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**Recensão a *The Brutish Museum:
The Benin Bronzes, Colonial
Violence and Cultural Restitution*,
de Dan Hicks**

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Dan Hicks

*The Brutish Museum: The Benin
Bronzes, Colonial Violence
and Cultural Restitution*

London: Pluto Press, 2020,
345 pp. plus illustrations

João Figueiredo*

Much has already been written about Dan Hicks' *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, published by Pluto Press in 2020. Highly acclaimed by *The New York Times*, *Nature*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Review of Books*, the book offers us a concise, well-documented dissection of the looting and razing of Benin City in 1897, as well as a host of new concepts that help us unpack the enduring legacies of imperial ultraviolence. Amongst these, some of the most stimulating are the ones related to what Hicks defines as “the weaponization of time itself”¹, namely, “chronopolitics”², “white projection”³ and “*Chronocene*”⁴. This conceptual assemblage expands Johannes Fabian’s critique of anthropology’s denial of ‘coevalness’ to the ‘objects’ of ethnography⁵, allowing Hicks to better capture

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1 Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 7.

2 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 16, 113, 178-193.

3 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 46, 222.

4 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 225.

5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

how ethnographic museums work as a white supremacist “temporal technology”⁶.

According to his argument, white projection was first and foremost an elaborate form of blame-shifting, “part time-warp, part head-trip”⁷, that allowed the British to justify their unprovoked military interventions as retaliations or “punitive expeditions”⁸. With great care, Hicks exposes how, within the walls of Western museums, “ancestral skulls” were turned into “war trophies of head-hunters” and African sculptures into “fetishes” that demanded “human sacrifice” and “cannibalism”⁹. Misrepresented in this manner, these objects provided a vast reserve of *casus belli* that European empires could mobilise to justify land grabs and masquerade them as ‘humanitarian’ interventions¹⁰. Concomitantly, as the author demonstrates, ethnographic museums also converted these objects into “scientific proof that there could be no civilisation outside of white Euro-America”¹¹. Building upon Ann Laura Stoler’s work¹², Hicks argues that this additional step implied the naturalization and projection into the past of the ongoing state of “ruination” caused in Africa by European colonialism¹³. In a cruel twist of irony, the same objects that were *forced* to justify military interventions often ended up being exhibited in the British museums as “relics” and “antiquities” of the Kingdoms and cultures that the British military destroyed for ‘humanitarian’ reasons. Concluding his thoughts on how time itself was turned into “a war zone”¹⁴, Hicks proposes that our epoch is best understood as the “*Chronocene* – an epoch of placing

6 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 125.

7 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 84.

8 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 42.

9 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 45.

10 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 57-78.

11 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 45.

12 Ann Laura Stoler, “Imperial Debris: Reflection on Ruins and Ruination”, *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008): 191-219; and Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

13 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 193.

14 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 190.

others into other epoch”¹⁵ and that museums reify this ‘othering’ therefore performing the “borderwork of empire”¹⁶.

A second set of concepts helps Hicks to grapple with the ‘pure negativity’ that Aimé Césaire foresaw at the core of western museums: “After all, by itself the museum is nothing. It means nothing. It can say nothing”¹⁷. This other assemblage is composed of the concepts “Euro-pessimism”¹⁸, “necrography”¹⁹, and “necrology”²⁰ and is loosely inspired by the work of Achille Mbembe²¹. Euro-pessimism is a much-needed corrective to the over-enthusiastic, self-serving language that can be found in the ‘decolonization’ programs Western institutions such as art galleries, museums, and universities pay lip service to²². As Hicks dryly remarks, “the theft of an object by a European is a negative act”²³ and this fact cannot be changed by any amount of interpretative, creative, or mediative efforts. This implies, adopting the author’s Euro-pessimistic viewpoint, that provenance research or cultural biographies of objects simply reproduce the foundational violence at the origin of non-Western collections, leaving our white projections and extractivist appetites unchallenged and unchecked. Hicks sees this as problematic in both political and epistemological terms. The alternative he envisages is, of course, cultural restitution, a process that galleries, museums, and universities can prepare for by fostering the ‘necrological’ study of their collections. Necrographies are defined by the author as “death-histories, histories of loss – of the ‘primitive accumulation’ of museums”²⁴ – that take into account that the relationships established within Western museums are “constituted by separations

15 Hicks, *The British Museums*, 225.

16 Hicks, *The British Museums*, 12, 125, 150-151.

17 Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Éditions Présence Africaine, 1955) *apud* Hicks, *The British Museums*, xi.

18 Hicks, *The British Museums*, xii-xiii.

19 Hicks, *The British Museums*, 25-36, 153.

20 Hicks, *The British Museums*, 152-165.

21 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

22 Hicks, *The British Museums*, 19.

23 Hicks, *The British Museums*, 32.

24 Hicks, *The British Museums*, xiv.

not entanglements”²⁵. Until “new kinds of co-operation and partnership between Europe and Africa”²⁶ materialize, this forensic labour is understood by Hicks to be the only meaningful action that can be promoted by Western institutions hosting the spoils of empire.

Despite its focus on ultraviolence, Euro-pessimistic stance, and realist appraisal of the negativity at the core of key Western institutions, *The Brutish Museums* is not an ominous, depressing book. On the contrary, Hicks manages to capture the enthusiasm for restitution aroused by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr’s *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*²⁷, adding momentum to the debate over the return of looted heritage to the African Continent. How will its impact be felt in Portugal? It is hard to say yet whether Hicks’ argument will be reduced to a plea for the restitution of the few looted bronzes hosted by Portuguese institutions (the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa* and the *Museu Grão Vasco*, according to the author), or recognized in all its complexity. The new concepts showcased in *The Brutish Museums* would be a major addition to the historiography of the early stages of the Third Portuguese Empire, especially the period that came to be known as the “transition from the slave trade to the licit trade”²⁸. If you focus on this epoch, Portuguese archives provide countless examples of white projection, blameshifting, and land-grabbing, enslavement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples being justified with ‘humanitarian’ reasons. That these chronopolitics are yet to be connected to the birth of the first ‘modern’ colonial museums, in Lisbon, Coimbra, Porto and Figueira da Foz during the 1880s-90s proves how much can be learnt from Hicks’ work on the British context. Furthermore, in the historiography on the Portuguese Empire, the ultraviolence that characterized the occupation of the African territories claimed by Portugal in the wake of the

25 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 28.

26 Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, xiv.

27 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 2018).

28 Roquinaldo Ferreira, “The Conquest of Ambriz: Colonial Expansion and Imperial Competition in Central Africa”, *Mulemba* 5, n.º 9 (2015): 221-242.

Berlin Conference (1884-85) is not understood as an acceleration of trends that had started during the Liberal readjustment to abolition (*c.* 1836-1878). However, as Hicks proves, blaming the Africans for the trade in enslaved persons was just the first link of a long chain of white projections that paved the way for the settler-colonization of Africa. A necrology of Portuguese museum collections of non-European origin would provide a better account of how this came to pass and constitute the basis for a more promising cooperation between Portugal and the countries it formerly colonized.

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