Review

Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism

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isha Azoulay London, Verso, 2019, xvi+634pp.

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On 21 September 2020, the *New York Times* reported that Congolese Pan-African activist Mwazulu Diyabanza was scheduled to appear in a Paris courtroom to answer charges of attempting to steal artifacts from French museum collections. The most recent charges stem from a visit to the Quai Branly Museum as well as an earlier visit to the Museum of African, Oceanic, and Native American Arts, in which Diyabanza allegedly sought to repatriate artifacts that he claims had been looted by French colonial authorities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Diyabanza's goal was not really to steal the artifacts; instead, he livestreamed each of the attempted thefts in an effort to draw attention to the vast number of African artifacts that remain in European collections, despite French President Emmanuel Macron's assurances in 2017 that the vast majority of them would be returned. As an effort to draw attention to the African artifacts still housed in French museums, Diyabanza's actions are very much in the spirit of Ariella Azoulay's *Potential History*.

This book demands that readers undertake the paradoxical and difficult task of unlearning something that has become a pervasive feature of their lives, namely imperialism. According to Azoulay, an initial problem with unlearning imperialism is that for most of us, our thinking and acting—indeed, our very being-in-the-world—is conditioned by imperialism. Unlearning imperialism is a paradoxical task because we must first learn how imperialism works by rendering its working explicit so that we might unlearn it. We must learn how imperialism has made us who we are if we are to have any hope of unlearning it. The task of learning something in order to unlearn it is paradoxical, but it is also difficult because those of us in academia have been conditioned to strive for mastery: we must demonstrate mastery of a subject before we can progress, and this is how education typically works from the earlier grades up through graduate school. Azoulay writes that what motivated her to write this book was her attempt to unlearn her Israeli identity in order to imagine what it might have meant to have been an Algerian or Palestinian Jew (pp. xiii–xiv). Although pedagogical concerns are not an explicit

part of *Potential History*, thinking about the institutional norms that govern learning provide a useful example of how imperialism conditions us to think and act, for both mastery and progress are key concepts of imperialism, according to Azoulay.

Readers familiar with Azoulay's previous work know that her critical theory is grounded in photography and the aesthetic realm more generally, and *Potential History* is no exception. This is a book that critiques visual culture, whether it is manifest in archival photography or museum objects. But this book does much more, and this is both its great strength and a source of some weaknesses. Whatever else it is, this is a big book, and it is prone to some of the errors that are common to sweeping histories. While I will briefly discuss some of these errors below, readers should keep in mind that the great virtue of this book is that it prompts us to think about imperialism in profoundly new ways.

There is an irony here, because Azoulay is deeply suspicious of the category of 'the new'. She casts a critical eye on novelty, at least insofar as it is thought to provide the key to modern narratives of progress. Azoulay states her aim early in the book: 'My assumption is that the human condition, consisting of a diversity of political species and necessarily diverse worlds, is at the same time the object of imperialism's assaults and the bedrock resistance to imperialism. It is this tension and struggle that I assume and explore' (p. 31). Imperialist accounts of progress depend upon a process whereby various ways of life and cultural forms deemed traditional are cast aside as outmoded. Azoulay terms these cultural forms that preexist imperialism 'worldly', hence she characterizes imperialism as imposing 'unworldly' ways of living and being upon those subject to it. Imperial narratives of progress are institutionalized in archives and art museums that render the expressions of ostensibly 'outmoded' and 'backward' cultures as documents and objects to be collected and studied. Archives and museums provide key supports for these imperialist histories that in turn depend upon narrative accounts of progress. Indeed, modernity itself is conditioned by imperialism: the drive to empire is not just one feature of modernity among others; on Azoulay's account, it is its engine.

Azoulay proposes a synchronic rather than a diachronic, progressive account of history. On her synchronic view, resistance to imperialism takes various forms, having to do with the attempt to recover and repair worlds that have been obliterated by imperialism—for imperialism is a world-destroying machine. 'Thus, rather than an "end" to come for the sake of a future vision, I conceive of a future vision, I conceive of the human condition as an undefeatable condition that does not need to be invented, but rather asks not to be ignored for the sake of future utopias. We do not require more grandiose motions forward, but rather need slowed-down spaces for repairing, providing reparations, and reviving precolonial patterns and arrangements ungoverned by Man' (p. 31). In other words, resistance consists in salvaging the remains of worlds already assumed lost to the ravages of

imperialism, rather than various attempts to found a new order to replace the imperial one.

In addition to the incalculable devastation wrought in terms of lost lives and mangled bodies, empire works through erasure of material worlds and the identities that these material worlds support. Agents of empire erase worlds through the establishment of political and academic institutions that advance imperial aims, the two most important of which are the museum and the archive. After all, scholars and soldiers are both agents of empire. Museums appropriate artifacts that perform definite functions within traditional societies and transmute them into artistic objects that are now meaningful only within the context of an art historical account, their utilitarian or ritual function within the traditional world of its origin forgotten. This means that imperial violence is a condition for the possibility of the institution of art. 'In his advocacy of the restitution of the looted objects from Benin, Kwame Opoku refutes legal claims to ownership of these objects by Western museums, as well as the connoisseurs' approach that recognizes art in looted objects rather than the genocidal circumstances of their museal display, making the blood of the people who were expropriated of these objects invisible to them ... Imperial violence is not secondary to art but constitutive of it' (p. 59). Museums serve to whitewash the violence that made it possible for these artifacts to be included in their collections.

Archives serve much the same function for history as museums do for art. Historical archives replace previous ways of ordering knowledge with imperial ways of knowing. Archives replace traditional taxonomies through the proliferation of precise taxonomies that destroy traditional worlds of meaning. 'Imperial taxonomy originated in the destruction and denial of previous systems of classification that it replaced with the incessant impulse to reclassify everything. Everything and everyone must have its precise place in endless lists, indexes, compendiums, and repertoires. Such a place *in the archive* is meant to supersede people's place *in a world* previously shared with others' (p. 173). Much like art museums, imperial history practices its mania for classification in order to erase material worlds. Azoulay calls for the institution of a potential history which short-circuits this work of erasure.

I have two worries about the book. The first is that 'imperialism' seems to be defined much too broadly to encompass political forms that differ in important ways from imperialism, and it is not always clear whether the analysis of imperialism is historical, political, cultural, or something else. Slavery and settler colonialism are lumped together with earlier forms of colonization under the rubric of 'imperialism'. Furthermore, Azoulay claims that imperialism institutes a progressive account of history, but it does not follow that all progressive historical frameworks are imperialist. While there is no doubt that various forms of oppression, such as slavery, settler colonialism, and genocide, are related to one another, some more conceptual clarity is needed so that we can recognize both the

similarities and the differences among them. Lumping these together under the term ‘imperialism’ obscures important distinctions. My second worry is that the basic distinction between traditional worldliness and imperial worldlessness that structures the book may lead to nostalgia for a pure, pre-imperial world that fails to acknowledge how imperialism has structured the world in ways that make it impossible to return to the past. Despite these reservations, *Potential History* is an excellent book that should appeal to political theorists, art historians, and other scholars interested in postcolonial studies.

Reference

To Protest Colonialism, He Takes Artifacts from Museums, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/arts/design/france-museum-quai-branly.html>. Accessed 23 September 2020.

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