

Polemics and Provocations

Johannes von Moltke

University of Michigan

This contribution attempts to steer the debate back to its origins in the German *Feuilleton*, where responses to the Mbembe Affair and to the publication of Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* in German translation first manifested some of the dogmatic positioning that Dirk Moses called out in his "German Catechism". Noting that these debates extend well beyond the circles of professional historians, von Moltke argues that, in addition to policing the parameters for Holocaust memory in Germany, the "Catechism" unites liberal *Feuilleton* critics with positions on the identitarian new right, with which they share a rigid, anti-American aversion to postcolonial studies and progressive identity politics.

Dirk Moses's short piece for *Geschichte der Gegenwart* has hit a nerve, to be sure, as polemics will. Hard to imagine that a rewriting of Kleist, replete with a five-point program for a "public exorcism," wasn't meant as a provocation in the first place, flirting with the very "moral hubris" of which Moses accuses the Federal Republic's official memory culture. Leaning hard on the language of religion and heresy, he invests his new "German Catechism" with the power of clerical dogma promulgated by the "high priests" of redemptive philosemitism. With the help of their "priestly censors," these guardians of incomparability keep the German population in the fold by protecting the "sacred trauma" of the Holocaust from contamination by other memories.

This all sounds downright dystopian and a bit over the top, leading the historian Volker Weiß to see in Moses's text nothing but a "resentment-laden mess" lacking full knowledge of the relevant debates. If this claim misses the mark in light of Moses' published record, Patrick Bahners' quip that Moses was "Sieferle von links" at first glance hit somewhat closer to home—though as I'll explain, the quick analogy also distracts from key aspects of the debate. Elsewhere on this blog, Helmut Walser Smith has detailed the implications of the manifest echoes between Moses' religious rhetoric and the reactionary critique of the "Auschwitz-Myth" (Sieferle's term and quotation marks)—to which one could also add Martin Walser's similarly infamous reference to Auschwitz as a "moral cudgel." Regardless of the divergent politics underlying them, these resonances risk moving Moses into an unpalatable proximity with the intellectual discourse of the German far right, which gleefully seized on Bahners's Sieferle tweet to score points on its own blog. Which is how we end up with a text by the leader of the Austrian Identitarian movement writing in the right-wing *Sezession* about a piece published by a US-based Australian historian of Germany in the Swiss online journal *Geschichte der Gegenwart*. I'll return to this curious constellation below, but first want to take stock – not just of current state of the debate but also of a few aspects that seem to have fallen by the wayside. Recovering them from the fracas will be important for locating the political fault lines in this iteration of *finis germania*, if that's what it is.

Moses' "Catechism" text has also had its share of well- or better-meaning critics, most of them now assembled in this forum. Appreciative of some of his stated intentions, they plead for more balance and all seem to call for degrees of moderation (but how do you conduct a moderate polemics?) and greater differentiation. Historians all – until the recent contributions by the sociologists Zoé Samudzi and Paula Villa Braslavsky, that is –, they seek to steer Moses back into the disciplinary fold by asking him to consider more carefully the *history* of German memory. Neil Gregor, Matt Fitzpatrick, Helmut Walser Smith, Udi Greenberg, Bill Niven, and, in a more personal vein, Frank Biess would remind Moses of the

hard-fought gains of individuals and social movements; the work of the *Geschichtswerkstätten* and the long march through the institutions; the varieties of democratic activism and the strengthening of civil society that ensued; and indeed the work of academic historians, who have long attended to questions of comparison and complex causation even as they have continued to debate, uphold, and nuance our understanding of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Others have suggested that Moses overestimates the impact of the “civic religion” he outlines. As Greenberg suggests and as Samudzi’s contribution also implies, Holocaust memorialization may not be the most important obstacle to facing the history of colonialism, combatting racism, and building a more inclusive society in Germany. And Bill Niven points out that the memorialization of other groups may not be quite as proscribed (let alone censored) as Moses suggests.

These critiques and historical vantage points are as welcome as the debate itself – so long as we recall also some of its more proximate causes. After all, Moses’ intervention was penned explicitly in response to the Mbembe affair last year and to the vitriol unleashed earlier this year in the *Feuilletons* upon the publication of Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory* in German. As became clear in those debates – a “historians’ debate 2.0” now rewired to new political polarities – history, and indeed scholarship, at times took a distant second place to opinionating, to political posturing, but also to memory as a public act that always takes place in the present. This is not to suggest that the kinds of historical correctives advocated in this forum aren’t in order and indeed crucial in various ways. But it is to remind ourselves that, in Rothberg’s case at least, the terms of the debate are set by (scholarship on) literature and memory, for starters. To be sure, this fact was all too often obscured in the responses – Rothberg had to remind his critics time and again that he is a comparatist by training, not a historian (nor was Habermas, for that matter). And he has had to defend himself more than once, bizarrely, for doing the work of a humanist: for asking and answering questions as they arise in literature, painting, and film, where they often find their richest articulations. From the literary analyses that make up Rothberg’s book, multidirectional memory emerged as much as a theoretical paradigm as an empirical finding in the annals of postwar cultural production.

Most of Rothberg’s German critics refused to accept the premise, let alone follow Rothberg’s argumentation, though for good measure they happily threw historian Jürgen Zimmerer under the bus along with *Multidirectional Memory*. Some demonstrably failed to read books carefully or to the end, others cited out of context and in bad faith, others again just reworked their colleagues’ misquotations into mash-ups of their own. Thomas Schmid was a particularly egregious, serial offender. Writing first for *Die Welt*, he lashed out against Rothberg as an “intellectual authoritarian” and “the current Guru of a cultural milieu supported by NGOs and left-liberals,” a notion that Schmid might as well have cribbed from the far right’s talk of a “links-grün versiffte Milieu.” Drawing on experiences made only “on paper, in paintings, and on film reels,” Schmid claimed, the contributions of *Multidirectional Memory* amounted to little than “social work platitudes.” Not content to leave it at that, he repeated and amplified his claims in a response to an article by Zimmerer and Rothberg in *Die Zeit*. Though it was difficult to recognize the latter’s claims in Schmid’s rendering, which accused these two Holocaust scholars of seeing in the Shoah “merely a special case of colonialism.” Both have argued explicitly against such a conflation. In advancing their comparative frameworks, Rothberg and Zimmerer were playing with fire, Schmid suggested, feeding the “resentment for overdoing the Holocaust” – or belittling it, as the case may be: “At universities in the USA” (one wants to know: which?) “it can happen that minority rights activists dismiss the Holocaust as mere ‘white on white’ crime.”

Schmid's contributions as well as some of his misattributions were subsequently aped on the other side of the *Feuilleton* spectrum by Tania Martini. Writing for the *taz*, she, too, lamented the nefarious effects of postcolonial studies, that noxious academic import from "universities in the USA." Curiously and counter-intuitively, Martini first aligned Rothberg with this import and then accused postcolonialism of engaging in competition over victimhood – in other words: of precisely the kind of competitive memory politics against which Rothberg first wrote *Multidirectional Memory* over a decade ago. And in passing Martini, too, discredits the work of literary scholars who "disregard historical specifics and pay more attention to narratives than real history or political processes." Other critiques – by Claudius Seidl in the *FAZ* and Tobias Rapp in *Der Spiegel* – were somewhat more nuanced, though the former, too, misquotes Zimmerer and misreads *Multidirectional Memory* entirely when he concludes with a hint of satisfaction that "the American Rothberg" will not "unburden us of our German responsibility."

If I have picked out only some of the more egregious examples as a reminder of how the German *Feuilleton* across the political spectrum hyperventilated in response to Rothberg's book, it is to underscore Moses' point. Whatever his exaggerations, they become legible as a response to the overblown rhetoric of a debate that does seem driven by some shared doxa, collective catechism apparently in need of defending. I am less certain that this catechism is captured precisely by the five points Moses lists. Rather, I think it also involves a few other articles of faith that underpin the reactions to Mbembe, Rothberg, and Zimmerer. Reassessing the controversy, one might begin to ask what was truly at stake in the furor of the *Feuilleton*.

For the critiques certainly went beyond the reassertion of the singularity of the Holocaust that seems to have become the focus of the debate, but which neither Rothberg nor Zimmerer ever really disputed. And so, underneath the not-so-genteel veneer we find other common causes for handwringing: postcolonial studies, identity politics, academic standards – unwelcome imports from across the Atlantic, all of them. This is not the place to unpack the defensive reaction that these terms occasion in current debates (including those launched in the past few months by Wolfgang Thierse and Horst Bredekamp). But this complex is surely what Moses has in mind when he notes that "for the ageing 68er generation, the influence of Postcolonial Studies is tantamount to the barbarian conquest of Rome." The responses range from nostalgia to political reaction. One need only reread the opening lines of Schmid's nasty review – where in a mix of mockery and ironic self-deprecation, he nostalgically recalls the ubiquity of the "Sarotti-Mohr" – to realize how much the reaction is driven by a desire to return to a *status quo ante* of the "young Federal Republic" in which Schmid apparently grew up. Though he goes on to admit that colonialism remains a blind spot in the landscape of German memory, the dogwhistle has been sounded as loudly as if he had opened with some lines about changing demographics in light of increased migration.

Which brings us back to *Sezession*, where Martin Sellner picked up on Patrick Bahners' "left-wing Sieferle" tweet. In his piece, entitled "Postcolonial Attack on the 'Auschwitz-Myth,'" Sellner seizes on Moses's religious imagery to outline the "right" way to overcome the *Schuldskult* inculcated by the new catechism. *Sezession*, it should perhaps be noted, is but one tentacle of the "metapolitical" project that has been operating for the better part of 20 years out of the small village of Schnellroda, home to the poster couple of far right think tanks, Götz Kubitschek and Ellen Kositzka. Besides the journal-cum-blog, the operation includes a publishing house (Antaios), a YouTube channel, podcasts and biannual "academies" organized by a think tank, the Institut für Staatspolitik, which remains under surveillance by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Nonetheless, Kubitschek, Kositzka, Sellner

and company have continuously sought to expand their discursive footprint, espousing what some have called a “Gramscianism of the Right” (pace Antonio Gramsci), even promulgating their own “conservative catechism” in the pages of *Sezession*. In this context, the constellation of authors, arguments, and publishing venues I briefly sketched out above would prove irresistible to someone like Sellner. And so we find ourselves at the interface of progressive and reactionary debates, in that strange space of the Venn diagram where the readership of *Geschichte der Gegenwart* overlaps with that of *Sezession*.

Sellner applauds Moses’ “sharp analysis,” since he and his ilk share its “clearly formulated thesis” about the centrality of Holocaust memory to the moral foundations of the Federal Republic.



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25. Mai 2021

Postkoloniale Angriffe auf den „Auschwitz-Mythos“

Martin Sellner / 95 Kommentare

Die Scholastiker der deutschen Schuldreligion schlagen Alarm. Ihr „Universalismus der Schuld“ ist Thema identitätspolitischer Debatten.



Martin Sellner ist Kopf der österreichischen Identitären Bewegung.

Sez  

„Sieferle von links“, urteilt etwa Patrick Bahners über einen jüngst von A. Dirk Moses veröffentlichten Beitrag über den „Katechismus der Deutschen“. Tatsächlich erleben wir im Kampf zwischen dem deutschen postnazistischen Schuldstolz und der postmodernen Identitätspolitik einen interessanten theologischen Konflikt der Neuzeit.

Der Text von Moses ist absolut lesenswert. Seine klare formulierte These muß in den Ohren des bundesrepublikanischen *juste milieu* wie Blasphemie klingen: „Die Erinnerung an den Holocaust als Zivilisationsbruch ist für viele das moralische Fundament der Bundesrepublik. Diesen mit anderen Genoziden zu vergleichen, gilt ihnen daher als eine Häresie, als Abfall vom rechten Glauben. Es ist an der Zeit, diesen Katechismus aufzugeben.“

  

Similarly, Sellner quotes approvingly from Rothberg’s and Zimmerer’s article in *Die Zeit*, where they called for an end to the taboos on comparison and critiqued the provincialism and “ritualized postulates” of German memory culture. He also devotes considerable space, several Sieferle-quotations and one quote from Adorno to further shoring up the religious character of the German “guilt narrative,” happily adopting Moses’s reference to a “sacred trauma.”

However, especially in view of the analogy that Moses admittedly furnished by his choice of imagery, it is worth noting that the parallels end right there. For where Moses critiques the catechism in the name of

greater differentiation, where Rothberg and Zimmerer call for more multidirectionality and comparison, the far-right advocates for its outright abolition as the only way to free the Germans from the burden of guilt. To them, the problem lies, neither in the singularity thesis nor in the ritualization of Holocaust memory per se, but in their “psychological and political effects on the German *Volk*.” The purpose of critique, consequently, is not inclusiveness, recognition, or solidarity across multiple identity groups but ethnonationalist retrenchment. Agreeing at first blush with the thesis of a catechism that rules Germans lives, Sellner winds his way to conclusions diametrically opposed to both the letter and the spirit of Moses’s intervention. If for the former the catechism demands to be countered by “inclusive thinking,” the latter sees it only in terms of its “inescapable consequences”: “the exchange of the population through replacement migration as well as the routine, targeted traumatization of indigenous youth.” By which he presumably means “bio-Germans.” Moses, Rothberg, and Zimmerer want a *different* culture of memory; Sieferle and Sellner want none.

What they do want, however, is what Rothberg’s and Zimmerer’s critics ultimately called for: less multiculturalism, no postcolonial studies, and leave us alone with your identity politics, thank you (we have our own). In Sellner’s barely veiled *völkisch* language, these tendencies go hand in hand with the universalizing guilt narrative in dooming the people (he calls this “ethnomasochism”). By contrast, he seeks to work out an “identitarian approach to anti-Semitism, Holocaust, Shoa, and Colonialism.” While Moses may have provided him with some terminology for this, Sellner’s ideological alignment is ultimately, if counter-intuitively, with the very “priests” Moses had called out for their gatekeeping.

As Fabian Wolff noted in his long, searching essay for *Die Zeit*, the pattern is not new, even if some of the terms are. “*Diese weiße Mehrheitsgesellschaft ist nämlich schon seit Jahren damit beschäftigt, rechtes, ja völkisches Gedankengut in die Mitte zu holen, auf links zu zeigen, um über rechts zu schweigen, und sich lieber von Schnellroda-Chic anfixen zu lassen, statt ihn zu bekämpfen.*” To Dirk Moses’ credit, he pointed squarely at that center, laying bare the degree to which Schnellroda chic already colors some corners of the *Feuilleton*, and forcing us to ask when self-styled liberal critique shades into the *völkisch-identitarian* dribble peddled in *Sezession*.

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