

On the Misleading Framing of Plausible Insights

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This paper was written from the experience of a migrant Jewish German citizen, a sociologist living and working in Germany, an academic and intellectual of sorts. As such, I find Moses' piece ambiguous and strangely contradictory. I argue that by framing historical dynamics as 'catechism', Moses systematically invisibilizes the nuances and complexities of politics, the public sphere, and the educational sector; the tensions, struggles, the intense debates, and the inner contradictions within social groups and movements.

Dirk Moses published an important, interesting and timely piece on what he describes as the "catechism" of German Holocaust remembrance. The piece has sparked an intensive and productive, while nuanced and friendly debate. This in itself is a merit and, at least to those of us living in Germany, delightfully refreshing, especially in the light of what Moses lays his finger on, the 'heated' and somewhat sectarian debate regarding the nexus of the Holocaust and (other?) genocidal realizations of systemic racism and/or racist colonialism. For Moses, all past, recent, and ongoing political debate on this issue is to be understood in somewhat religious terms. The "German Catechism," as he puts it, consists of five 'sacred' elements, and any discussion of or any reference to the indeed tricky topic is, in Germany, to be understood as religious of sorts. Moses refers to the several dimensions of how Germany discusses, teaches, legislates, remembers, questions, negotiates ... does, well, anything in this regard as religious: "heresy trails", "priests", "sect", "keeping the faith", "priestly censors", "inquisition", "purging of heretics" etc.

As a migrant Jewish German citizen, a sociologist living and working in Germany, an academic and intellectual of sorts, I find Moses's piece ambiguous and strangely contradictory. Perhaps even dubious. I, too, "scratch my head," to use his words. While I agree with many observations and some of his arguments, I find the 'religious' framing highly misleading, and one that even undermines the actual argument of the piece. What I do agree with is Moses's observation of the intensity, ferocity, and often reductive fundamentalism of many German debates regarding the Shoah, the Nazi period, and how to deal with it in schools, politics, law. I, too, am frustrated, bewildered and taken aback by what I'd call a '*Willen zur Unbedingtheit*' of many public voices; a willful ignorance of nuance, the conscious inability or reluctance to acknowledge complexity, connections, contradictions, the weird taking pride in strong absolute judgements where actually careful nuancing would be necessary. But, is this specific to Germany? Is it specific to the Holocaust issue, or to the *(Un)Möglichkeit of Vergleich*? Is it specific to a specific version of memory and memory-making? No, it's not. I would argue that any political ideology, any reductionist version of actually complex political dynamics, especially those which include such heavy ethical questions (and which wouldn't?) might be described, if you wanted, as 'catechism'. The term usually used in political and/or academic commentary is 'orthodoxy'. But, does this framing make any sense? Does it help us to better understand history or the present? I don't think so. While Moses mentions all sorts of debates and re-formulations of how Germany comes to terms—or not so much—with its genocidal past, the catechism/heresy/sect framing obscures and ridicules precisely the debates and negotiations that have been, and are on going, in Germany. Instead of acknowledging these debates as part of a complex and complicated, still to be fully understood political history of post-war Germany, its divided past btw completely skipped by Moses, the framing he offers is itself reductionist. It systematically invisibilizes the nuances and complexities of politics, the public sphere, and the

educational sector including the tensions, struggles, the intense debates and the inner contradictions within social groups and movements. Moses's rhetoric sounds even conspiratorial at times, evoking a country governed by a uniform elite, "disciplining" its citizens through educational programs into a philosemitism. This obviously contradicts not only many empirical dynamics found in the GDR and FRG, but it is also clearly incongruent with the many debates and struggles Moses himself narrates.

It bears mentioning that the catechism-framing also has resonance with the defamatory rhetoric against liberals, lefts, feminist, gender studies, queer theory, LGBTQI* we've seen over years. When, in 1991 Judith Butler appeared in academia, German feuilletons used the sect/catechism trope to ridicule her work and those engaging with it. The contemporary illiberal regimes in Brazil, Poland or Hungary, much like the neo-authoritarian movements in the far-right spectrum all over Europe, East and West, often describe 'gender' and queer perspectives as 'death cults', quasi-religious, creationist or other forms of sectarian idolatry. Casts, elites, priests, manipulation, catechism. 'priestly censors'—this is the language of those who are actually threatening pluralism and progressive politics. In other words: To frame complex political issues through the religious/sectarian frame is a rather reducing, perhaps even authoritarian move. So, why use this catechism-framing at all?

I can only assume it might relate to the actually head-scratching, bewildering '*Unbedingtheit*' that marks the intensity of debates in Germany regarding the Nazi past. It might be worthwhile to take a closer, open look at the political affects generated in Germany, especially among '*Menschen mit Nazihintergrund*' (Hilal & Varatharajah 2021). Why not instead draw on the rich strands of historical analysis on affect (e.g. Frevert), embodiment (e.g. Theweleit), authoritarian personality (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer) to understand what Götz Aly has criticized as the widespread reluctance of the German population—East and West—to 'identify' with the perpetrators (Aly 2018; <https://www.geschwister-scholl-preis.de/preistraegerinnen/2018/>), finding accessible comfort and, yes, perhaps redemption in the identification with the victims or with the heroic few *Widerstandskämpfer_innen*.

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