A New German Historians' Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg (Part II)

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This is the seco[…] conversation wi[…] Rothberg about […] and memory of the Holocaust and colonialism. [Part one] *explored the central issues at stake in the latest debates and their relation to the German Historians' Debate of the 1980s. Part two engages the relationship of minorities to official Holocaust memory in a diversifying Germany, the role of scholarly positionality, and the relationship between scholarship and activism.*

Jonathon Catlin: Michael, you have been working with Yasemin Yildiz on book called "memory citizenship" about German-Turkish and other migrant encounters with Holocaust memory in Germany. You describe a "double-bind": minorities in Germany are told they *must* remember the Holocaust in order to become Germans, but also that they *cannot* remember the Holocaust because it is not their history. The formation of German identity as a nation of guilty perpetrators thereby inherently tends to exclude minorities from becoming "real" Germans.

Scholars working on this issue from an ethnographic perspective, such as you, Sultan, as well as Esra Özyürek and Irit Dekel, have shown how aspects of German Holocaust memory culture, such as discourse and memorials centered on a special German-Jewish or Judeo-Christian bond, often exclude and marginalize people of color in Germany. Some argue that guilt and the accusation of "ontological" antisemitism is "subcontracted" (Özyürek) or "outsourced" (El-Hassan) to those with migrant

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school group, in which you show how Holocaust memory is "universalized" while at the same time those with migrant backgrounds can be excluded from identifying with it. One of the Muslim guides, you write, "internalized an external gaze onto Muslims, as if inadvertently confirming that Muslim difference is incommensurable with the notion of 'humanity' proposed for the trip." At the same time, "The idea of identification with Jews as humans and erasing Jewish difference enabled some ethnic German students to imagine themselves under attack" from racialized notions of Islamist terrorism.

Michael and Dirk have also participated in the online video series "This is Germany," which pokes fun at the German phrase "Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund" (people with a migration background) by turning it on its head with the phrase "Menschen mit Nazihintergrund" (people with a Nazi background). Dirk, as you recently put the issue pointedly at the Einstein Forum symposium, the Holocaust memory regime that "had once discursively empowered multiculturalism is now directed against migrants and refugees, especially from the Middle East." You have also written of the "affective colonization" of Middle Eastern, and specifically Germans of Palestinian origin, whose perspectives seem to be inassimilable. As Sultan has written, "instead of civil courage," the value ostensibly taught by the civil education programs examined in your fieldwork, many educators of minority backgrounds leading those trainings "learned to self-silence or to talk in whispers and

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historical links between the Nazi period and racial science and colonialism in Africa. Mirjam Brusius has argued that the debate is not about historical comparison as such but rather “about finding more nuance, complicating what we believe we know, and looking for the ways in which other groups of people have used these histories to give force to their own struggles.” It has become clear that Germany has poor vocabulary for discussing “race,” a notion tainted by its role in Nazi thinking. At the same time, I was struck by how Sultan emphasizes the role of religion and the othering of Muslims as evidence of not so much an “incomplete secularization,” but rather the way “religious reason, memory politics, and citizenship are enmeshed in the secular state with far reaching consequences as to who belongs.” To what extent do you see the doubling down on what Michael calls “competitive memory” in recent years as activating older histories of prejudice, versus as a new chapter in addressing the “minority question” in Europe?

Sultan Doughan: Allow me to clarify the dynamics in my fieldwork. I worked with civic education projects primarily funded to combat Islamic extremism. They mobilized Holocaust education and memory to teach tolerance, but they were not based at memorial sites. In fact, they regarded Holocaust memorials as old-fashioned forms of engaging history: frozen, moralizing, and too ritualized. Yet the schools they catered to thought memorial sites, especially

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memory and migration in public is much softer in these domains because you must reach immigrant communities. You cannot punish them if you want them to change. My fieldwork taught me a lot about the delicate nature of this work, and about my own assumptions and prejudices.

Educational practices were rather playful, game-like, and based on role play. The organizations usually emphasized responsibility and agency, while guilt was seen as obstructing a renewed bond with the past. These are civic education projects invested in forging liberal subjects for a demographically changing Germany; hence they emphasized to the students that they were defenders of liberal democracy and that they should regard this as a gift. The students, in contrast, complained that they were discriminated against and that they were victims: "what about us?" or "why always Jews?" were common reactions, which was interpreted as victim-competition, and as potentially antisemitic. On an institutional level, I think there is an extreme anxiety that these new immigrants (actually German-born citizens) could in fact bring back discussions about race and racism, equal rights despite religious and ethnic difference, and a rethinking of secularism, which are basically unfinished debates German-Jews began some two hundred years ago, before their collective claims were disrupted by the Holocaust.

What you quoted from my forthcoming article, "Desiring Memorials: Jews, Muslims and the Human of Citizenship," deals

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Germany, you downplay differences and try to look for commonalities, or you just practice mimicry and assimilate. At the same time, many things that would be considered racist in the U.S. pass in Germany as an "objective" description of how Muslims, and sometimes Jews, are. And this is a problem, because on the one hand, you cannot describe differences other than through a racializing language and on the other, you have internalized that racism and racialization are strictly Nazi procedures and do not exist.

I have another forthcoming article in which I discuss "postracial pedagogies" in Germany after the Holocaust and how this ultimately turns into a play of seeking out depoliticized sentiments and prejudices such as hate based on the wrong ideology. This becomes particularly complex in educational praxis that centers the figure of the Jew as the historical and categorical victim of racism. The premise here is that Jews are not different at all, but were made different by the Nazis through pseudo-science. As an anthropologist, I would rather ask how Jews were governed with regards to their traditional and religious particularities, because this is where the issue of race emerges. Why should Jews or Muslims resemble Christians or Christian-secularized Germans? Can there be any space for self-determination for minorities in Germany? But this is not the conversation we are having, and I think if this conversation happens at all it should not be about

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The notion of hu
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maintain, for each new ethno-religious difference that was revealed became provocative, and sometimes purposefully so. The notion of the human centers the figure of the victimized Jew, but it does so by disregarding any potential difference besides the reference "Jewish." What made the person recognizably Jewish was the experience of the Holocaust and the loss of Jewish communal life. Students encountered a Jewish person as a Holocaust survivor and took from that encounter that she was a normal person, just like anyone else. Certainly, the experience of the Holocaust belongs to survivors and their descendants, but is this the only feature of being Jewish in Germany? So the notion of humanity, and specifically the secular human of German citizenship, mobilizes the figure of the Jew, but in a way that it resembles a Christian-secularized German. This has a lot to do with how Holocaust memory is organized in the Western European public sphere. Although displayed and visible, it conceals the crux of the matter, namely that we are dealing with longer-standing structural issues of religious difference, minoritization, and the crisis of citizenship.

So let me be clear: I do not think that "Muslims are the new Jews." We are in a very different historical and political time, and yet, the exceptionalism and triumphalism of Holocaust debates in Germany occlude unreflected issues surrounding religious difference and citizenship. The minority question is certainly connected to these debates, because the last two decades have

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youth projects, surveilled by administrative institutions, and amplified through social media. The major difference between now and older racial relations is that German Jews could become liberal subjects, and perhaps that's why they were so threatening to Christians in Germany. Today's range of immigrants, I believe, will remain immobile Muslim laboring subjects, not improved enough yet, or with one slight mistake can be disposed of again. So, yes, in my scholarship I address the minority question as one that cannot be asked in Germany.

JC: Another question that often remains unaskable is the role of identities in scholarly debates. Michael, I was struck by the frankness with which you write about your own positionality as a scholar in your 2019 book, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Your family, with a European Jewish background, emigrated to the U.S. around the turn of the last century, such that you are not directly complicit in formal slavery in the U.S., nor were your ancestors directly victimized by the Holocaust. Yet you remain *implicated*, in separate, though sometimes overlapping ways, by lines of historical domination and victimization, advantage and disadvantage, that continue to bear on the present. Reflecting on your own experience led you to develop a moral theory of "implication" that goes beyond the reductive binary of victim and perpetrator. Dirk, you come from a settler colony, Australia, which in my understanding exhibits more public consciousness of that history of violence than the U.S. You have

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especially when speaking to a German audience with evidently little appreciation for histories of colonial violence and of the diversity of non-Zionist Jewish orientations?

Dirk Moses: You are right to note that my hailing from the settler colony of Australia is a key formation for me. Indigenous colleagues and friends played an important role in broadening my horizons. You are also right to point to the limited imaginative capacity of German journalists and even some academics to understand positionality, in part, I think, because they continue to inhabit a revolutionary temporality. Because the Historikerstreit began a moral refoundation of the German republic in a twenty-year period from the mid-1980s, subsequent memory debates are framed in its terms. Thus I am often denounced as a leftwing Nolte despite the absurdity of the moniker. Its memorable battles are restaged although circumstances have changed. Yet the trope is clearly irresistible, as even such a careful and distinguished historian as Sebastian Conrad was denounced as a latter-day Nolte by his colleague Martin Schulze-Wessel for daring to contextualize Holocaust memory in global perspective rather than adhere to it as an article of faith.

SD: Like Michael and Dirk, I am of course implicated in different histories of violence and domination. My father came to Germany in 1961 as a guest worker from Turkey, but he was actually not Turkish-Sunni, but Syrian-Alawi. Although indigenous to the region,

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During my fieldwork some people refused to work with me or do interviews because they saw me as either too pro- or anti- their work, or either too committed or not committed enough to their worldview. These were perceptions of me, of course, because I never claimed such positions. In hindsight, I can see that I must have made many people uncomfortable with my mere presence in places where they discussed Muslim youth and their antisemitism and extremism—especially because I did not just nod and agree, but asked questions. The most common response was: "Why do you ask that question?" For me this indicated that I should not question the way the world is, that I should not participate, but just observe. In a way this is indicative of the minority position in Germany: you are on the receiving end and disagreement or deviation cannot be accepted as a different position that can coexist, but is often seen as hostile and destructive. German academic spaces were not any different. I think I have no place in German academia. Regardless of my achievements, I have been told I am still not the right kind of German. Shouldn't this make us all consider where we are with regards to incorporating differences and diverse viewpoints in German institutions? I speak from the position of the scholar in exile, as do many other German women and scholars of color who work on Germany critically but from abroad, where our work is respected and valued. At Clark, I certainly allow my students to develop their scholarly positionality,

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Michael Rothbe
know so many (
because they can't bear the everyday racism and because they know that they have little chance of success in the German academy. The U.S. and U.K. have been more welcoming, despite all the serious problems here. I also know scholars of color in Germany and who, with good reason, are afraid to speak about the issues we're discussing because they worry about the fallout of being perceived as deviating from the "catechism."

As far as my own self-positioning: I always thought of *The Implicated Subject* as a kind of "autobiographical" project, but it was only after a colleague urged me to speak about my own position that I decided to include that passage in the introduction. I'm glad I did, and whenever I speak about the book I start from my own implication as a beneficiary of histories of racial violence and colonialism in the Americas.

When we were preparing the interview that opens the German translation of *Multidirectional Memory* I deliberately decided to speak autobiographically. I naively believed that presenting my Jewish-American "credentials" might ward off some of the accusations of "antisemitism" and "Holocaust relativization" that I knew were a possibility—though I never imaged things would get as bad as they did. I was wrong, as I started to realize when the *Spiegel* published a picture of me with the caption "Scholar Rothberg: Holocaust memory functions like a zero-sum game"—a complete inversion of my argument. Or when another critic intoned, "Rothberg will not take away German responsibility"

(Claudius Seidl)
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the current state of discourse on antisemitism and the Holocaust in Germany: not only do "Muslims," Palestinians, and other people of color continue to be targeted for the kind of disciplining that Sultan describes, but there is no (longer?) hesitancy in targeting Jews and Jewish organizations as "antisemitic" when they challenge aspects of the hegemonic discourse, especially on Israel. So, in the U.S., I think of self-positioning as a way of taking responsibility for my status as an implicated subject, while in the German context I think of it as testing the limits of what is sayable.

JC: As you have all alluded to, academic freedom and freedom of expression in the public sphere in both Germany and the U.S. have become a matter of concern. Dirk writes of a "new illiberalism." Aleida Assmann proclaimed in the wake of the Mbembe affair that the specter of the accusation of antisemitism is "haunting Germany," and figures ranging from Peter Schäfer of the Jewish Museum Berlin to German-Palestinian doctor and journalist Nemi El-Hassan have lost their positions in pressure campaigns Micha Brumlik has likened to a McCarthyist witch hunt. As a result, scholars contributing to this debate have felt pressured to remain silent or publish anonymously. Even in the U.S., Princeton University withdrew support for an event on the topic of our exchange here.

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remarkable settlement. At that time, you defended the right of scholars "to engage the uneven field of interpretive power" in the public sphere and "to offer counter-narratives," even unpopular ones, against hegemonic accounts. How do you balance the scholarly and political aspects of that task? To put the question more pointedly to Dirk: your polemical approach in "The German Catechism" has met significant criticism, even among generally sympathetic thinkers. In light of the backlash that ensued, would you still defend the approach you took?

MR: I don't consider myself a political activist (or at least not a very good one!), but I do think that ideas are political and intellectuals have political responsibilities. What I've noticed about myself is that I respond very strongly when I recognize an injustice that is being performed in my name. In the case of Steven Salaita, or again with Achille Mbembe, I felt that prominent actors were speaking in the name of or in defense of Jews—or at least of perceived Jewish interests—in ways that I found disturbing: ways that essentially collapsed the State of Israel with Jewishness as such. That makes me angry, and it makes me want to speak out. Of course, there are lots of things done in my name that I object to —and that's why, like many people, I'll go to antiwar demonstrations, or what have you. But in cases like those of Salaita or Mbembe the additional factor is that they also speak to my expertise as a scholar in Jewish studies and Holocaust studies. Not only am I angry, but I feel I have something to say

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DM: I don't think my intervention was that polemical; certainly not compared to attacks endured by Mbembe, Michael, and others. If anything, it was written with an "Arendt-inspired tone," as Dan Stone observed. Amazingly, the mainstream view is that all was well in Germany until I made waves by casting a pebble into its placid pond. That is of course a self-serving and fanciful notion in view of the cases you mentioned. I did not start anything; rather, I simply called out this sort of bullying and proffered an explanation for it: namely, that a fairly small group of opinion-formers in the media, politics, and academia seek to control public narratives about Holocaust commemoration and the country's security commitment to Israel that they enforce as the country's *Staatsraison*. I then showed how each of the catechism's five articles of faith can be rethought by applying the findings of academic research. None of this made any impact other than provoking indignation. Of course, why would one expect these authorities to admit the abuse of power they wield? Quite predictably, they dug in their heels, blissfully unaware of their blind spots. For instance, in a radio debate with Jürgen Zimmerer in January 2021, the historians Norbert Frei and Sybille Steinbacher in one breath denied the existence of the catechism and in the next asserted that Germans must abide by the *Staatsraison*, all while equating postcolonial studies and far-right politics. Who can be surprised, then, that the "debate" was marked by serial

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and others, while about a third wrongly think their grandparents resisted the Nazis. Neither did their Holocaust education prevent the rise of the AfD. Instead of accepting responsibility for the inability of their pedagogical model to reach Germans, they lash out at critics.

That said, I think the historian Wolfgang Reinhard's intervention, which seemed to imply that Holocaust memory from the U.S. has been imposed in Germany, is neither accurate nor helpful. His tone and terms are reminiscent of the resistance to Holocaust memorialization in the 1980s and 1990s. He also underplays the important West German activism on the subject analyzed by Jenny Wüstenberg in *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany* (2018). As I have written in a number of places, this activism was very important in liberalizing Germany in the 1980s and 1990s. The problem is the perversion of this admirable enegy into coercive state policy over the last fifteen years. That is where the illiberalism lies. It is remarkable that certain colleagues seem to miss this distinction.

I noticed that the political-theological language I used triggered many of those invested in this culture. They may not realize that political theology is a venerable German intellectual tradition, as is the collective psychological approach of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich. Together, they supply the analytical tools to account for the intense emotions I explored in my first book. Iris Hefets's

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deteriorating further as we see in the cases of Nemi El-Hassan and the Dokumenta 15: more heresy trials. Some German colleagues I know are reasonably sanguine about the situation, but they live in villa districts and don't mix with people like Nemi El-Hassan. Other colleagues, who are Germans of "migration-background," assured me that the catechism essay expressed what they long said in private company but dare not utter in public for fear of retribution. There you have the enlightened Germany that has mastered its past.

Jonathon Catlin is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of History and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities (IHUM) at Princeton University. His dissertation is a conceptual history of *catastrophe* in modern European thought, focusing on German-Jewish intellectuals including the Frankfurt School of critical theory. He tweets @planetdenken.

Featured Image: Cracking stelae of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which was completed in 2004 (courtesy of Pexels, creative commons).

jhiblog February 4, 2022

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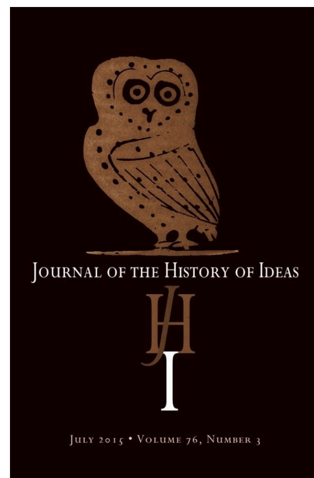

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