

Inaccuracies and Absences

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Joachim Häberlen is scratching his head, wondering about the perception of German media and politics by some colleagues.

I: Scratching My Head

Reading the debate about Moses's essay makes me wonder if the place where I spend much time, Germany, is the same place Moses and some of his respondents write about. It seems like a space of uniformity, without dissent, except for the anarchy of social media. This seems far removed from the reality I'm living in. I'm struck to read that the "official and media approach in Germany is based on the axiom that a lesson of the Holocaust is that Jews and Israel (or more accurately, Israeli Jews) are always right" (Alon Confino); or about "Germany's rigid adherence to supporting any and all actions by Israel against the Palestinians" (Matt Fitzpatrick). This is simply inaccurate. At best, it displays a stunning lack of knowledge about actual controversies in German media.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, certainly not known to be a paper with leftist sympathies, reported for example about the "clashes" within Israel. The article quotes the mayor of Lod comparing riots by young Arab men with Kristallnacht, and blaming them for destroying seventy years of peaceful coexistence. The *FAZ* reporter notes: "He had few words for the other side's actions. After the nights of unrest in Israel, law enforcement agencies across the country have charged 116 suspected rioters. None of them are Jewish." Does this sound like "what Israeli Jews are doing is always right"? We might also look at the *ZEIT*, which published an article before the escalation of violence in Gaza: "Provocations instead of a sense of proportion: The situation in Jerusalem has escalated. Once again, the Israeli authorities and security forces have made decisions without giving sufficient consideration to the consequences." The list could go on and on.

Or with regards to the supposed silencing of Palestinian voices in Germany: *Ze.tt*, the *ZEIT*'s online magazine for young readers, published a long interview with Palestinian Simin Jawabreh in addition to long articles about how it feels to live as a young Jew in Germany right now. Leftist *Jungle World*, surely more on the side of Israel, has published a letter by a young Palestinian fleeing from Hamas. More generally, one of the most powerful comments on German Holocaust memory, and on the relationship between German identity and the Holocaust, comes from Navid Kermani, a "non-white, non-Jewish, non-ethnic German" (Confino). Or consider Deniz Yücel, another non-white, non-Jewish, non-ethnic German, actually vocally condemning pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the *Welt*. Once again, there are many more examples one might cite.

The same goes with regards to Germany's alleged "rigid adherence to supporting any and all actions by Israel against the Palestinians": Yes, German politicians across the political spectrum declare that Israel's security is part of German *Staatsräson*, that Israel has a right to defend itself, and that Israel's right to exist is without question. Germany isn't neutral. But Germany has also, by itself and through the EU, repeatedly criticized Israeli settlement policies. It has announced that it would consider an annexation of the occupied territories a breach of international law and condemned the expulsion of Palestinians from

their homes based on Israeli court rulings (a clear reference to Sheikh Jarrah). Of course, one might wish German politicians (or the EU more generally) to be more in line with what Israeli human rights organizations advocate, that German officials condemn more strongly human rights violations. But claiming that Germany is “supporting any and all actions by Israel against the Palestinians” is plain and simply wrong. Factual accuracy as a basis for political and scholarly claims about current German politics and media is a must.

All too often in this debate, it feels as if German media and politicians are accused of one-sidedness because they aren't supporting a particular position. The same is true, by the way, for the other side in the debate. The *Jüdische Allgemeine* (published by the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland), for example, wrote about the recent Bundestag debate on Israel / Palestine: “Almost like a prayer wheel, many MPs repeated their commitment to Israel, its right to exist and its right to self-defense. But most of them linked the whole thing with criticism of the Israeli settlement policy and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.”

This brings me to the controversial BDS movement, and the equally controversial Bundestag resolution. Far from this resolution being unanimously supported in German media, the FAZ published a damning (and in my view ultimately convincing, even though I have zero sympathy for the BDS movement) legal critique of the resolution by Stephan Detjen; and it also published an equally damning critique of the effects of the resolution by Hanno Loewy, along with critique of BDS itself. This is all controversial, and German mainstream media offers a platform for those controversies. Strange times indeed in which defending the FAZ has become necessary.

Overall, I share Paula Villa Braslavsky's and Andrew Port's sense that Moses (and some of his respondents) are just as restrictive and polemical as the debate they respond to. Much of it is a continuation of polemics from all sides, the latest iteration being Johannes von Moltke's equally polemical contribution, that doesn't offer much that is novel for anyone reading German newspapers on a regular basis. I find those polemics tiring, and as long as it's not about arguments, but about inquisitions, I find it hard to see anything intellectually stimulating here. Amusingly, one of the FAZ articles Moses mentions in fact more or less summarizes the points he makes, albeit to refute them. To me, this indicates how unproductive the debate has become.

II: Political Socializations

Frank Biess gave us an insight into his political socialization, and Andrew Port called upon us to do the same. So I'll follow their models. My own political socialization in (then reunited West-) Germany happened a decade after Biess's (*die Gnade der späten Geburt, von der Friedensbewegung verschont geblieben zu sein*). It was a time of racist violence, not only in the former East, but also in West Germany. Mölln and Solingen are only the most famous, and most lethal, examples, but violence also happened in places like Mannheim-Schönau. Recalling those years and the various anti-racist struggles, against neo-Nazis as much as against a state deporting refugees, I'm struck to read that young Germans are now, finally, joining the fight against forms of racism other than antisemitism, inspired by the BLM movement, as if that struggle is new. Even though I was impressed by the numbers of teenagers in the streets last summer, it remains to be seen how much of that will last.

But I'm even more struck by claims that memories of the Holocaust and Auschwitz did not help

migrants and their descendants to address racist violence (Tiffany Florvil now made a similar point with regards to Black (queer) women). I vividly recall migrant groups on the left, most importantly Café Morgenland from Frankfurt, but also Köxüz from Hamburg and Berlin. They were famous for harsh polemics against fellow white, German leftists. These migrants clearly regarded the struggle against everyday racist violence in post-unification Germany as intrinsically linked with a struggle against antisemitism. For their critiques of the *deutsche Zustände*, Auschwitz was central, though they had nothing but contempt for the shallow public memory culture. Their furious polemics, attacking racism in the German left as well as antisemitism amongst migrants, are still worth reading today. They never made it to the pages of German *Feuilletons*. Yet, this should not keep us from including these marginal voices in the narratives. I find their absence telling.

III: Absent Voices

So much of this debate is about the absence of voices, specifically the absence of non-white German voices; indeed, I find their absence in the debate we are having here (at least in the contributions so far—this was written prior to Tiffany Florvil’s contribution) conspicuous. So I want to introduce one such voice, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a Syrian writer and dissident now living in Berlin. If I look for intellectual inspiration, I turn to him. I’m happy to call him a friend, and I’ve published myself on Al Jumhuriya, which he co-founded. As it happens, he just published a very positive review of Dirk Moses’s recent book, calling for its translation into Arabic (including a reference to Moses’s catechism-text). There is much I agree about with Saleh, even though there are also—of course, as it should be!—disagreements. I recently found myself in agreement with something he wrote, as it turns out, years ago, and with which he now disagrees; I’ll return to this later, because I still find his former position profoundly inspiring.

Let me start with something I share with him: a deep frustration with the West, including the Western left, taking barely any interest in what’s happening in Syria, in its democratic and now clearly defeated revolution, which I found immensely inspiring, or in the genocidal politics of the Assad regime. Shouldn’t we, in the West, if we genuinely believe in democracy, declare at least some solidarity with those struggling for democracy in Syria? Why are we not having a debate, here on the New Fascism Syllabus, about the fascist nature of the Assad regime, with the voices of Syrians who have to say a lot about those matters?

And it’s not only Syrians. What about the voices of Afghans who recently came to Germany? Who took notice of a vigil Afghans in Berlin organized for 86 girls killed in a blast in Kabul just at the same time as violence in Gaza escalated? While I’m writing these lines, my Facebook newsfeed is filled with posts about the genocide of Hazara. Any interest? This indeed strikes me as deeply provincial.

The question is, though, how to explain this silence. Of course, one might wonder if there is some limitation to what people can take an interest in. There’s just too much suffering going on in the world for us to pay constantly attention. For Moses, it seems to be the German Catechism that prevents at least Germans from seeing anything but the Holocaust, that makes them incapable of seeing other atrocities and recognizing other struggles against racism.

But here, I would have to disagree. The problem as I see it is that everything has to be looked at through the lens of the Holocaust, antisemitism, and, yes, the Israel-Palestine . Look at the debate here on the NFS, the German Feuilleton debates it responds to, and indeed Moses’s essay for *Geschichte der*

Gegenwart: what makes it a hot topic, causing outrage, is what Moses writes about the Holocaust, how it is commemorated, and probably most importantly what he says about Israel/Palestine. Everyone feels compelled to comment on this conflict, and how Germany is positioning itself. And to be clear: this goes for all sides of the debate. Moses, who criticizes Germans' fixation on the Holocaust, remains just as fixated. By contrast, neither the Holocaust nor Israel/Palestine came up as a frequent topic in numerous conversations I had with people from Syria and Afghanistan since 2015 (until this May, when it did become important for some, with people having, not surprisingly, diverse views). Can't we actually just listen to what they have to say about their histories, about their political visions, which is so much richer than this constant circling around the question of how singular the Holocaust was or wasn't, how it was related to colonialism, and so on? I doubt that an essay about Assad's genocidal politics, whether that label applies, or about German politics with regards to the situation in Syria, would have sparked a similarly heated debate. How provincial indeed.

(To be fair, drawing on an article by Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Moses's book does seem to present an argument to move beyond this trap, in his view, of looking at everything through a genocide lens, which makes me wonder why the polemics on *Geschichte der Gegenwart* effectively replicated this trap and its limitations, rather than overcoming them: what a missed opportunity! Indeed, I wonder if Moses's argument about security regimes wouldn't equally work, perhaps even be stronger, *without* reference to the Holocaust. It seems that, once again, everything needs to be tied to it.)

Can I then just avoid saying something about Israel and Palestine, the conflict that is on everybody's mind? It's a topic causing absolute enmity, it sometimes seems. There's no option but joining one or the other side. We might agree on almost everything else, but if we disagree about this conflict, nothing else matters. Therefore, I'll limit myself to quoting a comment by Yassin al-Haj Saleh, which I found on Twitter and thought it recent, only to learn from him that it's many years old, and that he now disagrees with his former position. So to be crystal clear, while I don't claim authorship of those words, they should be considered my position alone. Because of that, I only cite the final question in the Tweet: "Is there a policy of partnership other than in death [with regards to Israelis and Palestinians]?" To me, this question expresses a profound, perhaps even utopian hope for reconciliation. I do not want to give up on this.

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