Right from the outset of this editorial, I would like to alert the reader to the fact that many of the texts in previous editions of Artalk Revue have touched upon the topic of colonialism or the neocolonial and neoliberal practices of late capitalism. This attests to the omnipresent nature of this topic in art and theory, in contemporary politics and economics, and in our everyday lives. These five new contributions consider this problem from other, new perspectives, searching for and examining the foundations of current demands for decolonisation.

Although the term “decolonisation” first appeared in the mid-19th century, it only really entered into usage after the Second World War, in works by European and American scholars and politicians, mostly in reference to the process by which former European colonies gained their territorial sovereignty.¹ At this time, decolonisation also referred to a number of other terms used to describe the situation in European overseas colonies, such as national liberation, the end of empire, or the transfer of power.² The term first gained traction in French in connection to the Algerian war of liberation in the late 1950s. One of the most significant proponents of decolonisation at this time was the revolutionary thinker and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front. A number of contemporary theorists working on this topic are still developing his ideas today.

Nowadays, the term – now an oft-used imperative – is applied generally to a broad spectrum of human (and non-human) activities. It is used not only to refer to the struggle of the indigenous population for expropriated land, natural resources, and

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¹ See Todd Shepard, Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents, Boston/New York: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2014, pp. 8–9.
² Although there are still a few European overseas colonies/territories, the end of the long “decolonisation era” is usually dated as 1997, when the United Kingdom returned Hong Kong to China. Recent events in the region and contemporary decolonisation discourse make this fact particularly symptomatic.
rights that were taken from them, but also in relation to various necessary structural changes to institutions, both educational (schools and universities) and cultural (museums and galleries), in the former metropolises. It refers to the very form of thought and operation of the Western – Euro-American – world, formed over centuries by the conquering/exploiting/racist/supremacist approach of the imperial and colonial powers. Decolonisation has become an issue of urgent need – an instrument of change but also a metaphor that is applied perhaps a little too easily.3

One of the aims of this issue will be to alert the reader to the constant presence of imperialism/colonialism as a form of structural violence that manifests itself in various forms, influencing the present. Through the selected texts, we will attempt to show how these forms reveal themselves in contemporary societies and suggest how we might fight against them. We will ask whether it is possible to make amends and repair what has been done. The turn from postcolonial thinking and practice to decolonial will be reflected upon as one of the present symptoms that needs to be subjected to inquiry.

3 In this context, I would like to refer the readers to a critical article titled “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor”, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277992187_Decolonization_Is_Not_a_Metaphor, accessed 2.1.2020, in which Eva Tuck and K. Wayne Yang highlight the problematic aspects of the “metaphorisation”, which takes part in the blurring of boundaries, the camouflaging of wrongdoings by the principal participants of both the colonial past and the neocolonial present.
Decolonisation in the Czech Republic

The current debates on decolonisation have gradually and carefully made their way into Czech cultural and academic institutions, while the Czech political representation continues to reject any refugees. Until recently, the government’s position on climate change was equally dismissive. It is these two parallel “crises” – climate and refugee – that are the pressing problems we face as inhabitants of planet Earth. We consider (global) capitalism to be their source, along with imperialism and colonialism, both intimately connected with capitalism.

Until recently, colonialism was mostly overlooked in the Czech Republic, the topic itself considered marginal and unimportant, often dismissed with the laconic sentence “It doesn’t concern us because we had no colonies”. In the present situation, however, such arguments simply will not hold. In the geopolitical and discursive context between Central and Eastern Europe, the issue of decolonisation represents a very specific type of political act.

Why, how, and what we should decolonise in the Czech context is the topic of the contribution by political theorist Pavel Barša. He describes specific movements on the East–West and North–South axes that took place in Czech political discourse from the 1980s to the present. He describes the “perverse consequences” generated by the official rhetoric and politics on the one hand and the dissidents’ thinking on the other, which tended towards the simple logic of “sympathising with the enemies of our enemy”. Barša accurately analyses the process by which the previous regime’s propagandistic self-legitimation – founded on an emphasis on the polarity between the imperialist, racist West, and the oppressed, exploited South – was simply replaced by a new polarity, this time between the imperialist East and colonised Central Europe. The oppressed South (also referred to as “the Third World” or “the periphery”) was simply left out of this equation. According to the author, the West, or rather the project of returning to Europe, became the final horizon of the self-centred foreign policy of the post-communist governments of the 1990s. It is now, after our successful return to Europe, when we have finally “assumed our desired place among the former
colonists and thus also lost the alibi of the colonised”, that Barša sees the ideal moment to begin the decolonisation of our thinking.

The unexpected trajectories of solidarity

The text by artist Ladislava Gažiová is an accurate study of our colonial past. Gažiová takes us back to the 1880s, the time of the first anti-imperial uprisings. She focuses on the friendship between José Rizal, the Filipino doctor, writer, national hero, and founder of the reformist movement known as the Philippine League (La Liga Filipina), and Ferdinand Blumentritt, a high school teacher in the Czech city of Litoměřice and a leading 19th-century Filipinist. The author focuses on a factual account of this unusual long-term collaboration, using selected quotations to demonstrate the complexity of anti-colonial struggles, and emphasising the part played by solidarity.

The friendship between these two men was recently also used as a set piece in order to cement new business partnerships: last year, the governors of the national banks of both countries ceremonially unveiled a bronze bust of Rizal in the hall of the Czech National Bank. We can find testimony to the often unsatisfactory balance between entrepreneurial and cultural relationships in the fact that very few us know that one of the first Non-European anticolonial novels in world literature, written by José Rizal, devoted to the Litoměřice native Ferdinand Blumentritt. The novel, *El filibusterismo*, is an exceptional work in many respects, and so it comes as no surprise that Benedict Anderson devotes a number of pages to it in his book on anarchism and the anti-colonial imagination. The title of one of the most dramatic chapters of the novel is also the title of Gažiová’s contribution, which aims primarily to actualise a neglected example of mutual cooperation and cohesiveness displayed by two protagonists of anti-colonial history, encouraging us to explore the archives of solidarity.

Perverse decolonization

I interviewed the Polish sociologist Jan Sowa about “Perverse Decolonization”, a research project he has been working on for the last two years, initiated by the Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne. According to Sowa, the project focuses on “the parallel phenomenon of the right-wing capture of left-wing intellectual tools and the left-wing turn to identity politics”, which diverts attention from the economic and material aspects of the problems faced by societies today. Looking for the causes of these processes, he names “post-structuralist episteme” in combination with “neoliberal economic policy”, which together lead to a conservative-populist uprising based on resuscitating primordial identities and confirming diverse particularisms. Postcolonial studies play an important part in this context, and the project also criticises this field. Furthermore, Sowa points out the specific weaknesses of postcolonial studies, as well as the ways in which right-wing politicians in Poland have misused the field. According to him, we are now witness (in contrast to the assumptions of some 20th-century theorists of modernization) to an upending of the basic advances of modernity, with the centres looking more and more like the peripheries. He sees potential for a struggle against dominant and globally unified capital in overcoming identity politics and cultural differences, i.e. diverse particularisms on the one hand and the search for new “universalisms” defined on the
basis of equality on the other, for example “universal taxation”, “universal dependence on the ecosystem”, and the like.

After this historical excursion into the political and sociological considerations anchoring the space and context of the former Eastern Europe into broader geopolitical coordinates, we turn our attention to contemporary symptomatic movements in the field of cultural and institutional politics. This editorial is therefore complemented by two further chapters in which I attempt to capture the trajectories of these politics.

The Return of the Looted “Artefacts”

The current debate on decolonisation in the institutional context of culture takes many forms. One direction that attracts considerable political and media attention is the question of the return of looted “artefacts”, which accelerated in November 2017 as a result of a promise made by French president Emmanuel Macron at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. This promise first took shape a year later with the publication of the Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage, which Macron commissioned from the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr and French art historian Bénédicte Savoy. Among other things, this document recommended the return of about 90,000 objects from French museums to their countries of origin, mostly located in sub-Saharan Africa. To date, no artefacts have been returned – not even the 26 ceremonial statues from Benin stolen by the French army in the 19th century and now located in the collections of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, the return of which Macron had promised immediately upon receipt of the report. Instead of quickly returning the objects to their countries of origin, in July 2019 France offered Benin a loan of 20 million euros to build a new museum in Abomey where the statues could be shown. It remains only to ask how favourable the terms of such a loan from the French development agency will be for Benin, and to hope that the process of “decolonisation” in European museums does not become an interminable farce. While we could fill many pages listing similar affairs or requests for the return of various artefacts that get no response for decades, I would suggest that we look at the topic from a different perspective. The return of objects acquired in the former colonies through the use of

5 Negotiations about the return of artefacts stolen by European colonisers in Africa in the 19th century started a decade earlier, in 2007, with article 11 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. That same year, a consortium of European museums – the Benin Dialogue Group – was also established.

6 The diplomatic language used is symptomatic of the entire discussion: we hear the word “restitution” far more often than “repatriation” or “return” of stolen artefacts (violently acquired cultural objects whose acquisition was qualified as a colonial crime against the original owners/indigenous communities).

7 In order for the artefacts really to be returned from France (rather than simply figuring as a promise or rhetorical figure in a political speech), a legislative framework has to be created and implemented (after confirmation by the French parliament). We impatiently await these steps to be taken by the French state.
violence and other methods that are legally or otherwise unjustifiable today is a moral obligation, and we can only be amazed at the fact that we have waited so long. However, it is now taking place concurrently with the refugee crisis, so we can observe that while borders are becoming permeable for once-stolen objects in one direction, they are being fortified with barbed wire in the other. While we follow the efforts to return objects stolen in the past to people from the former colonies, we also see being turned away those who have fled from these countries where, through transnational corporations, toxic infrastructure, and newly created tools and technologies – including our consumer habits old and new – we support the continuing exploitation of people and natural resources. We thus cement old inequalities while generating new ones.

In “Plundering, Objects, Art, and Law”, a chapter of her recently published book, theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay emphasises that colonial thefts cannot be seen only as the “the mere appropriation of discrete objects”.\(^8\) She thus draws attention to the fact that this plundering crucially established the destruction of the political and material world inhabited by the colonised, a world that was then degraded through the imperial powers’ professional procedures and protocols (museums, galleries, art history), which turned these objects into works of art. According to Azoulay, their newly gained status and identity as art objects has to be recalled in order for us to recognise the rights inscribed in the stolen objects: “Once recognized, these rights can become the basis for providing the victims of mass looting a place – not just an “asylum” – close to their objects, or enabling them to unite with these objects under various arrangements.”\(^9\)

The loose canons, the inclusion of perspectives, and the redress of cultural institutions

Current attempts at reform in cultural institutions at all levels\(^10\) also relate to changing approaches to the creation of programmes and the presentation of their own collections. Cultural policy in some European countries thus includes the creation of new institutions, programmes, and exhibitions presenting new critical narratives, which allow for a deeper reflection on the imperial and colonial past. One of the many examples of this shift is the programme of the Global Museum, realised by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, which has instigated many exhibitions in a number of institutions aimed at redefining the presentation of their own collections from “non-Western perspectives”.\(^11\) In “Loose Canons”, an article published in 2017 in Frieze magazine, Ana Teixeira Pinto reflects on the Global Museum, pointing out the problematic moments of this new conception and contemporary museum regulation of cultural difference. She sees within the politics of inclusion (of voices, narratives, and perspectives) an attempt to redress the Eurocentric approach, as well as a certain atonement for the history of subjugation and colonialism. However, she also points out that the exploitation of non-European indigenous societies can continue even in the cultural appraisal of their heritage. The problem of violence – both symbolic and real – cannot simply be undone through inclusion and recontextualisation. It is also necessary to subject the conceptual and normative categories on which the Western canon is based to thorough re-examination.

Decolonising art!

The problem of decolonising art is explored in more depth in a contribution by Françoise Vergès. Her text was originally part of a publication, Décolonisons les arts! (Decolonise the Arts!), put out in 2018 by an eponymous collective of three editors and fifteen artists.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 65.
\(^10\) On the structural level, this involves problematic mechanisms of operation but also funding, and in some cases even the very raison d’être of their existence. The discussions take place internally: the professionals and employees organising themselves, like the Museum Detox group, for instance, established in Britain in 2016, or – and this is much more common – thanks to publicised external pressure from activists in newly established initiatives such as Decolonize This Place or NotAnAlternative.
\(^11\) I would like to mention several exhibitions realised as part of this programme: A Tale of Two Worlds at the MMK in Frankfurt (2017–2018), Microhistories of Ex-centric Modernism at K20 in Düsseldorf (2018–2019), Global Resonances at Berlin’s Hamburger Bahnhof (2016), and exhibitions created under the heading of the Kanon-Fragen project in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, also in Berlin.
In this article, the French theorist and feminist begins her analysis with examples of problematic behaviour on the part of cultural and educational institutions that have as yet not undergone the necessary transformation. As proof, she cites the fact that these institutions still lack colonial history and critical theories of visual and postcolonial studies. Vergès points out the deep roots of the racial structuralisation of mentalities and representations, the processes of erasure and silencing that often took place covertly and was based on “achievements which made forgetting natural”. It returns us to the beginnings of the slave trade, whose existence manifested the “entirely fictional character of universal human rights”. Vergès considers a knowledge of the vast “archive of colonisation” essential and ignoring it “wilful ignorance”. She further emphasises the difficulties inherent in the process of decolonisation, and its complex and many-sided nature. This process begins with the capacity and willingness to unlearn and give up certain privileges. The result is then the possibility to learn to see things differently again, and to “stop seeing the world, which is created by economic and political regimes, as something natural”.

As a feminist and activist, she emphasises the indispensability of intersectionality and the need to overcome internal disputes. And it is from these positions that she posits an aim to overcome the “fragmentarisation” imposed by the patriarchy, sexism, racism, and capitalism. In place of a conclusion, Vergès offers a list of specific points of debate that can also find their application in our local context.

In addition to the decolonisation of art and decolonial feminism, Vergès also address the impact of the climate collapse on the inhabitants of the global South. In her essays, she refers particularly to its deep roots in colonialism and capitalism, calling their contemporary constellation the “racial Capitalocene”. She also points out that the inhabitants of the global South and minorities are not just the primary victims of ecological catastrophes caused by corporate colonialism, but that they also crucially took part in analysing colonialism and searching for new ways of resisting racialised environmental policies (environmental racism). It is no coincidence that, according to many commentators, the 2019 global climate conference in Madrid was marked particularly by clearly rising animosities between countries of the global South and North. The climate crisis and related issues of climate justice are certainly today’s burning questions.

The crisis of European imagination

Under the umbrella term “crises of European imagination”, Ferreira da Silva diagnoses the insufficient capacities necessary for the ethical resolution of the two interlinked and concurrent crises – the refugee crisis and the climate crisis. The author defines both as colonial, created and driven by the extractivist logic of global capital. She goes on to demonstrate how coloniality and raciosity currently operate as two key tools of global politics, resolutely refusing as solutions to the refugee crisis both dusted-off humanist concepts such as Kant’s cosmopolitanism/world citizenship or Derrida’s absolute hospitality. In order to adequately respond to the current crises, she claims, we need an entirely new description of the world, one that requires a redefinition of epistemological and ethical orders on which the present colonial extractivist infrastructure relies. In the demand for decolonisation made by the racial others of Europe, she sees “the end of the world as we know it”.

In a chapter aptly titled “Calor and Labor”, Ferreira da Silva further speculates on the causes of climate change. Inspired by the law of conservation of energy, the philosophy of Empedocles, and the theory of fractals, she sees in the accumulated
greenhouse gases that cause the warming of our planet a global threat in the shape of transformed energies extracted principally from labour and resources acquired in the colonies. She sees violence as a neglected topic in discussions about the climate crisis, and as one of the foundations of the crisis. And the solution is then the anti-colonial approach to global capital, which requires the restoration/reconversion of energies extracted from the land and bodies of the “others of Europe”.

**Imagining the strike as a form of care**

We can consider repeatedly directing our attention back to the causes of imperial and colonial exploitation, to oppression, expropriation and the inequalities they cause, to their economic and political background, and to the violence that is at their essence one of the aims and tasks of the present debate on decolonisation. Another pressing task is the search for repair and solutions to the present situations, when a dark and unresolved past has come back to haunt us while the future looks darker by the minute.

An important part in this process is played by various forms of solidarity and alliance. These will be necessary to overcome all forms of oppression and exploitation and policies maintaining the toxic accumulation of capital, and necessary for us to learn to resolve both the refugee and climate crises together, fairly, and ethically. At present, we can see how these solidarities and alliances are created and develop in diverse protests, on public squares, in the streets, and in institutions around the world, or during the global strikes that the newly established climate movements use as an effective tool. The idea of strikes expressly designed for those of us operating within the art world is developed by Azoulay in the volume mentioned above. On the differently coloured pages of her book, which is printed on grey paper, she provokes our imagination with suggestions for potential strikes by professionals from the world of art, by theoreticians and practitioners, by workers at museums, galleries, archives, and academies, and by visitors to these institutions. Azoulay derives the right to strike from the right to resist oppression, but she also sees it as a possibility to care for the world we share. To care by refusing to take part in its destruction.

Let us conclude, then, with her words: “...if one’s work is conceived as a form of being-in-the-world, work stoppage cannot be conceived only in terms of the goals of the protest. One should consider the strike a modality of being in the world that takes place precisely by way of renunciation and avoidance, when one’s work is perceived as harming the shared world and the condition of sharing it. In a world conditioned by imperial power, a collective strike is an opportunity to unlearn imperialism with and among others even though it has been naturalized into one’s professional life. Going on strike is to claim one’s right not to engage with destructive practices, not to be an oppressor and perpetrator, not to act according to norms and protocols whose goals were defined to reproduce imperial and racial capitalist structures.”

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