Confessions of an Ex-Believer

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Based on a general agreement with Dirk Moses' intervention, this contribution seeks to assess the significance of Holocaust memory for West German subjectivities in the 1980s. It argues that Holocaust memory and the singularity thesis need to be seen in the context of nationalist-conservative historical revisionism during the Kohl-era. The progressive function of Holocaust memory manifested itself in many local commemorative initiatives, which, at least occasionally, were quite willing to link the memory of the persecution of the Jews to racist exclusions in the West German present. By the early 2000s, however, Holocaust memory became increasingly ossified and ritualized and lost some of its earlier progressive meanings. How and why this shift occurred is still not fully understood. But it also meant that it became increasingly difficult to locate the Holocaust within a broader history of racism and state-sponsored violence. In fact, the increasingly rigid emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust rendered this memory less pertinent, perhaps even objectively unhelpful, for anti-racist struggles in the present. As such, this contribution sees Dirk Moses' intervention as a plea for a different, progressive and multidirectional Holocaust memory and not as a critique of German commemorative culture per se (as right-wing observers falsely claimed).

I read Dirk Moses' provocative piece with a series of mixed emotions: widespread agreement and internal nodding regarding the general substance, if perhaps not the tone, of the argument, yet also a sense of unease and a kind of *Betroffenheit* (being personally affected). Let me try to explain both reactions. I'll start with the latter. My unease, I think, results from the fact that I used to believe in what he calls the "catechism of the Germans." In fact, this catechism was central to my political socialization in the 1980s and 1990s and probably constitutes one, if not the most important reason, for the fact that I am now fortunate enough to a earn my living by thinking, writing, and teaching about German history. Moses' text clearly recognizes the significance of this "catechism" for West German subjectivities since the 1980s. But I think his essay does not sufficiently acknowledge both the reasons for this emotional investment as well as it broader significance.

As Moses states correctly, a belief in the singularity of the Holocaust—and a strong partisanship with Habermas and his left-liberal allies among the historical profession in the *Historikerstreit*—was absolutely central to Germans coming of age in the 1980s with broadly left-wing sympathies. Perhaps it simply resided in a naïve desire to be a "good German", as Moses asserts. But I would like to think that there were also some more important and profound motivations for this attitude. The most important one was to push back against a sustained and quite explicit conservative attempt to roll back whatever critical memory of the Nazi past had emerged and to recreate a positive national identity supposedly unburdened by the Nazi past. It's easy to underestimate the sense of anxiety and outrage that that this project invoked since an emerging critical memory of the Nazi past seemed so closely intertwined with West German democracy per se. It also should give pause to those who prematurely declare postwar Germany as some kind of "post-national" society. Some of this commemorative and historical revisionism was blatant nationalism, which had never completely disappeared and had fueled a conservative desire for a "final stroke" since the 1950s. Ironically, these attitudes were articulated precisely on the pages of those venues, especially the FAZ, that are now at the forefront of the defense of the singularity thesis!

The emotional and political commitment to Holocaust memory, however, was not really matched by any sort of deeper expertise in the subject. It's also important to remember how late the study of the Holocaust arrived in the German historical profession. Throughout my academic studies in the late 1980s

and early 1990s, I do not recall ever having seen a course offered on the history of Holocaust. In my *Gymnasium*, committed and progressive teachers taught about the rise of the Nazis and the destruction of Weimar democracy. But not about the Holocaust. At the time, Holocaust memory was anchored more strongly among non-professional historians, many of whom started local initiatives to research the history of their local Jewish communities. Some of the effects of these activities are visible to this day in local commemorative sites or, for example, in the wonderful exhibition on "We Were Neighbors" in the Schöneberg City Hall (http://www.wirwarennachbarn.de/index.php/denkmal-bayerisches-viertel.html). But for most of us, Holocaust memory did remain a rather abstract entity, more of an emotional commitment or a set of belief that was not really grounded either in a deep familiarity with Holocaust history or, for that matter, in any meaningful encounter with actual living Jewish people in Germany. I became aware of this fact only when I noticed how much I had to struggle in reconciling my belief in the singularity of the Holocaust (and therefore my membership in a unique perpetrator collective) with interacting with exceedingly generous and friendly Jewish professors at my first American host university. I will not dwell on my awkward contortions in these encounters. Suffice to say that "redemptive philosemtism", as Moses calls it, was quite difficult to put into practice, at least for me.

It is also important to remember and, in my view, not sufficiently acknowledged in Moses' text, that Holocaust memory was an unabashedly progressive project at the time. The peace movement of the 1980s, by far the largest protest movement in the history of the Federal Republic, projected Holocaust memory into the future with its apocalyptic imagination of a "nuclear Holocaust." There were also considerable efforts to link Holocaust memory to contemporary forms of exclusion and racism. One of my favorite songs at the time was "Kristalnaach" by the Cologne band BAP. The lyrics propagated a distinctly universal Holocaust memory and went as following (in translatiom from the original Kölsch): D*a, wo Darwin für alles herhält, Ob man Menschen vertreibt oder quält, Da, wo hinter Macht Geld ist, Wo Starksein die Welt ist, Vom Kuschen und Strammstehen entstellt, Wo man Hymnen auf dem Kamm sogar bläst, In barbarischer Gier nach Profit "Hosianna" und „Kreuzigt ihn" ruft, Wenn man nur einen Vorteil drin sieht, Ist täglich Kristallnacht. Nur noch Kristallnacht*. (If you don't know it, here it is: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK5O1rL0NwE). To be sure, there was of course no "daily Kristallnacht" in Germany at the time. But the examples demonstrate that, at least in popular culture, Holocaust memory entailed a critical edge with respect to the West German present.

Progressive Holocaust memory also enabled a critique of anti-foreigner racism (though mostly and euphemistically labeled "xenophobia" at the time). In the asylum debates of the 1980s and 1990s, the attack on foreigners was routinely combined with a critique of Holocaust memory whereas a defense of more welcoming attitudes toward asylum seekers was linked to a critical understanding of the German past, i.e. Holocaust memory. Some commemorative activities made this link public as well. The inauguration of the impressive memorial by Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock in the Bavarian quarter in Berlin Schöneberg in June 1993 explicitly invoked the neo-Nazi arson attack in Solingen one week earlier that killed five and injured 14 people with Turkish background. As these example demonstrates, the provincialism and singularity of Holocaust memory, its separation from other and more contemporary forms of racism, was not there from the beginning but constitutes itself a historical product that requires analysis and explanation.

While the catechism of Holocaust memory was therefore central to my political socialization and political identity formation, I have ceased to believe in it and have come to recognize its deficits. This is why I now essentially agree with the basic thrust of Moses' argument. This gradual disbelieving (not

really a conversion since I don't think it has been replaced by a similarly strong set of beliefs) constituted another painful process. It would exceed the available space to mark all its stages, but I want to highlight some of what I think are the most important markers.

Perhaps the most important one is a gradual recognition of the long and largely unacknowledged history of racism in postwar West Germany. The 1980s are crucial in this respect as well. This was the decade when a group of conservative academics could propagate unabashedly folkish theories in the Heidelberg declaration (published in the FAZ!) and warn against the "over-foreignisation" (*Überfremdung*) of the German *Volk*. West German policy toward foreigners already during the social-liberal coalition but then especially during the Kohl government aggressively promoted the return of foreigners to their alleged homeland, thus pursuing, according to Philipp Ther, a policy of "de-integration." Despite the isolated efforts mentioned above, Holocaust memory became increasingly isolated from these forms of official and popular racism. We still don't know how and why this decoupling of an emerging Holocaust memory, on the one hand, and racism toward ethnic minorities, on the other occurred. But I am inclined to agree with Rita Chin, Michael Meng and others, who have emphasized the limiting and, at times, exclusionary nature of Holocaust memory. Holocaust memory, especially in its singularist version, called on the former members of the *Volksgemeinschsft* (national community) to confront a difficult past. In so doing, it tended to exclude non-ethnic and non-white Germans who made up an increasing part of West German society. Racism too, was increasingly limited to Nazi biological antisemitism, everything else became euphemistically labeled "xenophobia" or "hostility toward foreigners." The 1980s were also the period when other minorities like Afro-Germans began to organize and form a distinct identity. They too did not seem to find Holocaust memory useful in developing a language to address the daily racism they were encountering. If I am honest, I must confess that the abstract nature of the catechism also did not enable me to really see the link between Holocaust memory and the situation of Turkish guest workers and other immigrants in Germany at that time. In retrospect, I would see this indifference toward popular racism as one of the blind spots in my political socialization (the other one was a similar indifference toward the situation and the experience of Germans east of the Iron Curtain). I am not sure if it was actually caused by Holocaust memory, i.e whether a fixation on the suffering of Jew in the past came at the expense of an indifference toward ethnic minorities in the present. But my white privilege (yes, it existed in Germany as well!) certainly enabled me to keep the two things rather separate.

A growing familiarity with what might be called post-colonial sensibilities also helped me in (hopefully) transcending a narrowly German-centered perspective. Teaching twentieth century World History in multicultural California for now almost two decades definitely cures one from the ultimately Eurocentric assumption that any national history can claim a particular singularity (that is beyond the truism that, in some way, every history is singular). So I completely agree with Moses in highlighting the intellectual benefits of the longstanding debate about the link between colonialism and the Holocaust. The challenge is to show how what Charles Maier called "the two narratives of moral atrocity in the 20th century"—imperialism and genocide—were, in fact, always interrelated. What is truly "singular" here is the German reaction to a debate that has been firmly established in international scholarship for decades now. The English version of Michael Rothberg's book has been on the reading list for my doctoral students since it appeared in 2009, courses on "Comparative Genocide" that examine the similarities *and* differences of genocides are routinely part of course offering in US History Department, and the recognition that figures like W. E. B. Du Bois or James Baldwin thought about the oppression of African Americans in the United States in relationship to the Holocaust strikes me as intellectually tantalizing. While it is perfectly possible to arrive at a variety of different positions regarding the historical

relationship between the history of colonialism and the Holocaust, the rejection of this entire debate as somehow illegitimate, revisionist or even antisemitic is simply absurd and, indeed, singularly provincial.

The force of the argument and the passion that the debate ignites shows that there is more at stake here than merely competing historiographical positions. And this gets me to the last point why I have stopped believing in the catechism. For it is plainly obvious that Holocaust memory, at least in certain contexts, has lost some of its progressive impetus that it still entailed in the 1980s and 1990s. Some of it has simply to do with a changed political context: the rise of Islamophobia as a dominant form of racism in the West after 9/11; the increasing rightward shift in Israeli politics and the gradual abandonment of the peace process; the rise of a global right-wing ethno-nationalism. Perhaps the vestiges of my former belief in the catechism still lead me to think that perhaps Germans and the German government do not necessarily have to be at the forefront in articulating the harshest critiques of Israel. At the same time, I also do not think that the German parliament should declare complicated positions such as the BDS as "antisemitic" and hence essentially exclude them from public discourse. In general, the current tendency to label positions as somehow "antisemitic" that are identical or even more moderate than similar liberal or left-wing critiques of Israeli government policies formulated from within the Jewish discourse inside and outside Israel is just silly. For my part, I want to have nothing to do with (or contribute to) a right-wing Holocaust memory that is eventually used as a justification for acts of violence, oppression, and racist exclusion. At the same time, I find the invocation of Holocaust memory both legitimate and necessary in criticizing and rejecting misguided attempts to express opposition to Israeli policy by attacking synagogues or even individual Jewish people. If this makes me end up "between all chairs," so be it!

Memory, as we know after studying it for several decades, always responds to the concerns of the present. The current debate therefore is also about the function of Holocaust memory in the early 21st century. My own sense is that a universalist and open Holocaust memory that does not shy away from new meanings in changing contexts will ultimately be more productive than a closed, singular and provincial memory. The current global movement for racial justice actually strikes me as a real opportunity for renewed research on and teaching of the Holocaust, albeit in multidirectional ways. The history of the Holocaust is not just part of German or Jewish history but an integral part of European and global history in the modern period. In one of the formative History books of my younger self as a believer, *Inside Nazi Gemany*, the great historian Detlev Peukert ends his reflection on National Socialism as a "pathology of modernity" with the following statement about the enduring lessons of the Nazi period. "The values we should assert in response to this experience are easily stated but hard to practice: reverence for life, pleasure in diversity and contrariety, respect for what is alien, tolerance for what is unpalatable, skepticism about the feasibility and desirability of chiliastic schemes for a new order, openness toward others and willingness to learn even from those who call into question one's own principles of social virtue." This is something I can still believe in.

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