

Towards a Radical Practice of History: When Can History Repair?

Friday 10 June 2022, by [ZAMINDAR Vazira](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2022).

Historian Vazira Zamindar asks if history has the disciplinary tools to practice repair, part of the Verso roundtable “Unlearning Imperialism” considering the work of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019) is an incendiary text, a call to unlearn and strike against the imperial formations of history and art, and although forged over more than a decade of thinking and writing, it came situated between a historic report on African art in French museums (November 2018) that stirred up renewed debate on colonial looting, and the toppling of a slave trader’s statue in Bristol (March 7th, 2020). If there ever was a time, captured and sequestered as the past, the book calls us into the “now” with the sense of urgency, the “potential,” of our deeply felt revolutionary capacity, and expands our lexicon for restitution and repair. Below are responses to the book by a historian, a media studies scholar, an archaeologist, artist, and the book’s verso editor, as each take the book to task, turning its pages to reflect and incite, or simply deliberate on the unruly practice of our distinct crafts that the book invites us to engage.

My own reading of the book comes from working with Ariella Azoulay and Yannis Hamilakis on the [Decolonial Initiative on the Migration of Objects and People](#), which we forged around one of the ideas in the book that the forced migrations of objects welcomed into museal modalities of art needed to be restituted so that people on the move, fleeing catastrophes from former colonized lands from where these objects had been looted, could be/had to be extended the same hospitality, restitution and repair so that we could rebuild our world together. In thinking forced migrations of objects looted by European imperial powers in the “past” and contemporary migration of peoples in the “present,” what would need to change to think these two forced migrations of objects and people together? How does one “decolonize” this separation between objects in museums and people in detention border camps so as to make reparations and hospitality necessary modalities of living together again?

When Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy’s report on African art in French museums, *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics*, was published, we organized a [teach-in on the report](#) at Brown University to join on-going debates on the restitution of colonial collections and to expand on its political imagination. For instance, one of the most strikingly aspects of the report was its focus on historical memory sedimented as trauma on the one hand and institutionalized as art history on the other. The report argued, in line with others before, that the case for restitution did not/could not depend on whether an African state or society was making formal demands, or whether they had the capacity of care for these objects. The removal of objects from these societies had been so *traumatic* that postcolonial societies suffered from “amnesia” – a particular kind of loss of memory caused by trauma of colonial violence: the destruction of social worlds, indigenous knowledge and institutions that accompanied the removal of objects. Left with “fragments” and “phantom limbs,” this “amnesia” had to be accounted as inseparable from the very

condition by which European museums had developed their art historical expertise and modalities of conservation around these cultural objects – destruction, erasure and denial on the one hand, and museal knowledge formation on the other were two sides of the same coin. [1] Yet, while the report considers restitution of a selection of objects as integral to a larger ethical process of making visible a hitherto “inadmissible history,” it doesn’t address the institutional formations of History of which the museum is a part. How does an erased past gain admission, if erasure and annihilation was an *intentional* effect of these formations of History? Can admission of historical wrong enable restitution and repair, and are the disciplinary tools of History sufficient for the task?

It is here, as Azoulay takes offense at the formations of History, that I want to think with *Potential History*:

And if there was no past? And if the past was the invention of the imperial archive? Imperial agents’ annihilation of political species and modes of life and the confinement of their acts of deportation and incarceration to a delineated space called “the past” were all necessary in order for the imperial enterprise to materialize as a condition of political life. The archive makes the condition palpable. It is a graveyard of political life that insists that time is a linear temporality... Unlearning this paradigmatic interpellation of the archive means stepping back from the inclination to unearth secrets from the archive of catastrophes perpetrated in the open, disengaging from the position of the explorer-historian, and instead engaging in a present continuous mode with those considered “past.” It means acting on the belief that what they sought to protect is not over. (*Potential History*, pp. 186-187)

As a historian of the Indian subcontinent, the awareness that History was a “colonial form of knowledge,” that it was a weapon of war in the British conquest of India, was already integral to our work. Anticolonial thought wrestled with interpretations and judgements of colonial historiography and sought to write histories of their own. (For instance, Veer Savarkar’s *The Indian War of Independence* in 1909 attempted to overthrow Kaye and Malletson’s multi-volume *History of the Indian Mutiny* of 1857–8 that denied political consciousness to Indian rebellion, and Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Discovery of India* was a breath-taking exercise of reclaiming historical imagination, penned in colonial jails in the 1940s.) Since then, this fierce struggle has continued to be waged with interrogations of the colonial archive and strategies for “reading against the grain,” to parsing apart how older forms of knowledge were lost or reordered through colonial collecting and translations, to recuperating subaltern agency. Decades of historical debates informed Ranajit Guha’s defiant opening lines to his seminal text *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1997): “There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past.”

Yet, despite the conviction with which Guha, the founder of Subaltern Studies, made this proclamation (arguably a call to arms as much as a declaration of victory), the battle for the past remains far from over, as signaled by the toppling of Colston’s statue. If anything, this is the one battle that “Britain” appears to relentlessly win, as racial and religious partitions of colonialism permeate national histories and public memory in both Britain and the Indian subcontinent (and elsewhere) and shape their fraught political worlds. From a cultivated belief in the benevolence of colonial rule (Robert Clive’s statue erected in 1912 still stands in Whitehall), dogged persistence of colonial categories, and the continuous republishing of British colonial documents for waging twenty-first century American wars, Azoulay’s strident call to “unlearn imperialism” remains relevant to us as historians and as urgent as ever!

Indeed, there is a significant (even if minor) tradition within history to hold its own violence to account, and *Potential History* can be read in solidarity with anticolonial thought and a long-

standing, radical tradition for writing histories of the enslaved, the colonized, the marginalized, for workers, for subaltern women and others – and yet, what sets Azoulay’s searing, expansive work apart in my view is her focus on *restitution*. How does one write in the aftermath of the catastrophic and ongoing violence of imperialism so as to repair? Restitution is integral to her dismantling of the epistemological, institutional and material practice of History, for without restitution how can we rebuild the political world we share?

The struggle is not over!

Arguably at the heart of Azoulay’s problem with History is its carceral relationship to time in giving an account of the past. While for many historians (including myself), the labor of history has not only been bound to understanding the politics of the present (how we got here), but rather in transforming that present by recuperating agency, possibilities, roads not taken. In that sense, “potential” has always been important, the potential of the past to have unfolded differently. Yet Azoulay’s concept of “potential” goes further – it utterly refuses the “timeline” by declaring it an imperial invention – the linear movement of history that makes the past in the past – and instead she insists on its reversibility. This idea of reversibility is crucial to restitution – what happened in the past is not over – it is ongoing and therefore the demand for accountability, justice, action can be, must be here, in the now. What does it mean then to write history as not an account of what happened, *fait accompli*, but *what is happening, past continuous*, and can therefore be undone if written from that standpoint?

Unlearning imperialism: its implications for political life are radical, for no crime can thus be shielded by time. Our governments cannot commit crimes, deposit their redacted accounts in archives for contextual judgements by history, and continuously produce victims in its time and thereafter by denial, bereft of justice. Or alas, leave no records at all, like Cyril Radcliffe who after drawing the Indo-Pak border destroyed all the records, as did hundreds and thousands of colonial officials across Asia and Africa on the eve of hard-won independence from colonial rule in the second half of the twentieth century. [2] What then of the archive?

Archive as loot!

The notion that the “past is invented by the archive” is one that has been in one form or another levied against the rank empiricism of the historian’s craft. Thus, while a historian’s prowess or expertise continues to draw on the archives that have been consulted, the power wielded by the archive has been put to considerable scrutiny, to get at histories that have been actively denied or destroyed, or rendered “unthinkable,” by the archive itself. Imperialism-archive-history, or what Gayatri Spivak describes as “the epistemic violence of the worlding of worlds” (in “Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading in the Archives,” 1985) has led to myriad strategies beyond unearthing hidden documents, conducting ethnographic fieldwork, recording subaltern oral histories, folklore and so on, to both expand as well as interrogate the evidentiary capacity of the archive. But for Azoulay, the resulting “alternative histories” are still bound to dominant histories, even if written against them. What holds both dominant and alternative histories together is the founding violence of the archive itself – and here the demand that we interrogate the archive, like the museum, as a repository of loot comes with consequences.

The archive is easy to understand as loot when we consider how Aurel Stein (1862–1943) returned from his celebrated expeditions in Central Asia with some 60,000 manuscripts, paintings, and temple banners from the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas at Dunhuang alone, and that these expeditions were sponsored by museums and universities in Britain and the US to acquire, control and claim a new kind of expertise around them. But this plunder which constitutes the archive, Azoulay argues, is part of and preceded by centuries of an “archival regime” which destroyed existing worlds to

dislocate, tag and classify people within an imperial taxonomy, and it is a stark reminder that the violent separation of people from their material worlds so that they could not/cannot create meaning on their own terms continues to this day. However, while some historians write about absences in the archive, the institutional facts of the archive as a continuation of this violence – for example the British Library in London holds a monumental collection of manuscripts, maps, prints, photographs, government records and reports from across Asia and Africa (from expeditions like Stein's), and determines who has access to them and continues to profit from them – has been considered of little relevance to the historian's craft itself, or to the partitioning of the world we inhabit.

However, when Azoulay brings the debate on restitution that animate museum collections to the archive, she makes the material archival conditions (possession on the grounds of protection/ control over what and who is admissible in the archive) an epistemic and political question as well, the borders that keep people out and continuously generate "inadmissible history." In other words, the practice of history cannot be indifferent to the material-institutional conditions of the archives they have privileged access to, and must engage with disobedience, calls to decolonize, make archives into commons, and so on, as not only a matter of activism, but rather integral to the very "potential" of history if it is to no longer destroy, but repair how we live together in the world.

Historian on strike!

Howard Zinn once wrote a very personal essay entitled "Objections to Objectivity" (in *Failure to Quit*, 1993) where he gave an account of his own life and work to explain why "objectivity" made no sense at all to him as a historian. "I decided early," he wrote, "that I would be biased in the sense of holding fast to certain fundamental values." Azoulay provides a wider systemic anti-imperialist argument for Zinn's poetic principled refusal of objectivity as an activist-historian forging a "people's history." It begins by disavowing the privilege of expertise as a formation of imperialism, and mobilizing the call to strike in leveraging a series of refusals.

For one, like her earlier work on photography, she makes where we stand in relation to the objects we look at/study a matter of huge significance. This means refusing a set of already available and highly respected subject positions. The position of the imperial "explorer-historian" (making the kind of "discoveries" that Stein was honored by scientific societies and universities for), where "exploration" in the brazen search for the new and loot are inseparable, may be the easiest to recognize and disavow. However, she also rejects the position of the "citizen-historian," where citizenship has become an instrument of separation between those who are bestowed rights of access and those who are denied. In a world divided by vicious national borders and differential citizenship, this self-awareness of our relationship to our enquiries and to our "documents" is, like the archive, a vital intellectual and political question that cannot be put aside from what we write.

From archive as commons, the refusal of discovery, of the new, to the call to historians to go on strike, *Potential History* is particularly committed to thinking shared worlds – and this emphasis on shared worlds is important. In all her work Azoulay activates a political field around images/objects/documents that make possible demands for a different set of relations to share the world. The image/object/documents are never to be viewed passively as if bearers of intrinsic meanings, especially as determined by experts – rather we, not as experts but rather as activists, must do the work, political work, necessary to reconstitute these images/objects in another set of relations for a world we can all belong to.

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P.S.

This essay is from the Verso roundtable, [“Unlearning Imperialism: Responses to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s Potential History.”](#)

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5271-towards-a-radical-practice-of-history-when-can-history-repair>

Footnotes

[1] The report cites Karima Lazali on colonial trauma: “the part of History refused by politics is transmitted from generation to generation and fabricates psychic mechanisms that keep the subject within a position of shame for existing.” Karima Lazali, *Le trauma colonial. Une enquête sur les effets psychiques et politiques contemporains de l’oppression coloniale en Algérie*, Paris: La D.couverte, 2015. (in Sarr and Savoy Report, pp.36-37)

[2] Cyril Radcliffe headed the Boundary Commission to partition India in 1947, and when he completed his catastrophic task he destroyed all documents related to the work. This was a systematic exercise of destroying records on “an industrial scale” on the eve of decolonization, as recounted by Ian Cobain’s *The History Thieves: Secrets, Lies and the Shaping of a Modern Nation*, 2016, London: Granta Books.