

Priests, Catechisms and Heretics: Some Thoughts on Dirk Moses' Remarks

Neil Gregor

University of Southampton

In this piece I seek to acknowledge the stimulus of Dirk Moses' intervention, recognising that his argument sits within a palpable move across our discipline(s) to place the Holocaust within the wider European history of extreme violence, colonial and otherwise. My initial purpose in writing was to seek to acknowledge the presence of a terrain for further discussion, whilst lowering the levels of polemical intensity that characterised Moses' own piece. The polemics of the latter seemed unlikely to me to foster the kinds of conversation around this topic that I should also like to see develop. I seek, finally, to draw initial attention to the dynamics of (mainly West) German memory culture since the 1960s, suggesting that what Moses describes as an ossified 'catechism' reflects the workings of a complex set of social movements over time—the evolution of this should be recognised and understood as a set of historically contingent processes too.

In a spirited, provocative essay for the highly respected Zurich-based History and Current Affairs web publication *Geschichte der Gegenwart* Dirk Moses takes to task the 'high priests' of Germany's memory culture for their defence of a view of the National Socialist past, its place in German and European history, and its proper place in the historical consciousness of the Federal Republic, that he regards as outdated. For Moses, the claims that 1. The Holocaust was unique on the grounds of the specific role that ideology played in it 2. it represented a *Zivilisationsbruch* (a 'civilisational rupture', or a 'rupture with civilisation', according to taste) 3. Germany has a special responsibility both to Jews in Germany and to the state of Israel as a result. 4. Antisemitism is a peculiar kind of prejudice, a distinctly German one, and is different to other racisms. 5. Anti-Zionism is antisemitism amount, collectively, to a 'catechism'. Together they form a doctrinal set of beliefs, foundational and incontrovertible truths designed—since this is what a catechism is—to be impressed upon the young i.e. the next generation of citizens of the Federal Republic, so that they may gain a firm, unshakeable grasp of what it means to be German in a world after Auschwitz, and of the obligations that entails. That such views have to be internalised equally both by fourth or fifth generation direct descendants of the perpetrator generation and by new citizens hailing from Syria or Afghanistan is what gives it its character as a civic religion and its key function in determining how German democratic subjectivity is to be inhabited by all, regardless of their other differences.

Moses' central claim is that the endless repetition of this catechism by its 'high priests' flies in the face of the new truths carried by a growing body of scholarship that renders such claims unsustainable, and that it has reached a point where it functions as a barrier, rather than a stimulus, to fostering the critical thought upon which both the vitality of democracy and a culture of respect for human rights in the present depend. Moreover, changing facts on the ground—the emergence of new demographics, positioned differently in relation to Europe's colonial pasts compared to the positions occupied (structurally, if not necessarily always intellectually) by its historical white majority—are now providing a powerful catalyst for an overdue renegotiation of how a (hitherto unproblematic) German and European 'we' imagine the moral burdens and pedagogical obligations bequeathed by 'our' many colonialist and genocidal pasts. Acknowledging as white Europeans now must (and should wish to do) that the unproblematised 'we' of the European imagination is now a far more complex, heterogenous

‘we’ whose diverse histories contain a wide variety of experiences of colonialism, violence and genocide enacted by Germans and other Europeans alike demands rethinking the underlying ethics of our relationship both to History and to human rights crises in the present. The catechism, according to Moses, stands in the way of this—the polemical tone of the piece makes clear that it ought urgently to be abandoned.

I sympathise with much of Moses’ perspective on the history, and with much of his ethical thrust too. I have argued for similar elsewhere, if slightly more *en passant*. For a long time, the history of National Socialism has made much greater sense to me when understood as European history as well as German history, and I have always thought it important to locate it within wider histories of European colonialism and racial science, to read its ideological drives within the contexts of more generic nationalism, militarism and anti-democratic thought, and to see it as having been incubated by powerful tendencies in not just German, but European histories from the nineteenth century onwards. The idea that National Socialism represented a moment of rupture with European civilisation has always seemed to me to rest on a set of rather dubious conceits about what European history prior to 1933 consisted of – far from representing a break with that history, it has always seemed to me to represent a powerful distillation of some of its most unpleasant traditions. (If the endless footnotes of the 2015 scholarly edition of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* taught us anything, then surely it was that). The fact that many of us work in institutions that helped to incubate those very ideas makes it all the more important to acknowledge it.

This is not, moreover, a question of juxtaposing a general burden owned by ‘us’ as Europeans—one anchored in our shared inheritance of a certain fundus of ugly ideas—with a more particular burden for those second, third, fourth generation descendants of the German perpetrators whom I mentioned earlier, understandable as that line of reasoning might in some ways be at first sight. The huge amount of work on the subject of collaboration in the Holocaust from France to the Ukraine tells us that this is not a question of juxtaposing European thoughts with German actions. From the French Milice to Ukrainian auxiliaries, collaborators acted out the antisemitic impulses that animated German perpetrators with the same complex, varied but recognisable mix of commitment, enthusiasm, routine and situational exigency that scholars have explored over the last three decades or so in the case of Germany itself.

The question ‘why Germany?’ is not explained away by any of this, still less is it answered. To ground an account of the Holocaust in the contexts advocated by Moses is not to obviate the need to think about the stresses of an unstable, dynamically changing, authoritarian society bursting with disruptive democratic energies; about the profound, deep, multi-dimensional crises engendered by the First World War and its aftermaths; about the sense many Germans made of these crises and their impact upon Germany; or about the ways in which those cultural and ideological responses – which drew upon those wider inheritances mentioned above—shaped the choices Germans (or enough of them) made in 1933, 1939 or 1941. Neither does Moses claim that to be so. His insistence that the antisemitic animus governing National Socialism makes more sense when read against wider histories of persecuting imagined ‘security threats’ and acting to destroy them than it does if described simply as yet another expression of the ‘longest hatred’ seems to me a point worth thinking about, though I see little need to adjudicate that as a zero-sum game.

More generally, however, I remain uncertain of the answer to that question, and the sense that the frames inside of which we need to think to answer it are shifting quite profoundly at the moment makes me less

certain than I have been for some time. That uncertainty has been compounded by some systematic reading of modern French history over the last year or so, and by shifting the emphasis of much of my reading and teaching into comparative work (for example on the history of the European far Right). The most cursory of perusals of the work undertaken by colleagues specialising in French history to recuperate the history of French fascism, as well as indigenous forms of French nativism and authoritarianism, leaves one feeling that while France didn't produce its own Hitler it might well have done so (and as one friend in that field often reminds me, it didn't produce one—it produced several). If one widens the frame more widely, and considers the resurgence of the far Right across Europe in the last ten to twenty years, it is similarly striking how little headway one makes in defining a generic core to often disparate movements without reaching for a common archaeology in late 19th century European colonialism.

If Moses' broad argument about Europe as a set of contexts is well-taken, then so is his observation of a certain defensiveness, and of the neuralgic points which one presses at one's peril, if one argues on this basis before a German public. I too have experienced the frustration of participating in public panel discussions in Germany, of arguing for the need to contextualise the history of National Socialism within a wider set of European histories of violence, and been met with the response that I am rearticulating the views of Ernst Nolte, or giving succour to 1980s-style conservative revisionism—as if the only people who could possibly want to think about National Socialism within those wider contexts must be that way inclined. My personal low point occurred a few years back when a senior German professor and established public voice—one of those I imagine Moses to have in mind when he refers to 'high priests'—responded to my suggestion on a public podium that we need to develop those more cosmopolitan memory cultures by taking the microphone and growling 'Quatsch' ('rubbish') into it.

Where I part company with Moses, however, is in the somewhat disrespectful tone vis-a-vis the authenticity of the political and emotional commitments of those whom he criticises. One of the weaknesses of the piece is that it is not entirely clear where, structurally, the problem seems to lie—Moses' 'high priests' are described, variously, as '68ers' and/or 'elites', both of which terms mask as much as they reveal, and in a manner that rides roughshod over the range of opinions among those for whom '68er' or 'elite' might figure as serviceable shorthand. But if we assume that Moses has in his sights the broad generation or two of scholars, memory workers and community activists who worked from the 1960s to the turn of the century to place awareness and acceptance of the crimes of the National Socialist era at the centre of the political culture of the Federal Republic, then we ought surely to feel some discomfort at the manner in which their efforts are described here. To characterise this broad section of opinion as simply fighting a reactionary, rear-guard action against the incontrovertible new truth, using the methods of censorship to repress 'heresy', seems to me to traduce both the achievements and the motivations of the people at stake here in a way that is not calculated to foster the conversation we need.

It is easy to forget the massive effort the project of establishing that knowledge took in the old *Bundesrepublik* and after 1990, and to underestimate the very powerful structural hostility which that shared project encountered. The desperately hierarchical, patrician, paternalist, clientelist character of German academia, and not least the co-determining say of the Ministry in making senior appointments—meant that the career stakes in pursuing certain projects were high. As late as the 1990s, pursuing work on the role of institutions such as universities in the National Socialist era was not just an indulgence of the age-old scholarly oedipal impulse—to do this meant challenging and accusing one's own immediate

(and powerful) academic elders for their own roles as intellectual outriders for murder. To write about lawyers, judges, doctors, policemen or teachers in the Nazi era was to write about one's own parents, aunts or uncles: the political, ethical and emotional stakes, and the potential personal costs, were high. If one looks more widely, at the range of civil society actors that emerged out of the History Workshop grassroots movements of the 1970s and 1980s the point becomes yet clearer: engaging the history in which parents and grandparents had been complicit was an act often associated with much pain. What Moses describes—pushing the religion analogy, as is often the temptation, that bit too far—with unmistakeable sarcasm as ‘sacred trauma’ was something felt bitterly and forcefully by members of a generation who grew up with a very profound sense of personal encumbrance. It was that encumbrance that was channelled in the pursuit of struggles for funding, or space, or institutional support to unfold various memory projects, again against often massive resistance from political forces answering to constituencies that simply did not want to hear.

The political commitments of this generation of activists are open, of course, to interrogation with the methods of the history of emotions, and the place such commitments occupied in the democratic subjectivities of Germans in the 1980s and 1990s has started to produce much thoughtful scholarship. It is interesting, indeed, to reflect about the socialisation of that generation of senior academics, museum curators and administrators that now presides over the important institutions of memory work. But while the desire to make some kind of restitution, however inadequate, on the part of this generation may be available for analysis with the tools of psychoanalysis, it strikes me as just too cynical to describe their work in such polemical terms as the pursuit of ‘national redemption.’ My impression has always been that such individuals are motivated by a variety of commitments that one could subsume, broadly, under the headings of democratic activism and the strengthening of civil society, and that such efforts should command respect. While such projects often have their limitations, and can be criticised for what they may not do, we have no need to traduce the efforts of those who, after all, were responsible for drawing to our attention the things about which we also try to think critically today.

The ‘high priests’ are heading into retirement, and it is hardly surprising that they feel a need to protect what they have achieved, not least given the resurgence of forms of far Right thought in the contemporary world. If we are going to engage those who see the historical past, its legacies and implications slightly differently to us in a meaningful conversation we will have to find a slightly different tone.

This article was re-published on the *New Fascism Syllabus* weblog series, “The Catechism Debate.” It is reproduced here with the permission of the author. For the full list of hyperlink citations, please consult the online versions at: <https://newfascismsyllabus.com/category/opinions/the-catechism-debate/> or <https://neilgregor.com/2021/05/25/priests-catechisms-and-heretics-some-thoughts-on-dirk-moses-remarks/>.