EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY LEGACIES

PROBLEMATIC HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

EDITED BY PETER BILLE LARSEN AND MARKÉTA KŘÍŽOVÁ

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Contents

Introduction: Revisiting Problematic University Heritage in Europe: From Pride to Questioning, Learning and Responsibility

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Introduction

How do European universities deal with their problematic heritage? Compared to recent work in North America to question university legacies, the European continent remains somewhat of a blind spot. If popular discontent has risen in both public spaces and universities, the diversity of contentious issues, histories and responses across different institutions is rarely seen together. Furthermore, nuances and differences across different European contexts are rarely considered in the images of the predominantly West European discourse.

This book challenges straightforward narratives of universities as heroic pioneers of intellectual progress and societal development alone. Instead, it brings into the debate the remembrances of colonial pasts, material legacies, racialised inequalities and problematic histories. It offers a decentred deep-dive and comparative perspective on the different kinds of university heritage values in both tangible and intangible forms. It is the outcome of an emerging collaboration among European universities undertaking conversations on their 'problematic', inconvenient or 'difficult' heritage.

Why then a volume dedicated to Europe? For one, universities are deeply embedded in European history, originating as creations of medieval European towns later transformed by processes of the nineteenth-century modernisation and industrial capitalism. As institutions, they have both shaped and been shaped by ideas and ideologies of their time from nationalism to authoritarianism, rendering important the ways in which such legacies are represented and turned into heritage. Despite this central role in shaping Europe with global repercussions, universities are perhaps the only European institution that has preserved its fundamental patterns and its basic social role and functions over

the course of history.[1] The role of European universities in imperial practice is only starting to surface in critical historiographies and the study of problematic heritage. The relative paucity of critical postures may partly be explained by the hegemonic nature of university self-representations, conservatism and the need for reputation management.

Researchers who engage in critical historiography of their institutions may even find themselves running counter to mainstream narratives. As several contributors to this volume noted informally, problematising university heritage is often perceived as airing dirty laundry in a public domain generally shaped by communications departments and global ranking. If imperial, colonial and authoritarian histories offer fertile terrains for investigation, they are equally also subject to silencing, self-censorship and mutedness in official university discourse. Fassil Demisile's conclusion that African cities as imperial legacies were 'out of the field of vision for much of western academia'[2] can equally be applied internally to the invisibility of the imperial legacies of European university institutions in terms of both ideational and material imbrications. The heritage arena is particularly evocative as it precisely involves the space where universities showcase – or problematise – their past in the present. University institutions can learn a lot from the wider heritage field. Critical reflection, reparation and restitution are, for example, today central activities of museum institutions revisiting colonial racialised practices and collections. By connecting with such conversations, universities may acknowledge rather than silently forget their own roles and responsibilities.

University heritage management today entails not only exhibiting intellectual achievements, but increasingly also questioning its legacies. On the one hand, European academia is proud of its scientific and art collections, libraries, observatories and historical buildings, the tangible and intangible heritage of academia accumulated and preserved through many centuries. On the other hand, recent years have seen a proliferation of initiatives that problematise university histories and take for granted heritage making. The etymological origins of the university combining 'higher education' and the wholeness of universal learning illustrate a certain epistemological superiority, which historically has left little space for critical heritage reflexivity. The ensuing epistemic violence is today up for questioning, not least considering the role of European universities in structuring and reproducing imperial, colonial and authoritarian practices, which form an undeniable part of European history. As knowledge institutions, we contend, European universities need to ask fundamental questions about the very essence of their own histories, their core practices and self-representations, as well as their wider role in European society and their social responsibilities to constitute or question knowledge making.

This is not merely of academic interest. Rather, it concerns critical constitutive or structuring elements of society, and the interplay of decision-making with knowledge systems. In times of deepening populism and the proliferation of fake news, but also deepening inequalities, assuming the responsibility of universities in revisiting their own epistemic premises is not a luxury, but an obligation. As Ariana González Stokes recently demonstrated in her thought-provoking volume on the pitfalls of the academic policies of inclusion and diversification,

> placing the university in relation to its traumatic, unjust histories, to the paradox of its character, opens higher education to its potential to engage in epistemic reparation, to redress where and how those injustices live today, and what shared collective responsibility social institutions and their actors, such as universities and their workers, hold.[3]

In the same line of inquiry, we seek to shed light on how European university heritage can be problematised, what aspects of inconvenient pasts are in need of being acknowledged in terms of epistemic reparation and redress as European institutions question themselves. Rather than taking the idea of Europe for granted, we have opted for a decentred inclusive perspective that acknowledges diversity of positionalities and experiences in different political contexts. By bringing such perspectives together we wish to encourage connection and cross-thematic learning on topics such as colonialism, authoritarianism and misogyny.

Towards the Critical Historiography of University Heritage

For a long time, European universities have mainly looked back at their founding fathers with pride and self-assurance, naming distinguished (male) scholars among alumni and professorial staff. Scientific collections and university museums, similarly, have sought to preserve intact the material legacies of laboratories, classrooms or pulpits, through which scientific breakthroughs were produced or announced. The university museums encompass material testimonies of the scientific advancements of which universities – as collective bodies – and the individuals attached to them were principal contributors. The historical buildings, in turn, are commemorated as sites of academic production and ingenuity, and may also recognise the wealthy patrons, maecenas or institutions supporting the intellectual endeavours of their times. Outside the buildings, botanical gardens, observatories and even public squares equally serve as memorial sites of discovery and explanation. The ownership

of precious scientific specimens, equipment and handwritings continue to be a source of prestige, pride and publicity for educational institutions. University heritage and its public display, arguably, constitutes an integral part of the public imagery, symbolic capital and even the political economy of university institutions, alongside the citation numbers, ranking or numbers of Nobel prizes achieved by the faculty.

Since the late 1990s, many national networks concerned with preserving academic heritage have been created.[4] University institutions not only map, but through presentation have joined the wider societal celebration of tangible and intangible heritage. A Council of Europe recommendation from 2005 spoke of cultural heritage of universities in terms of the 'accumulated source of wealth with direct reference to the academic community of scholars and students' of 'exceptional cultural value'.[5] A recent LERU network publication on academic heritage follows in the same direction, with its chair praising the "impressive amount of heritage [that] has been accumulated and preserved through the ages" by the universities of the network.[6] While true and legitimate in a world where science is repeatedly under attack, this should not preclude interrogating university heritage more critically.

Please do not get us wrong here. We are not against appreciating the richness and uniqueness of museum collections, galleries, libraries, observatories, university campuses and other material testimonies of past glories and achievements. University heritage in all its forms offers important testimonies to societal transformation, intellectual debate and historical accomplishments. The scientific and artistic value of their collections and other forms of cultural heritage is without doubt relevant. However, these are rarely only histories of grandeur and breakthroughs, but are often paralleled and coincide with entangled histories of exclusion, raciality, censorship and marginalisation. The book demonstrates the shared relevance of challenging the common systemic silence in terms of problematic legacies, of both material and immaterial nature; their absence from linear narratives of cumulative scientific knowledge and the ensuing policy narratives. Why should this matter? Let the past be the past, one might argue, and rather let invention, creativity and curiosity prevail.

However, academic histories are not merely histories of intellectual exploration, but socially, politically and economically grounded systems of knowledge production and contestation. Deeper awareness and engagement with our own contested pasts, we believe, will make science and universities more resilient as institutions of expertise and critical learning, while equally addressing contested heritage as a vehicle for social change. In this sense, the volume situates itself within the framework of critical university studies in a commitment to unsettle legacies and explore policy options for redressing past wrongs and building more

inclusive futures grounded in open debate. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, in connection to the process of democratisation and massification of universities, a 'new history of universities' arose, focusing on its social history[7] by questioning how universities may reproduce social inequalities. In what Sharon Stein called the 'underlying costs of the promises', academia may benefit the privileged in society at the expense of those excluded from the system.[8] This field of scholarship can be traced back at least to the 1990s, when the very conditions of academic knowledge production became an object of critique.[9] Some authors have compared higher education in North America to 'an apparatus built by and for a white supremacist, settler, nation- and empire-building project'.[10] If such dynamics have long been challenged in the United States, recent decisions by the 2025 Trump administration reveal a clear reversal.

While postcolonial thought has a long pedigree in academia, it is only in the past decade that the clear-cut narratives of intellectual endeavour and societal contribution of universities have started to be challenged more systematically both from within and outside the universities. As difficult, embarrassing, or shameful histories are being brought to light, it is now being acknowledged how higher education institutions were significantly shaped by, and in many cases, expected to serve wider political and economic dynamics. Universities, despite an ambition of academic independence, have rarely been isolated from wider colonial and authoritarian practices shaping their host societies. From remote colonies to the beating hearts of the metropole, universities were often founded, expanded and financed through the spoils of colonialism. This arguably took place both in direct and indirect manners. Even for countries without colonies, the matrix of European industrialisation, scientific and cultural development and economic growth was intimately tied into world system dynamics of colonial extraction, production and trade. Universities even played an active role in the legitimisation and training of colonial enterprises and agents overseas, building on and reinforcing racial theories and notions of imperial superiority, as well as the suppression of civil liberties within European states and the global South.

The role of universities in European modernisation processes is often highlighted in terms of contributing to the developments of civil society and public spheres, promotion of the ideas of human rights, of equality before the law. Yet they also took part in creating multiple, longstanding, sometimes silenced, but no less all-permeating legacies of exclusion, censorship and injustice. This is not merely a matter of colonial legacies. Since the nineteenth century, modern universities have had a constitutive role in nation-building in Europe, which includes their active role in the context of authoritarian regimes. As several chapters show, scholars and universities as institutions have had intimate relations with the Fascist, Nazi and Communist regimes in various parts

of the European continent from a constitutive role in nation building to scientific justifications of discriminatory practices, censorship and ideological training.

The problem, however, remains that the entanglements with colonial, authoritarian or elsewise discriminatory pasts are often framed as separate and distinct from the academic histories of intellectual accomplishment. If some practices are recognised as regrettable, these are envisioned as long gone wrongs, no longer connected to contemporary institutions and practices. Whereas traces to the 'proud' moments of early institutional history serve as the 'kernel of a continued, inevitable evolution toward ever greater and more democratic forms of inclusion and universalism',[11] uncomfortable legacies are thus far too easily left behind. By turning our attention to problematic pasts, critical university historiographies would involve an attempt to connect dark histories with present-day realities. What then does all this mean in a world grappling with deep-running sustainability problems? The contemporary world faces unprecedented challenges such as the climate emergency, growing social and economic inequalities, populism, radicalism and conflict.

Universities are not only producers of excellent research for themselves but play a formative role in society. As centres of knowledge production and higher education, universities are at the heart of framing the contours of public debate and reflecting on themes like identity, democracy, sustainability and human rights. This obviously concerns both the research as well as the teaching mandates of university institutions in what we might call epistemological readiness to challenge both knowledge systems and modes of higher education. Whereas the European university model has been globalised, it is only in its early stages of questioning its epistemological premises and foundational constraints. Universities, in other words, need to understand how they have been continuously shaped by their complex pasts.[12] This includes opening up for the recognition of excluded knowledge paradigms and enhancing intercultural understanding.

This does not just mean acknowledging non-European knowledge systems, but also greater plurality within European academia from deep-running gender inequalities and discriminatory practices to the persistent imaginary divide of Europe into 'East' and 'West'. For this it is necessary to pursue the inter-European university dialogue focused on the responsibility of present-day university institutions faced with such legacies. Considering the role and responsibilities of scientific institutions, such work is not only as one of taking on a reflexive introspection, but equally that of nurturing a critical societal perspective from educational, knowledge building and value debate perspectives.

Defining Problematic Heritage and Broadening the Ethical Considerations

Defining 'problematic' or contentious heritage by reducing it to only one dimension, such as coloniality, would not grasp the diversity of phenomena identified in this volume. And more, even if the terms 'difficult', 'contentious' and 'problematic' heritage are often used interchangeably, they come with different connotations. Museologist and critical heritage studies scholar Sharon Macdonald coined the term 'difficult heritage' within the frame of her research of the legacies of German National Socialism in present-day German urban spaces. She defined difficult heritage as a 'past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity.'[13] Such legacies, she argued, need not be perceived as a burden, but can be an inspiration to create new futures, in which patterns of knowledge, existence, legacies of discrimination and oppression are interrupted and redressed in new relationships. Recognising that a particular collection, site or building constitutes difficult heritage is thus for Macdonald ultimately not the final step, but the start of a reflexive process to recalibrate ethical practice.

While the notion of *difficult* or even *contentious heritage* is relevant for our collective effort, we suggest that *problematic heritage* may allow for a more comprehensive gaze. Whereas 'difficult' is arguably concerned with what is already perceived as contested, contentious and awkward, 'problematic' heritage is more broadly concerned with what can be problematised not only from one, but multiple perspectives. Consider how the discourse of discovery was used to justify Europeanness in the EU Accession process for Portugal (see the text by Pedro Casaleiro, Mariana Brum and Mariana Marques in this volume). Problematic heritage, in this sense, is not necessarily difficult or contentious. In fact, very often it is precisely its uncontested, 'easy' and normalised nature that makes it problematic and subject to problematisation. Whereas Nazi legacies are generally perceived as difficult by German society, this may still leave out or under-problematise other significant dimensions. Problematic heritage from this perspective is not something that is readily visible or necessarily easily identified, solved or discarded. Rather, it involves a processual perspective, where problematisation necessarily requires adopting a decentred reflexive posture or positionality.

Efforts to rename buildings, restitute misappropriated objects or change heritage narratives offer one perspective. However, specific deeds, such as renaming or reworking of exhibition practices, rarely offer panacea to the full nature of the problem complexity involved. While public debate in these

cases may specify responsibility, the university endeavour should go further. For Macdonald, the central role of owners and curators of contested holdings is to enable a discussion between different stakeholders with opposing views to encourage transcultural learning and reflection on the role and politics of science and knowledge production. It is 'about restoring damaged relationships'.[14] Universities, whose collections and heritage representations are less visible and accessible compared to national museums and public monuments, have for a long time remained at the margins of re-examining their pasts. Recently, however, more and more institutions have been confronted with their challenging pasts. Questions of restitution of cultural property and the conservation of human remains are among the major issues that university collections are facing often in a politicised context. As Matthias Legnér noted in his chapter, 'heritage is never isolated', negotiations over problematic heritage should first of all enact reflexivity and subsequently change social practices and allow for new ways of thinking. Universities, in this sense, have a moral obligation to stimulate conversation and create safe environments where problematisation and redress is possible.

Colonial empire building reveals multiple university entanglements not only in terms of ideas of race, superiority and nation building at home, but equally so in terms of divide-and-rule governance, ontological hierarchies and domination of the other.[15] Centered around intersecting dynamics of knowledge, power and representation,[16] a critical epistemology of heritage needs to move beyond single-issue treatment and raise a bundle of colonial entanglements of university institutions even embedded in their core practices and self-representation in society. If narratives portraying rapid expansion of universities across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often connect to ideas of scientisation, democratic governance and human rights,[17] a focus on problematic heritage challenges linear descriptions of enlightenment, progress and modernity. In some respects, problematic entanglements are literally part of the furniture. From chairs at university libraries made of colonially extracted tropical timber (Casaleiro et al., this volume) to fascist architectural design and decor, the problematic backstories of scientific discovery and instrumentality are easily taken for granted. Just as 'modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin',[18] language around dark modernities has been used to interrogate authoritarianism and totalitarianism.[19] Modernist ideas of both scientific rigour and progressive thought are frequently encapsulated and reproduced in standard university narratives and imagery.[20] Naming and redirecting attention to problematic heritage is arguably a step in a different narrative direction.

Universities were among the first institutions to systematically collect objects. Such material legacies cannot be separated from contemporary systems

of knowledge making and transmission. Centuries of studying, classifying, and ordering nature and society have left profound marks in different moments, but have also been shaped by specific contexts. The loss of innocence does not only involve the materially obvious such as returning looted cultural objects or sensitive exhibits (human remains, religious objects, colonial "trophies") in university museum collections, but also questioning the connected systems of thought, expression, teaching and representations that are (potentially) perpetuating notions of racial, social, gender and cultural inequalities within and outside Europe. The cross-border connections are critical in this respect.

Several cases, from Geneva and Coimbra to Uppsala and Uzhhorod, demonstrate the continuous movements of scholars, ideas and objects across Europe and even to other continents. Scientific racism is a case in point (see Larsen, this volume, Chapter 14). Problematic university heritage, in other words, is not always site-specific, nor only tied into individual misdeeds. Rather, it involves collective matters, embedded practices and concerns, clearly justifying a systematic and shared response across contemporary European academia.

What to expect from this volume

This volume seeks to problematise university heritage in a European context, open up for alternative questions that have so far not been asked enough, and propose strategies for the future. The respective chapters unveil certain aspects of university histories that are often foregone, silenced or forgotten in official narratives. They also explore how such silences will continue to exist unless actively problematised. The authors address the multiple roles of universities as creators, guardians and representative voices of (officially sanctioned) knowledge, and their central position within national communities, political regimes and (post)colonial networks. Revisiting university heritage is not only a vehicle to enhance alternative historiography and question the underbelly of knowledge production, but also, more broadly, to contribute towards rethinking contemporary politics of academia, science and societal engagement.

Grounded in the portrayal of concrete universities and specific problems, the cases and the complexity they reveal defy simplistic labels. While the book is divided into three parts for analysing and explaining the problematic histories – namely, colonialism, authoritarianism and modernisation – there are obvious overlaps. In many cases, colonial practice and modernising discourses went hand in hand; just as authoritarian regimes justified their practices through resorting to 'modern science' and, at the same time, borrowed from the existing tropes of colonialist imagery.

Part I, 'Colonialities', starts with Chapter 1, by Pedro Casaleiro, Mariana Brum and Mariana Marques, which deals with three examples of colonial objects held within the collections of the University of Coimbra, Portugal. The authors explore changing narratives connected to these material items (a mariner's astrolabe, a tropical hardwood table and an African ritual mask). Used in the past as material confirmations of the master narratives of Portuguese civilisational missions overseas, they are now inserted into efforts to deconstruct these colonial and nationalist discourses. Chapter 2, by Larissa Schulte Nordholt, explores the colonial and postcolonial histories of Wageningen University, responding to the recent decision of the university board to fund research into these aspects of the history of their institution. The chapter demonstrates how in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial expertise and culture circulated between Wageningen and the Dutch possessions and plantation economies in Indonesia, and how these entanglements are reflected in the curriculum, the composition of students and the built heritage of the university. Its final part explores the recent efforts of coming to terms with how colonial heritage – formerly invisible, has recently become 'problematic' in the eyes of the students as well as the university representatives.

The results of a recent effort to come to terms with another institution's historical ties to (not only) colonialism – this time Trinity College Dublin – are presented in Chapter 3, by Mobeen Hussain, Ciaran O'Neill and Patrick Walsh. The authors explain the complexities of the Trinity case, which served as an instrument of British colonialism in Ireland, yet whose members also engaged in imperialism overseas. Therefore, several entangled issues came to the fore – on the one hand, the renaming of Berkeley Library, bearing the name of philosopher, benefactor and slaveowner George Berkeley; on the other, the debate regarding the remains unethically acquired by the Trinity College from the offshore Irish island of Inishbofin in 1890. The Trinity College case demonstrates that the questions of reparation, compensation and redress certainly are not limited to the relations between former metropoles and former colonies. It also shows that reparation and redress require not only academic work focused on the analysis of preserved historical documents, but in the first place require open and sincere debates with all stakeholders involved. The theme of colonisation from yet another angle is also present in Chapter 4, by Maria Giovanna Belcastro, Teresa Nicolosi and Patrizia Battilani, focused on the collection of physical anthropology preserved until today at the University of Bologna. While dealing with the history of racial science and its use as legitimisation of the colonial expansion, the authors also examine how the nationalist and fascist regimes made use of the museum collections and their

scientific interpretations, so that these became the tools for building the Italian Empire and fascist culture. Once again, the slippery nature of the 'problematic heritage' is revealed through seemingly neutral scientific objects (human remains).

Part I is concluded by Chapter 5, a testimony of Rahab Njeri from the University of Cologne. Drawing upon the Utu/Ubuntu philosophy – that is, the philosophical stream grounded in African intellectual traditions – she demonstrates the potential, but also the pitfalls, of efforts to fight racism in German universities.

Part II, 'Authoritarianism', is opened by Chapter 6, written by a team from the Uzhhorod National University, under the principal authorship of Myroslava Lendel. The text deals with the complex history of this relatively new university, with historical developments marked by the nationalist, political, ideological, cultural and economic negotiations that took place in the territory of present-day western Ukraine. Referring preponderantly to the period of Soviet rule and its legacies, the authors nevertheless take as their starting point the concept of 'coloniality', thus responding to the recent debates about the structural similarities of the Soviet imperial ambitions and the European expansion of the modern period. Yet they also open numerous other important issues, such as the role of universities – as educational, cultural, even political institutions – in local contexts. Chapter 7, by Markéta Křížová, returns to the important issue of university museums of anthropology and their sensitive collections of human remains, as well as their foundational ideologies of quantifiable science and racial theories. Exploring the case study of the Hrdlička Museum of Man, the anthropological collection founded in the 1930s at Charles University in Prague, she studies the ways in which the anthropological specimens were put to use by nationalist competitions in a local context. Again, the topic of 'colonialism' appears in the text. The author refers to the 'colonialist fantasies' of a nation not directly involved in colonial expansion; at the same time, the Nazi and Communist discourses regarding the human remains and their use in the regime's own legitimisation are also explored.

The Nazi racial science and interpretation of history is also the principal theme of Chapter 8, by Matthias Legnér. Starting from the case study of the collection of plaster casts depicting rock art from the Scandinavian bronze age, acquired by Nazi expeditions in the 1930s and deposited at present at Göteborg University, the author not only demonstrates the ideological uses of rock art research but also reveals the mechanisms of the transnational circulation of objects and ideas within Europe throughout the turbulent twentieth century. As is the case with many other chapters in the present volume, label-

ling the collection as 'problematic' certainly does not mean underestimating its value for the study of the earliest chapter of European history; at the same time, the circumstances of its acquisition certainly mean a great challenge both for its use by scholars and its presentation to the public. Finally, Chapter 9, a shorter reflective piece by Riin Alatalu and Anu Soojärv on the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallin, adresses the theme of Soviet imperialism of the twentieth century and its relationship with the academic institutions of the present day, as well as the role of these institutions in shaping the narratives of the problematic pasts. Concretely, they focus on the built heritage, public monuments and names of public buildings, revealing the numerous dissonant voices that could be heard with regard to the legacies of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries.

Part III, 'Modernities', is opened by Chapter 10, by Laura Mercader Amigó, Dolores Pulido and Ramón Dilla Martí, which brings forward the so important theme of gender imbalances in academia, and the heritage of gender-based discrimination that represents the constituent part of the history of all European universities (or at least those founded before the mid-twentieth century). The chapter considers the recent initiative from the highest representatives of the University of Barcelona to engage with feminist critiques and presents some concrete activities of remedy. More generally, shows how the narratives that surround university cultural heritage often reinforce gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Bernadette Biedermann, in Chapter 11, offers a case study of the criminological collection at the museum of the University of Graz. While the collection bears witness to the changing ideas of refining criminology methods, and the underlying ideas of crime and justice, it is also heavily laden with ethical questions about the representation of the victims of violent acts (glorification of crime), as well as with human remains. In Chapter 12, Ulrika Kjellmann opens up for related conversations in her discussion of the collection of anthropological photographs originally owned by the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology, currently held by the Uppsala University Library. Produced with the aim of classifying the Swedish people according to racial criteria, and identifying the superior (e.g., Nordic) and inferior (e.g., Sami, Eastern Baltic, vagrants, criminals) groups, the collection brings testimony to the racialised bias of modern science and its objectives. It also challenges the institution that preserves them as to rethink the strategies of their display and presentation.

Chapter 13, by Simon Buck and Ian Stewart, addresses the preliminary results of the Decolonised Transformations Project, aiming to investigate the University of Edinburgh's involvement in histories of slavery, colonialism and racial science. It not only shows that the University was financially implicated

in the profits of slavery and colonialism, but also reveals the complicated colonial networks of knowledge and their long-term repercussions at the University and the community of its alumni. Last but not least, in Chapter 14, Peter Bille Larsen revisits problematic university heritage in Geneva, the capital of global finance, human rights and humanitarianism. Ranging from human remains to monuments in the public space, he demonstrates how contentious legacies are not unique exceptions, but illustrative of deep-running backstories of colonial entanglements, racial theorisation and discriminatory practice, offering critical vehicles for transformative learning.

To change or not to change?

Will institutional attention to problematic heritage actually change anything? Can heritage critique shift hegemonic worldviews and epistemologies? Feminist critique challenges how diversity policies may, in fact, be instrumentalised. As Alison Phipps and Liz McDonnell remind us, critical reports may be shelved only to reemerge to fend off critique as part of the master's tools.[21] Yet the case of the University of Barcelona, presented in this volume, demonstrates that critique indeed can lead to changes. The question is whether reports, commissions and new forms of storytelling ultimately make a difference or simply enable institutions to dissipate radical thought,[22] reassert moral high grounds and regain public trust. There is a real risk of the so-called 'politics of admissions' regretting problematic heritage in a non-performative way.[23] Reimagining university heritage may therefore enable 'education as usual' without fundamentally challenging systems of privilege and exclusion. Hussain et al., in this volume, reference literature on 'woke-washing' and 'audit culture', where apology only serves to preserve elite status and privilege. What, then, prevents token attention and recognition being weaponised against the very social forces seeking change? The answer, we believe, lies in building on collective insights and building systemic mechanisms to secure high-level buy-in and comprehensive approaches.

For one, the studies from different partner universities show the uneven nature of engaging with problematic heritage. A certain historical opportunism is often involved in creating more space to problematise heritage in public and collective terms. This suggests that European university networks can have a role to play in systematically creating space, securing adequate resources and institutional mechanisms for such dialogue. Single reports or meetings will not suffice.

Secondly, not all problematic heritage areas are being mapped equally by everyone. There has been a colonial momentum in recent years, but decolonial

attention remains uneven. The volume also draws attention to the panorama of other problem areas from gender discrimination, xenophobia and social exclusion to legacies of authoritarian regimes. More can be done, yet this does require dedicated resources for research, documentation and dialogue, as well as high-level commitment of the university management. Adopting clear-cut policy frameworks in this direction will be necessary.

Thirdly, the volume demonstrates how problematic heritage can indeed be transformed into a resource or an opportunity for positive change. Universities are also about humanity, hope and rethinking societal change.[24] Selected items from university collections, for example, can be used to problematise history in new and tangible ways that allow the reworking of relations, didactical approaches and even curricula. By renaming university buildings and public spaces, as the physical settings for academic life, these can become sites for rethinking practice through performance and inclusive narratives.

Fourth, where activities are undertaken, what have we learnt about actual impacts? Do reports end up in drawers or genuinely stimulate change and lead to new policy commitments? The transformative potential of problematising heritage limited to a stand-alone 'doing good' exercise should not be overestimated. We must resist the urge for quick answers and solutions, and instead acknowledge the complexity of the issues involved. With this goes the necessity of replacing the forced dichotomies (European/non-European, civilised/barbarian, East-West) that stood at the base of the colonial world system as well as the oppressive regimes of the recent past. Sexism, racism and colonial legacies remain and often reappear in fragmented and diffuse ways, prompting the need for systemic responses.

Fifth, in prolongation, there is a common need to think more carefully about how to shift from single-issues and fire-fighting to systemic change. More than just a disavowal of the violence committed in the past, addressing problematic heritage is about unlocking sedimented, embedded and structural conditions of contemporary higher education systems and their relation to society. How then can we interrupt such logics and unlearn harmful ways of thinking, feeling, doing, relating, knowing and being? We need far more work to bridge the disconnect between material conditionalities and critique of knowledge categories and representation.[25]

In summary, institutional responses and investments in problematic heritage differ considerably. Some universities have so far not yet begun the debate at an institutional level. A certain conservatism, even resistance, may prevail, leaving the conversation in the hands of individual scholars. Elsewhere, ad hoc committees have been set for concrete issues, while others have

embarked on specific studies. University attention is not merely a matter of problematisation and mapping, but also responding to it through policy and institutional measures. Unless the latter is undertaken, the exercise is not only reduced to lip-service, but may potentially even serve to fend off reimagining of academia.

All the case studies converge around one important message: problematic heritage is not an exception, but a constitutive dimension of Europe as an imagined community, our university institutions and academic practice. Cooperation among institutions is therefore crucial, not just to share our experiences, but to join forces in building a shared commitment to rethink heritage making in our institutions and mobilise it for pluralist futures.

Notes

1. Walter Rüegg, 'Foreword', in *A History of the University in Europe*, vol. 1, ed. Walter Rüegg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xix.
2. Fassil Demissie, 'Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments: An Introduction', *African Identities* 5, no. 2 (2007): 155–165.
3. Ariana González Stokes, *Reparative Universities: Why Diversity Alone Won't Solve Racism in Higher Ed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023), 144.
4. At European level, Universeum was created in 2000 (https://www.universeum-network.eu/), and at international level, ICOM-UMAC (Committee for University Museums and Collections) was created at the International Council of Museums' general assembly in Barcelona in 2001 (http://umac.icom.museum).
5. Recommendation Rec 13, of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the governance and management of university heritage, 7 December 2005. https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805d9276. Quotes p. 5 and 11.
6. Paul Ayris, Katrien Maes and Bart Raymaekers, eds., *Academic Heritage at LERU Universities* (s.l: s.p., 2022), 5, https://www.leru.org/files/Publications/Academic-heritage-at-LERU-universities.pdf. See also massive commemorative volume on Polish university heritage, Hubert Kowalski et al., eds., *Treasure Houses of Polish Academic Heritage* (Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2020).
7. Hilde Ridder-Symoens, 'The University as European Cultural Heritage: A Historical Approach', *Higher Education in Europe* 31, no. 4 (2006): 369.
8. Sharon Stein, *Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022), 7.
9. Vineeta Singh and Neha Vora, 'Critical University Studies', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (2023): 41.
10. Ibid, 42.
11. Stein, *Unsettling the University*, 53–54.
12. Nick Shephard, ed., *Rethinking Heritage in Precarious Times: Coloniality, Climate Change, and Covid-19* (London: Routledge, 2023).

13. Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.
14. Jos Van Beurden, *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 15.
15. John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
16. Tony Bennett, *Birth of a Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995); Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality', in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104.
17. Evan Schofer and John W. Meyer, 'The Worldwide Expansion of Higher Education in the Twentieth Century', *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 6 (2005): 898–920.
18. Walter Mignolo, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity", in *Modernologies. Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism: Catalog of the Exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, Barcelona, Spain* , ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Barcelona: MACBA, 2009), 42.
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22. Richard Hall et al., 'Struggling for the Anti-racist University: Learning from an Institution-wide Response to Curriculum Decolonisation', *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 7–8 (2021): 902–919.
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24. Áine Mahon, 'The Gift of the Interval? Revisiting the Promises of Higher Education', in *The Promise of the University: Reclaiming Humanity, Humility, and Hope*, ed. Áine Mahon (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 1–13.
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