by the Greek economic problems? He also failed to mention or refer to the Cairo Conference on restitution which took place a few weeks before he wrote his article. (14) What was the motivation here? After all, that conference dealt directly with the topic he was writing about and there has not been of recent any meeting as significant as the meeting called by Zahi Hawass of Egypt. Was this a result of the arrogant position that those who met at Cairo were of no significance and deserve no attention?

It is very sad that writers such Kimmelman do not use their important positions to contribute to finding solutions to questions of restitution but take the side of those who are alleged to have deprived others of their rights and in the process make absurd statements, disingenuous arguments and unsupported assertions. One could point at the thousands of Egyptian artefacts that are in Western museums and the absence of any French, British or German cultural artefacts in Egyptian museums. One could urge parties contesting cultural objects to submit to arbitration or judicial settlement.

It is not for those of us who oppose the retentionism of the major museums to advise on how to present arguments in favour of an outmoded ideology of previous centuries. But we are surely entitled to hope and pray that certain standards are observed. The article “Who Draws the Borders of Culture” does no good service to the cause of the retentionists.

Once again, Kimmelman’s article demonstrates that when it comes to restitution of cultural objects, many in find it difficult to remain fair and to refrain from absurdities, insults and contempt for the demanders of restitution whose only offence is to dare ask for the return of their stolen/looted or illegitimately acquired cultural objects.

Kwame Opoku, 16 May 2010.

NOTES

1. <http://www.melinamercourifoundation.org>.

2. Michael Kimmelman, *Who Draws the Borders of Culture?* THE NEW YORK TIMES, May 4, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05> All citations of Kimmelman are from this article. Readers may be interested in 2009 coverage of the museum by the New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com...>

3. Paul Barford, <http://paul-barford.blogspot.com>

<http://paul-barford.blogspot.com>

See excellent comments at <http://archaeologymatters>

4. Derek Fincham, <http://illicit-cultural-property.blogspot.com>

5. K. Opoku, “Is Nationalism such a Dangerous Phenomenon for Culture and Stolen/Looted Cultural Property?” <http://www.modernghana.com>

6. Gert v. Pacezensky and Herbert Ganslmayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause; Europa - Schatzhaus der “Dritten Welt”*, C.Bertelsmann, München, 1984; see also, Culture and Development, www.nofretete-geht-auf-reisen.de/echronol.htm
K.Opoku, “Nefertiti, Idia and other African Icons in European Museums: The Thin Edge of European Morality”, <http://www.modernghana.com>

7. Christopher Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, Verso, London, New York, 2008, pp. 97-99

I found in this useful book, a report on an interview said to have been given by David Wilson, then Director of the British Museum who threw the accusation of “nationalism” and “fascism” at the supporters of restitution. His statements are so remarkable in their violence and lack of logic that I feel everyone should read them:

“In a BBC television discussion on 15 June 1985, Sir David Wilson, Director of the British Museum, was invited to contrast his opinions with those of Melina Mercouri. Sir David had already exhibited a certain lack of gallantry when, on an earlier visit to London, Mrs. Mercouri had expressed a wish to visit the Museum and view the marbles. On that occasion he had said publicly that it was not usual to allow burglars 'to case the joint' in advance. But once before the cameras he easily improved on this ill-mannered exaggeration. 'To rip the Elgin Marbles from the walls of the British Museum' he said, 'is a much greater disaster than the threat of blowing up the Parthenon'. This might have been thought hyperbolic, if Sir David had not gone on to say, in response to a mild question about the feasibility of restitution:

Oh, anything can be done. That's what Hitler said, that's what Mussolini

said when he got Italian trains to run on time The interviewer, David Lomax, broke in to say: You are not seriously suggesting there's a parallel between

Sir David was unrepentant:

Yes, I am. I think this is cultural fascism. It's nationalism and it's cultural danger. Enormous cultural danger. If you start to destroy great intellectual institutions, you are culturally fascist.

LOMAX: What do you mean by cultural fascist?

WILSON: You are destroying the whole fabric of intellectual achievement. You are starting to erode it. I can't say you are destroying, you are starting to erode. I think it's a very, very serious, thing to do. It's a thing you ought to think of very careful, it's like burning books. That's what Hitler did, I think you've to be very careful about that.

LOMAX: But are you seriously suggesting that the people who want the Elgin Marbles to go back to Greece, who feel there's an overwhelming moral case that they should go back, are guilty of cultural fascism?

WILSON: I think not the people who are wanting the Elgin Marbles to go back to Greece if they are Greek. But I think that the world opinion and the people in this country who want the Elgin Marbles to go back to Greece are actually guilty of something very much approaching it, it is censoring the British Museum. And I think that this is a bad thing to do. It is as bad as burning books”.

This is an extraordinary performance by a Director of the British Museum. One can sympathize with his desperation in face of the mounting pressure to return the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles to Athens and the great presence of the unforgettable Melina Mercouri in London. But can anyone excuse his shameful performance?

8. K.Opoku, “The Amazing Director of the British Museum: Gratuitous Insults as Currency of Cultural Diplomacy?”<http://www.modernghana.com>

9. Culturegrrrl [MacGregor Whopper: Greek Government "Simply Continued Elgin's Practice"](#)

10. Culturegrrrl.*ibid.*

11. James Cuno, *Who owns antiquity? Museums and the battle over our ancient heritage*,p.9, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008. See also, K. Opoku, “Do Present-Day Egyptians Eat the same Food as Tuthankhamun? Review of James Cuno’s Who Owns Antiquity? <http://www.modernghana.com>

12. Aida Edemariam “How G2's Parthenon marbles poll went global”, <http://www.elginism.com> See <http://www.parthenonuk.com> for more information on the Elgin Marbles.

13. See comments on the sale by Tom Flynn, “*Annus mirabilis* for bankers, *annus horribilis* for those who bailed them out” <http://tom-flynn.blogspot.com/search/label/Picasso>

14. K. Opoku – “Reflections on the Cairo Conference on Restitution: Encouraging Beginning”, <http://www.museum-security.org>