

The Philosophers Have Only Interpreted the World...

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Chiselled into the marble wall of Humboldt University's grand main building in Berlin is the famous quote (often ill-used, not least by the SED regime) from Karl Marx: 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.'

In this eleventh and final of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wasn't dismissing philosophy per se, nor indeed philosophers like himself, as bourgeois. Rather, he was making a point about praxis, the integration of theory and practice. This pithy, dot-point summary, which was the starting point of a broader critique laid out by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* taking aim at poor materialist critiques of religion and theology, could be crudely précised as 'context! context! context!'

These days part of the university's former East German heritage, the quote's original installation was less public memorial and more ideological caveat. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lesson here for the present debate. I have often found my mind wandering to the *Theses* not only in relation to this set of responses to Dirk Moses' piece on the German Catechism, but a wider set of intellectual, political and public discussions currently underway over questions of historical and continued imperialist and genocidal violence, and their implications for geopolitics but also domestic security and everyday life.

The first time I ever attended a political panel about the 'Palestine question' in Germany was in 2007 in the main building of Humboldt University, up the marble staircase past Marx's 11th thesis. In the discussion time, many of the contributions seemed to implicitly support a two-state solution. When my turn came, I argued that the two-state solution often worked like a corridor pass for those who couldn't bear confronting the logic of Zionism and the question of a Palestinian right of return. This seemed fairly uncontroversial to me in the context of a left-wing activist conference, coming as I did from the Australian Marxist left and having cut my political teeth on the issue of settler colonialism, land and genocide in that context. But some audience members stared as though I had descended from Mars. My German was admittedly intermediate, but I felt like something more was being lost in translation. I later wrote about this sense of deep cognitive political dissonance, which I know has been shared by many other activist immigrants to Germany.

German public discourse over Palestine has long been an object lesson in 'cancellation', even before that concept was a thing. Occasionally we see a thaw, only to see things quickly refrozen. The illustrious line of cancelled critics of Israel includes not just Norman Finkelstein but Jewish American philosopher Judith Butler, Jewish Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, and the elected Palestinian member of Israel's Knesset, Haneen Zoabi. German scholars too, such as Helga Baumgarten, have been smeared as Hamas apologists. The high-profile Mbembe affair, as others before me here have pointed out, is only the latest, but the very fact that it attracted such immense public attention and had such huge ripple effects is, in my view, a sign of a more significant thaw, deep in the permafrost of the 'German Catechism'. The seemingly pre-scripted intellectual pearl-clutching in response to Moses' frankly mild scholarly provocation, not to mention those by Michael Rothberg and Jürgen Zimmerer, strikes me as dreary rather than chilling, at times bordering on an intellectual storm in a Meißner teacup, threatening to spill little

more than weak black tea over the latest Feuilleton broadsheet.

Often the debate lacks connection to actual, practical political struggles that are playing out not only in the salons but on the streets, in local parliaments, public treasuries, community services, cultural clubs, theatres and even private social networks. If these intellectuals are merely interpreting the world in various ways, fretting over whether the religious overtones of the term ‘Catechism’ are historically, philosophically or symbolically justified, then who is changing it? As Zoe Samudzi challenged—echoed by Tiffany Florvil and others—what is really at stake here? And for whom?

This is why, when a photograph of one of the intellectual giants of post-colonial and anti-imperial critique in the twentieth century throwing a rock at an Israeli guardhouse in Southern Lebanon in the summer of 2000 was virally shared on social media during May 2021, I began once again to ponder the question: ‘What do German intellectuals do with Edward Said?’

For I have noticed that there are two parallel and seemingly disconnected critical discussions taking place over how, in Germany, the memory and erasure respectively of the Holocaust and colonial crimes are weaponised in the service of present-day political objectives concerning Palestine, racism and fascism. One is among academic historians and political scientists who, with some notable exceptions, research German politics and history at universities *outside* Germany, some of whom have a semi-high public profile, but most of whom still struggle to get their opinions published in mainstream papers. The other is among activists in the revolutionary and socialist left and the anti-racism movement inside Germany, including minority ethnic networks, communities, political organisations and human rights campaign groups, with one or two semi-semi-high profile politicians from marginal political parties. Arguably there is a third arena in the German bourgeois cultural and research sectors, including peak representative bodies of religious communities and establishment political figures with relevant offices and titles.

I mostly only care about the first two, but aside from having in common that they are in different ways marginal to the German mainstream, it seems to me that they don’t speak to each other at all. There have been some recent exceptional crossovers, such as the ‘This is Germany’ Instagram video initiative and Fabian Wolff’s magnificent recent essay in *Die Zeit*, which was shared and read widely in activist networks. But as far as I can see, not enough of the scholars participating in the debates (even this one on New Fascism Syllabus) are in touch with, or even aware of the grassroots activist interventions within Germany. I don’t just mean the historical activist scholars that Florvil describes in her excellent piece, but those in the here and now, too.

What of important contributions by activist scholars such as Ármin Langer, co-founder of the important Salaam-Shalom initiative in Berlin in 2013, whose excellent 2016 book *Ein Jude in Neukölln: Mein Weg zum Miteinander der Religionen (A Jew in Neukölln: My Path to Coexistence of the Religions)* presented a forceful rejection—based on personal activist experience—of the weaponization of antisemitism in the service of Islamophobia? A Hungarian international student at the Abraham Geiger Rabbinical College in Potsdam, Langer was expelled after publicly criticising the leader of the German Central Council of Jews, Josef Schuster, for advocating a cap on (Muslim) refugees. Schuster and other high-ranking Jewish community spokespeople such as Daniel Alter, who warned that the Berlin district of Neukölln was ‘unsafe for Jews’ due to the high number of Muslims, were ‘sounding the same horn as Sarrazin, Buschkowsky and the AfD’, according to Langer.

Salaam-Shalom, by contrast, sought to demonstrate how Jews and Muslims could work together to fight racism. Another participant in Salaam-Shalom was activist scholar Yossi Bartal. A queer Jewish, former Israeli investigative journalist who publishes regularly in newspapers such as the TAZ, Bartal is an active public intellectual with strong links to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Now also a member of the Left Party (Die Linke), Bartal was once spectacularly refused entry to the beloved leftist techno club about:blank because he was wearing a keffiyeh. It is through such voices that we learn, for example, that a multicultural festival with the name ‘Open Neukölln’ had banned Jewish and Palestinian locals from participating. Or that a critical culture festival in Freiburg with the name ‘Dear White People...’ had cancelled a workshop on anti-Palestinian racism following pressure from funding bodies.

Together with queer artist, sex worker activist and former Israeli Liad Kantorowicz-Hussein, Bartal has held important public political interventions on what Rutgers professor Jasbir Puar has labelled as ‘homonationalism’ and pinkwashing in relation to Israel’s queer politics, with one meeting at the Berlin club and café Südblock in Kreuzberg even attracting the attendance of representatives from the Israeli Embassy. Both have been active members of the Queers Against Pinkwashing group which has been subject to repeated (even physical) attacks by pro-Zionist anti-Germans in the left and gay scenes.

This is to say nothing of the interventions by the Palestinian communities themselves. Bizarrely, the corona crisis has opened up new opportunities for circumventing ‘cancellation’ on German soil by making global conversations more accessible to activists on the ground here. Although previous in-person visits to Germany have faced threats of cancellation and harassment, Palestinian Knesset member Haneen Zoabi spoke virtually on a recent panel on ‘Discussing Palestine in Germany’ organised by the Left Internationals group (a group of non-German leftists in Germany) together with Member of the German parliament Christine Buchholz and Director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam and member of the Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit Susan Neiman. This was just one recent example of activist intellectuals and activist politicians coming together to discuss both theory and practice in context; many scholars eschew such forums.

At another virtual meeting on ‘Said’s Palestine’ hosted by the University of California Humanities Research Institute moderated by Judith Butler, four activist scholar panel members teased out the dual shifts of hardening/radicalising rightward Zionism and the increasing visibility and confidence of the global Palestine solidarity movement following a provocative intervention by Columbia scholar Nadia Abu El-Haj, who argued that even liberal Zionists inside Israel are caught up on the ‘trauma of the perpetrator’. They wring their hands in agonised sympathy over the Nakba but are on the whole unwilling to confront or admit the need for fundamental—or indeed, as Marx said in his *Theses on Feuerbach*—revolutionary change. On the question of religious symbolism and memorialisation, another panel member, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian of Hebrew University, made chilling observations about the sacralisation of political violence, on ‘killability’ and ‘livability’, who counts as a human, as a child, etc.: ‘I look out my window in Jerusalem and literally see mobs dancing on the graves of Palestinians’. For this reason, she noted, linking the struggle to Black Lives Matter was important precisely because of its radical politics and radical analysis. ‘Black Lives Matter is Palestinian Lives Matter. George Floyd is part of us.’

The ‘trauma of the perpetrator’ is a notion that can easily apply to the German state and its political bodies (and here I agree with the criticism levelled at Moses for his fuzzy, ill-defined ‘elites’). But this goes for the intellectual establishment too, if they insist on divorcing the question of genocide and its

persisting legacies and present-day forms from political struggle, treating the debate as an academic one. While I, like Marx, do not at all seek to belittle the importance of interpretive debates, I do suspect that at least some of the quibbling over the ‘Catechism’ concept is a useful distraction. Of course, responding to Paula Villa Braslavsky in this discussion, this refusal of nuance is not specific to Germany, but neither is false equivalence. In an Australian live TV panel discussion in late May, Palestinian-Australian activist and novelist Randa Abdel-Fattah was challenged for a response by an audience member whose son’s dog in Israel—unable to fit in the family’s safe room—had suffered trauma from Hamas rockets. And like the directives given to journalists at Deutsche Welle, Australian journalists, too, have been warned with disciplinary action for not complying with specific rules around terminology designed to erase the violence of the occupation. Unsurprisingly, some of the most incisive critiques of the Australian context have come from Indigenous activist scholars who recognise the links, for example, ‘From Gadigal Land to Gaza’.

On El-Haj’s other observation of the dual shift—a hardening of the pro-Israeli position along the lines of ‘well, sure, the IDF has killed 66 children but so be it’ and a simultaneous growth of human rights sentiment in solidarity with Palestine—I put this question to Palestinian activist scholar and journalist Majed Abusalama at a panel discussion on 5 June 2021 around the topic of ‘Palestine: Opportunities and Limits of Discourse’, organised, again, by the Left Internationals group in cooperation with Palästina Spricht (Palestine Speaks) and Jüdische Stimme für gerechten Frieden in Nahost (Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East). Originally titled ‘Cancel Palestine’, this was the workshop cancelled twice by the Open Neukölln festival mentioned above. Having just outlined how his mother had called him from Gaza on 13 May ‘as if she is saying good bye’ he replied with another question: ‘How many of my family members have to die while we wait for yet another shift?’

And what of the 15,000+ people from the Palestinian community in Berlin and their supporters who repeatedly marched in May and June for an end to the bombing? I witnessed the German police response with my own eyes—young men aged between 20-30 wearing keffiyehs were very obviously singled out and escorted away from public gatherings, ostensibly for breaching hygiene restrictions, but not the elderly, white Jewish women standing shoulder to shoulder with them in solidarity. What do the academics, intellectuals, philosophers and historians have to say to the working class, non-scholar Palestinian-Germans who live in my neighbourhood and, though happy to see me, a white person, wearing my Palestinian keffiyeh while out walking my dog, nevertheless note how much more of a risk it is for them to do so. ‘People accuse me of antisemitism if I wear mine around’, said one young man. ‘I have to be careful.’ Some have been slightly confused, asking ‘do you know what this means?’, assuming that I must think along the lines of the Catechism, until they learn that I am not German.

Despite the thaw and all of these new conversations, the fear of cancellation in Germany and beyond remains real for activists-who-are-also-intellectuals. It is no accident that most of the contributors here, the organisers of the Left Internationals group, and the various online virtual forums that have been consumed and watched by people located in Germany have not been Germans. For many, unlike Frank Biess, it’s because they have not yet extracted themselves from the Catechism. For others, it is simply personal terror. One of the brightest and sharpest activist-intellectual minds I know on the topic of Israel-Palestine discourse in Germany recently told me he had ceased posting on social media because he is currently on the job market as a precarious Early Career Researcher. I noted how much I appreciated the social media commentaries of other activist intellectuals such as Ghassan Hage, to which my friend retorted, ‘Ghassan Hage is tenured af [as f@#ck]’.

But even intellectual giants are not safe: the AFP photograph of Edward Said's rock-throwing nearly got him cancelled. Reports of the action quickly went viral in the international press (eg. here and here), sparking an energetic campaign by pro-Israel faculty and organisations to have him dismissed from Columbia University.

While the act itself had been a light-hearted, 'symbolic gesture of joy', the whole affair sent Said into a depression which his daughter later described as 'the beginning of the end of my father's spirit'. 'The assumption was that I was throwing stones at someone', he explained in an interview shortly after it happened, 'But there was nobody there.' Israel had already pulled out of Southern Lebanon.* It seems additionally poignant that there is some debate over whether the man in the centre of the frequently cropped photo is the philosopher, or rather the other figure to the left of the frame, often only visible as a disembodied leg.

[* See p. 446 and p. 339 for Said's own reflections.]

My take on Moses' Catechism piece is that it is an excellent, much needed intervention and its polemical tone was well-judged to strike up precisely these and other responses. More of this is a good thing. Could Moses' piece have been published in Germany? Perhaps, though the number of conceivably willing publications (Freitag? Junge Welt? Neues Deutschland?) is always small, and they are inevitably marginal or associated with the 'loony left'. For me, what the piece is missing is the praxis—the connection to political movements, an indication of where the intellectual debate can lead and how it can help us in the political struggle for human rights, for reparations, not just for acknowledging the crimes of the past in order to reify them into a political weapon against today's oppressed, and—for God's sake!—not to perpetuate Catechistic *Sonderweg* approaches to global political problems.

To lay my cards on the table as others in this series have done: I have no personal, ancestral skin in the game. Nor am I a Holocaust scholar, though I am active in memory and museum studies, including a stint as a postdoctoral researcher at the Natural History Museum in Berlin, working on a collaborative project with various Australian Indigenous organisations, curators and museums and the German Foundation for Lost Art, Ethnographic Museum and Botanical Gardens. I am not Jewish or Palestinian or Black, but my Northern Irish Catholic emigrant parentage and my upbringing as a white person in Australia does give me some personal perspective on empire. More importantly than any of that, I come from a political (and intellectual) tradition built up by revolutionary socialists Tony Cliff (born Yigael Glückstein) and Chanie Rosenberg (who passed away this week at the age of 99), who emigrated from Palestine to Britain in 1947, where they founded one of the most important groups of the post-war British left in the spirit of Marx, Luxemburg, Lenin and Gramsci. It is impossible for me to separate the history of imperialism from the geopolitics of today, much less to treat scholarship as though it were a purely intellectual endeavour. I ask myself how memory culture around the Holocaust in Germany can avoid colonial associations—the Balfour declaration was a British manoeuvre, to be sure, but it laid the groundwork for Germany's post-war Israel solution.

So how can progressive intellectuals avoid cutting themselves off from the struggle on the ground? How can we inspire one another to overcome the fear of cancellation and what strategies can we develop to avoid it really happening? How can the become—and remain—activist scholars?

Perhaps Said's excoriation of Sartre, De Beauvoir and Foucault after meeting them in 1979 can serve as

a cautionary reminder:

I guess we need to understand why great old men are liable to succumb either to the wiles of younger ones, or to the grip of an unmodifiable political belief. It's a dispiriting thought, but it's what happened to Sartre. With the exception of Algeria, the justice of the Arab cause simply could not make an impression on him, and whether it was entirely because of Israel or because of a basic lack of sympathy—cultural or perhaps religious—it's impossible for me to say.

Philosophers can always interpret the world in various ways, but they can also be active in changing it.

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