**John Torpey** 00:05

Cultural restitution claims seem to be increasing in the news lately; most recently with the return of some of the Benin Bronzes, thousands of pieces looted from the kingdom of Benin in the late 19th century, and now being returned to Nigeria, which it became a part of, by museums in Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and as of this past week, even the Metropolitan Museum of Art here in New York. And of course, other claims have made headlines over the past decades, most famously those by Greece, for the British Museum to return the Parthenon or Elgin marbles.

**John Torpey** 00:46

Welcome to International Horizons a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that bring scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 01:05

Today, we discuss claims for the return of cultural heritage objects around the world with Pierre Losson, a postdoctoral fellow at the Italian Academy at Columbia University, who recently received his PhD in political science here at the Graduate Center. His dissertation focused on the political motivations for cultural restitution claims by the governments of Colombia, Peru, and Mexico.

**John Torpey** 01:33

Pierre is also a practitioner in international arts and culture management, having worked as a French cultural attache in Latin America for 10 years and with the Americas Society/Council of the Americas here in New York. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today on International Horizons, Pierre Losson.

**Pierre Losson** 01:58

Thanks a lot for your invitation.

**John Torpey** 02:00

Well, it's a very interesting topic, and I look forward to the conversation. So we mentioned a couple of the most, best known cases in the introduction. But perhaps you could tell us a little more about the historical background of how some of these works ended up in museums in Europe in the United States, to give a kind of basis for this discussion to some of our listeners.

**Pierre Losson** 02:26

Sure, there are different origins for the collections that are in dispute today, and all seem increasingly unacceptable in the eyes of those who want to return all these objects. Maybe I would identify four broad phenomena or contexts in which objects were removed from their original context. And of course, these phenomena often intertwine, right?

**Pierre Losson** 02:56

So the first one would be loot from wars and conquest; and loot is as old as war itself, so it's definitely not a recent phenomenon. We, for example, see it with the Benin Bronzes that were taken from Benin City in the late 19th century during a so-called punitive expedition by the British Imperial Army into what would become Nigeria today. We also see it for instance, in one of the cases that I studied, which is Montezuma's feather head. It's a beautiful object in feathers, in Quetzal feathers, that was taken from Mexico in the early 16th century, during the Spanish conquest. But we also see it with much more recent examples with the case of artworks that were seized by the Nazis from their Jewish owners. So I guess that would be the first the first origin.

**Pierre Losson** 03:55

A second origin origin that is related to armed conflict is the entire colonial period. And here the example could be the Parthenon marbles, which were taken from Athens when Greece was not an independent state, but a province of the Ottoman Empire.

**Pierre Losson** 04:13

The third origin for this collection is scientific research. I studied how an American archaeologist, Hiram Bingham, removed objects from Machu Picchu when he 'discovered' Machu Picchu in the early 20th century. I saw a similar context in Colombia, for instance, in San Agustin, where it is a German archaeologist who took away statues from San Agustin.

**Pierre Losson** 04:47

So again, those situations often combined with colonialism and imperialism, because those objects were taken at a moment when newly independent states did not always have the means to impose the norms they had already passed on the protection of heritage.

**Pierre Losson** 05:10

And in the same context, we also see the origin of vast collections of human remains from native and indigenous people, particularly in settler states, like the US and Canada, and Australia.

**Pierre Losson** 05:24

And maybe the fourth origin for this collection would be the development of the habit of collecting. Objects were taken, sometimes bought, sometimes stolen, directly to join private and/or public collections. And here we see how objects, that had a social or religious use in their original context, came to be considered as objects of art, appreciated much more for their aesthetic value than for their anthropological use. So those would be, I think, the four main origins of these collections and why they are disputed today.

**John Torpey** 06:07

Interesting. That's helpful. I mean, I wonder if you could say a little bit more about why you think this is in the news now. I mean, it's been in the news for a while; I wrote a book about, you know, the idea of reparations fifteen some years ago, and, you know, these kinds of issues were floating around these issues about kind of dealing with past wrongs, of which this is one species sort of. So, why is the Metropolitan Museum suddenly giving back some of its -- some, I think, not all, from what I understand the paper -- of its holdings from the Benin bronzes (and forgive my pronunciation of Benin).

**Pierre Losson** 06:50

Yeah, sure, I think that we can probably explain this, both by what is happening like at the international level. And maybe I can talk a little bit about what I did with, with my research, looking specifically at what happens within the claiming countries. I think that there are many different factors, there is growing awareness worldwide that the cultural heritage of some countries has been depleted, that's very much the case in Africa. For example, there are two researchers who were commissioned by the French President Macron, to write a report about the African collections in French public museums. And one of their conclusions was that for many Western African countries, the vast majority of objects from past centuries, are actually located in France or abroad in general, but not in those countries themselves.

**Pierre Losson** 07:53

And I think this awareness comes with greater facilities to travel, the blockbusters exhibitions that the universal museums have been organizing over the past decades. So in general, people know that these objects are in these museums. There is also growing awareness of the damages done by trafficking of antiquities and of cultural objects.

**Pierre Losson** 08:18

There is a legal framework that has been strengthened throughout the 20th century in favor of the idea of returning objects that should not have been removed from their country of origin. So often under the impulsion actually of the countries that are now claiming these objects. For example, Mexico, which was one of the countries that was behind the adoption of the 1970 UNESCO convention. And this text is now widely considered to be a watershed moment for returns in our institutions, and that the problem of this particular text is that it's not retroactive, so it does not cover some of those cases that we were talking about, of objects that were removed during wars, colonial wars, or during the colonial period in general.

**Pierre Losson** 09:18

I think there is also the influence of post-colonial and decolonial studies in academia. In those have been pushing museums understood as institutions of white supremacy, to examine the history and origins of their collections. So for example, last fall, Dan Hicks, who is a curator at the University of Oxford, published a book called The Brutish Museums that made a big splash in the world of museums, where he argued that continuing to exhibit the Benin bronzes specifically --but I think the argument can really be extended to other objects-- continuing to exhibit objects that were seized in the colonial context perpetuates the violence that was used against the populations in the former colonized countries.

**Pierre Losson** 10:21

Now, one thing I do with my own research is to try to understand why this interest has also been growing within the claiming countries. Because, well, if those objects have been removed decades or centuries ago, why is it that there seems to be a growing interest in recent years, in recent decades? So I think that one nuance for this would probably be that there seems to be growing interest, because those cases are more salient in the media but there has pretty much always been discussions. Like experts, historians in those countries have always known that those objects were there and were interested in obtaining their return.

**Pierre Losson** 11:12

Now, one thing that I think is important to introduce here is the idea that cultural heritage is not a thing. It's not something that has an intrinsic value. It has the value that we give it; heritage is a construction. So it says more in a way about who we are today, what it is that we care about today, than what it may have meant in the past for the populations who created this object.

**Pierre Losson** 11:44

Heritage is really about our representation of the past; what it is that we keep from this past. And so understanding that, I think that in countries that have become independent in the in the 19th or the 20th century, the objects that are being claimed now has been constructed as part of a national heritage. So claiming them is really a nationalist project. And here I don't mean nationalist, as in like a strident, belligerent project as we often think when we talk about nationalism, but really like, in a very Benedict Anderson way, imagining a community of belonging and what it means to be a community in a country today named Nigeria, or today named Mexico, which did not necessarily exist a few decades or centuries before.

**Pierre Losson** 12:39

And I think from my research, I really concluded that these objects serve to coalesce the nation in a way through the many different crises of the nation. So oftentimes, you see that in a moment when there is political crisis and economic crisis, those claims can be used to somehow to, I wouldn't use the word distract, but really to just like, remember the whole community of who we are together as a group. And that is also past that has been possible in more recent years and more recent decades, because also more pragmatically, developing countries now have the expertise and infrastructure to care for the objects.

**Pierre Losson** 13:34

Western museums often said that, that these countries could not take care of properly of the objects and that was an argument not to return them. This is largely not true anymore. If you go to a country like Mexico, they have beautiful museums, archaeologists, historians, experts, restorators, who are very, very much able to care and especially they are specialized in the specific materials that they claim. Even in a country like Nigeria, they now have a project to build a new museum in Benin City, to welcome all the bronzes upon their return. So sorry, this is a really long answer.

**John Torpey** 14:18

It's an interesting answer. I was involved in some of these discussions when I was still at the University of British Columbia, which, as you may know, has a very famous Museum of Anthropology and the director in sort of debates about these issues and about the holdings of the museum; the director, a woman named Ruth Phillips, you know, made precisely this argument that they had the most sophisticated facilities and we're best positioned really to maintain these objects, which, after all, for many people are the only way they're really ever going to encounter the cultures that these objects represent, right? But it sounds like, you know, just in terms of whatever greater wealth and sort of modernization, many countries that once might have been too poor to have these kinds of facilities may now have them. So that sort of argument seems less compelling.

**John Torpey** 15:22

I mean, one thing that struck me when I was working on sort of related questions myself was the importance of democracy in these kinds of situations. That is to say, you didn't ask a non-democratic country to make reparations for past injustices, it just didn't really work that way. And I think, to some degree, similarly, you're probably not going to have much luck demanding whatever cultural artifacts that may have been stolen in the past, from sort of undemocratic countries in the present. I mean, does that strike you as a factor in explaining where these cases arised? I mean, there must be stuff, in some sense scattered all over the world by former conquerors who've conquered a group of people and taken some of their stuff and put it somewhere else. And so I would think at some level, these kinds of cases would be potentially infinite, but they're not, in fact, infinite. So maybe you could talk about the conditions and the calculations that underlie these kind of actions and claims?

**Pierre Losson** 16:34

Yeah, I think that there is really a question of geopolitics here. We have a very undemocratic regime, such as that of mainland China that is very active in trying to obtain the return of a lot of objects, particularly that were seized by France and the UK during the Opium War and in the different conflicts in the 19th century. And they are being successful at it, either by buying directly these objects at auctions when they come up, or by obtaining their return from museums. Nobody in those cases opposes to China that they are not democratic enough to obtain these returns.

**John Torpey** 17:31

I simply mean that you're not likely to get a response from an undemocratic regime, right? That claim it can be of any stripe, but the only countries that are really subject to the kind of shame that really underlies I think these kinds of negotiations are democratic countries.

**Pierre Losson** 17:52

I would agree with that. And I think that it's probably part of our democratic process to re-examine our colonial past and to, maybe, possibly, amend some of the wrongs that we caused in previous centuries. So yes, absolutely. And I think that if you take the case of France with Western African countries in particular, that was definitely, I would imagine, in the calculations of Emmanuel Macron, when he commissioned that report, absolutely.

**John Torpey** 18:37

Interesting. So, I mean, this case of the Metropolitan Museum of Art comes up just in today's news, so I might as well ask a bit more about that. It seems to me that the Metropolitan Museum before it must be full of stuff that would count as potentially subject to a claim for return. I mean, is that true? And how did they get all this stuff? Is it going to be empty once all these claims are made? How is that going to look?

**Pierre Losson** 19:11

Well, yes, definitely. In a museum, what we see is always just the tip of the iceberg from everything that is in warehouses, and that is being researched, or even in some cases, or just is being underutilized. But so I think that the threat of emptying museums is an argument that has been used by these big museums like the Met, like the British Museum, like the Louvre. And I actually have an article that is forthcoming in the International Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society about that. And I really do not think that is going to be the case for several reasons.

**Pierre Losson** 19:59

One being that, because as I was mentioning before, a lot of these cases are not covered by international conventions. Agreeing to return does not really set a legal precedent; it might set like a moral or ethical precedent that may encourage others to do the same and maybe we could put the recent announcements by the Met Museum, that they will return their bronzes in that category. But each of these cases is historically situated, and so I do not believe that we run the risk, if there was such a risk, to suddenly open the gates of the museum, and that would be a free for all, and we would bring everything back to their to their "country of origin".

**Pierre Losson** 20:54

Another reason is that this is no one's plan; nobody wants those museums closed and emptied. Maybe some activists of the decolonizing museums movement who are a little more radical than others, but it really is no one's plan. And that I saw during my research in Latin America, and in my conversations with people who have worked in other countries, including Nigeria, nobody in those countries ever argues that they want all these objects back for different reasons: because they know they could not care for all these objects themselves; because they also believe in the value of a human worldwide cultural heritage. And so for instance, if we see the case of Nigeria, the Nigerian authorities have already said that they would consider in some cases to leave the Benin bronzes in the museums where they are currently displayed, if the museums would acknowledge Nigerian property of the object. So I don't think we should see the movement as so radical that it would aim at emptying the museums. I do not, I do not believe that.

**John Torpey** 22:22

I mean, another question that came up in the work that I did, which again, is sort of parallel to some of this stuff had to do with the question of how far back do you go? Right? How far back is it something that was stolen, as opposed to something that was traded in a kind of fair and square way? I mean, the Elgin marbles strikes me as a case here that's sort of complicated, right? As you said, Greece was the province of the Ottoman Empire at the time and as I understand it was given sort of fair and square by the Ottoman Pasha, to Lord Elgin, you know, now you can...

**Pierre Losson** 23:00

That's the position of the British Museum, it's disputed.

**John Torpey** 23:05

Okay, tell us more about that. What happened?

**Pierre Losson** 23:07

Um, so no, I honestly, I do not recall absolutely all the details, but indeed, the ambassador, the British ambassador at the time, obtained a firman from the Ottoman Emperor at the time from the Sultan, to remove and make copies of the friezes, that these marble sculptures that were at the front and around the temple. It is unclear as to whether that included the authorization to leave Greece with those. In this particular case, there is also the dimension that those are not standalone objects, those were parts of the monument, which is an argument that has been used by Greece, but I think a lot of experts also agree on, that the real meaning and function of these objects is to be on a monument, not to be considered as just standalone statues that could be in someone's salon or in a room of a museum. Sorry, if that was your question.

**John Torpey** 24:24

Well, right, I'm just trying to sort through the problem that it's that the Elgin marble so-called are now, not where they were first produced or located and removed under, now sort of, how should we say complex and contradictory terms. But at the time they may have been regarded as stolen fair and square, so to speak. And our perception of who owns these things kind of changes over time and I think it's just a tricky problem to sort out.

**Pierre Losson** 25:09

I agree completely with that. And I that takes me back to what I was saying about, one way we should think about cultural heritage is as really a construction, not something that is once and for all considered as important for X or Y reason. So how far back do we go? I don't know. Today, in 2021, there are some objects that are considered important by some people belonging to specific communities, at the national or the subnational level. Is it possible that these objects will not matter in 50 years or 200 years from now? Yes, it is possible, just the same way as objects that are not really being considered important today, may become important in a few in a few centuries.

**Pierre Losson** 26:05

But I think that we have the same thing here; here in western countries in general. How many houses, buildings have been destroyed at some point in history to make way for highways, new high rises, because we thought they were not important. And today, we think about those, and we feel sorry that they were razed or destroyed at the time, because we give them an importance that they didn't have at the time. Yes, it's a construction and it's never a done deal. I think that returns and restitutions are the process more than the specific moments.

**Pierre Losson** 26:48

There are arguments that can change, and the very process of returning can lead to something new and different. I think that I've heard that again, time and again, in museums where people say that they were --particularly in the holding museums-- they were afraid that they were going to lose something if they accepted to return a specific object. And then they realized that they created new relationships with experts and audiences through this process of returning. So to give one example, among many, that I encountered in my research about people at de Young Museum of Fine Arts in in San Francisco entered in a lengthy negotiation with the Mexican government back in the 1980s, over the fate of some frescoes that had been found in Teotihuacan, exported into the US illegally probably at the end of the 1960s, and that were given to, bequeathed to the Museum.

**Pierre Losson** 27:58

And in the publications of the museums about this return process, they all say that by returning half of this collection to Mexico, they really established a completely new relationship with the Mexican authorities in charge of cultural heritage. And that led to several projects in common to develop new exhibitions, to exchange objects. So we shouldn't necessarily think of returns as like a zero-sum game, but really as possibly a win-win process.

**John Torpey** 28:33

Yeah, I think these are processes, as you say, that are in effect negotiations over long periods of time.

**Pierre Losson** 28:44

Absolutely.

**John Torpey** 28:44

And I think you're, you know, absolutely correct to say that we evaluate the significance of these objects and places very differently over time. I mean, some of the great discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls or something were something found by a farmer out in the field; they just been discarded, nobody thought they were important, right? So these things really change over time. And I think one fairly obvious reason that some countries want some of these things back is simply for tourism reasons, right? I mean, they can put them on display, that will attract tourists, that will help economic development, and that's perfectly fine. I mean, there's no reason that that's a bad thing. It's just, there's a motivation for doing this that some places have and some don't.

**John Torpey** 29:36

I mean, the question of the sort of varying evaluation of things and property; when I was doing the work that I'm referring to, and this go far back do you go question led me ultimately to kind of throw up my hands and say, "Proudhon was right; property was theft, and it's only the only question is who stole it first." It's a very difficult kind of problem to sort out. So I think you've got a very nuanced kind of a sense of how this works and it reminds me of, you may know, Elazar Barkan work up at Columbia; up where you are, I guess, at Columbia, and, the way he sees history as a kind of a negotiation between various parties and that sort of thing. And I think there's something, not everything, but something certainly to that as well.

**John Torpey** 30:33

So how do you think this is all going to kind of play out? I mean, it seems to me in a way, having watched this for a couple of decades now that it's something that kind of comes and goes and waxes and wanes, but it's obviously an issue that is going to be a source of some conflict between those who have and those who have lost various objects. How do you see this playing out in the near future?

**Pierre Losson** 31:07

Well, I think that if there is one thing that the social sciences have taught me that we should be very careful about making predictions about the future. But yeah, there is no denying that, right now, there is a dynamic, especially, for example, with with the Benin Bronzes, the developments in that case over the past three months have been really nothing short of dramatic with Germany announcing that they would engage in the process of returning all the bronzes to Nigeria by 2022, which was followed by similar declarations by smaller museums in the UK (not the British Museum) and again, as of yesterday by the Metropolitan Museum.

**Pierre Losson** 31:59

But again, I'm not entirely sure that the dynamic on this specific case will necessarily influence others. Again, here, the historic specificity of the conditions under which those objects left Nigeria, or what would become Nigeria, do not necessarily exist in other cases. So I want to be really careful, even though I do think that at the very least, today, the big museums in the Western world have to engage in --and they are doing it up to a point-- into a process of doing more provenance research into their collections and re-examine how legitimate their holdings are.

**Pierre Losson** 32:54

And I think that this is some something that is not just demanded from within academic circles. We have museum trustees, board members, and even to some extent audiences themselves for greater transparency. So I think we are going to see more and more of public acknowledgement of the disputed nature of collections. And in some cases; specifically like the Benin bronzes, where it was really loot, that is, that has been historically a knowledge researched, we might see some, some returns happening.

**Pierre Losson** 33:42

Again, not necessarily all of it because the claiming countries might very well see their own interest. You were mentioning tourism, why not? That might be a motivation to leave some of these objects in other countries as ambassadors, in a way. So without anticipating a very important movement, I would imagine that we will see more of those cases happen, definitely.

**John Torpey** 34:10

Well, thank you. I think you've learned the lesson of that important social scientist, Yogi Berra, the first citizen of Montclair, New Jersey, where I live, who famously said, "predictions are hard, especially about the future". And that is actually indeed one of the important lessons to learn from social science.

**John Torpey** 34:31

So thanks very much, Pierre Losson, this was a really fascinating discussion and fascinating set of issues and you're obviously going to be in demand for a long time to come.

**John Torpey** 34:42

I want to thank Pierre Losson for sharing his insights about cultural restitution claims around the world. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Merrill Sovner for her production assistance, Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance, and I want to acknowledge Duncan McKay for sharing his song "International Horizons" as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.