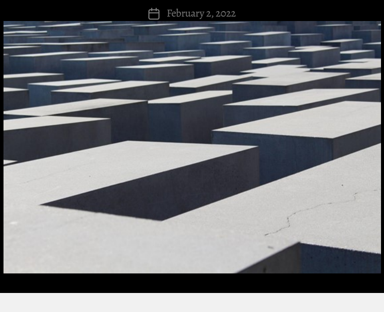
INTERVIEW

A New German Historians' Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg (Part I)

February 2, 2022



By Jonathon Catlin

This is the first installment of Jonathon Catlin's two-part conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg about recent debates in Germany concerning the history and memory of the Holocaust and colonialism. Part one explores the central issues at stake in the latest debates and their relation to the German Historians' Debate of the 1980s. Part two engages the relationship of minorities to official Holocaust memory in a diversifying Germany, the role of scholarly positionality, and the relationship between scholarship and activism.

In recent years, several U.S.-based scholars have found themselves at the center of fierce public debates in Germany about the history and memory of the Holocaust and its relation to colonialism and other forms of historical violence. Contributing editor Jonathon Catlin put three scholars in conversation to explore these debates from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Sultan Doughan, an anthropologist, is the Dr. Thomas Zand Visiting Assistant Professor in Holocaust Pedagogy and Antisemitism Studies at Clark University. Her research on civic education programs for people from migrant backgrounds in contemporary Germany investigates these practices as strategies for incorporation into the secular nation. A. Dirk Moses is the editor of the Journal of Genocide Research *and Frank Porter Graham Distinguished Professor of Global Human Rights History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In May 2021 he published "The German Catechism," a critique of aspects of German Holocaust memory culture that set off a new round of debate. Michael Rothberg is Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. A German translation of his 2009 book* Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization *appeared last year and been a significant touchstone in ongoing debates. The conversation that follows revisits some themes from Moses and Rothberg's 2014 exchange on the politics of memory in a transcultural sphere.*

Jonathon Catlin: A series of debates about the memory of the Holocaust and colonialism have roiled the German public sphere the past two years. Some have dubbed this the "Historikerstreit 2.0," a name that suggests a relitigating of the original "historians' debate" set off by the conservative German historian Ernst Nolte in 1986. This framing has been criticized for a number of reasons. For one, the present debate has been fueled not primarily by historians, but by journalists generating hot takes. The scholars involved have mostly been foreign, with the notable exception of the German historian of Africa Jürgen Zimmerer, who shares many of your positions. Protagonists such as Achille Mbembe—a leading African intellectual whose disinvitation from a German literary festival in April 2020 was a major flashpoint—and you, Michael, are not part of the historical guild, but cultural or political theorists. Gavriel Rosenfeld and Dirk have also noted that several other debates since 1986 have already been dubbed the "second historians' debate," among them the Friedländer-Broszat exchange in 1987, the Schneider/Schwerte scandal and reactions to the Wehrmacht exhibition in 1995, the Goldhagen debate in 1996, the Walser-Bubis affair in 1998, and debates about the Berlin Holocaust memorial throughout the 1990s. Yet again, most figures involved have been white and male.

Michael, you have also criticized the parallel to the Historikerstreit because it has been used by representatives of "official" German memory to suggest that scholars such as yourself relativize the Holocaust à la Nolte. On the contrary, you argue, raising the issue of colonialism in discussion of Holocaust memory functions as a call for *more* responsibility for *both* crimes, not trivializing either one. Dirk, you opened a new chapter in these debates by arguing that that German Holocaust memory has calcified into a quasi-theological "catechism" that has been wielded against minorities and progressives. Your essay activated longstanding currents of what Theodor Adorno, already in the 1950s, called German "guilt and defensiveness" about the Holocaust, which has now turned into its opposite: what Anson Rabinbach calls Germany's "negative exceptionalism" about its crimes and pride in its memory culture in recent decades. Already in your first book, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (2007), you refer to such memory debates as exemplifying "manifest enactments of an underlying structure of German political emotions" (5). Susan Neiman began a recent symposium (and forthcoming publication) at which you spoke by suggesting that emotions have run so high because of the context of a "hysterical" liberal reaction to the rise of the far-right AfD: the Bundestag's 2019 anti-BDS resolution overcompensated for a pro-Israel proposal from the AfD itself.

Let's begin by situating the latest debates amidst these histories. What are the most salient continuities, repetitions, or ruptures? Did anything in the latest debates surprise you?

Michael Rothberg: I don't know whether the term "Historikerstreit 2.0" is the right one for the current debates, but I do find the reference back to the 1986 debate illuminating for understanding how much has changed in the last thirty-five years. There have, of course, been countless debates in the German public sphere about National Socialism and the Holocaust. In my opinion, the current controversies share something with the "original" Historikerstreit that controversies such as those over the Wehrmacht exhibit or Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* do not necessarily possess. Both the 1986 debate and the current one turn on a similar problem, even if they naturally cannot be reduced to a single factor: how to conceptualize historical comparison in the context of the Nazi genocide of European Jews. In each case, the point of comparison is different: in 1986 it involved the relation of the Holocaust to the crimes of Stalinism; today the most relevant referent is colonialism, especially German colonialism.

Once we situate the question of comparison at the heart of the two debates we can begin to see how different they are and how different their contexts are. As you note, my argument has been that comparison was deployed in the Historikerstreit, especially by Nolte—but implicitly also by someone like Hillgruber—to minimize German responsibility for the Holocaust. I don't know anyone on "our side" of the debate today who argues that granting colonialism the attention it is due would minimize German responsibility for the Holocaust. To the contrary, for many of us, it involves multiplying the forms of historical and political responsibility to include colonialism as well as more recent and current forms of racial violence (at a minimum).

That difference is fundamental—and frequently ignored by those who criticize people like Dirk, Jürgen Zimmerer, and me. But recognizing it also encourages us to highlight other differences that separate us from the moment of the Historikerstreit. A generational shift has taken place since the 1980s, from a moment in which the most significant participants had living memories of the Nazi period to one in which almost all of us belong to postwar generations. The debate has also internationalized and the media of debate have changed. Some of the venues are the same as they were in the 1980s—the big German newspapers, *FAZ* and *Die Zeit*—but blogs like the Swiss *Geschichte der Gegenwart* and the Anglophone *New Fascism Syllabus*, as well as less traditionally prestigious newspapers like the *Berliner Zeitung* have also driven the debate.

The biggest difference of all, however, concerns the status of the Holocaust as such. The Historikerstreit illustrates just how contested the meaning of the Shoah remained in Germany even forty years after the defeat of National Socialism. But it was precisely the triumph of the Habermasian position—which highlighted the exceptionality of the Holocaust and of German responsibility for it—that became the clear cross-party consensus just a few years later with the end of the Cold War and the need to provide a unifying historical narrative for both a new Germany and a new Europe. With the Stockholm Declaration of 2000 and the completion of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin in 2005, among other developments, a new threshold was reached in Holocaust consciousness and commemoration.

To be clear, I'm not calling for a "forgetting" of the Holocaust in Germany or globally. But what we are seeing in current hostile responses to what I call multidirectional approaches to the Holocaust is a loss of the progressive, critical dimension of Holocaust memory that both Habermas and grassroots memory activists of the 1980s championed. The tasks of the present are different from those of the 1980s; you cannot simply assert the same slogans about the Holocaust's uniqueness in a moment when the agents and contexts of comparison have changed. In contrast to 1986, today it is anti-comparative approaches that tend toward exculpation.

Dirk Moses: I agree with Michael, and remind readers that I wrote an article in August 2021 arguing that we don't have a new Historikerstreit but, rather, a crisis of illiberalism. To explain that development, we need to register a dynamic I have called the "Dialectic of Vergangenheitsbewältigung," in which the state's appropriation of the critical approach Habermas articulated in the 1980s, which has been contested by conservatives ever since, has transformed its emancipatory effect into its opposite: a censorious culture of political correctness reminiscent of the establishment's reaction to the Fischer Controversy in the 1960s and New Left in the 1970s. In a presentation at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam in October 2021, I argued that the two decades from 1985 to 2005 witnessed the moral refoundation of the republic. One could even term it a revolution in moral coordinates in which many—though not all—Germans began to identify with the victims of their Nazi grandparents rather than with those grandparents. In doing so, they began to relinquish the national self-pity that characterized national sentiment, namely empathizing with the suffering of one's "own people." Now their victims' suffering moved to the center of identification and emotional connection. I welcomed this development at the time because the denationalization of politics could encourage multiculturalism. However, the opposite has occurred. As I put it in Potsdam: "When black and progressive Jewish voices are disciplined, indeed cast out by non-Jewish German politicians, journalists and even scholars with pompous displays of self-righteousness, I sensed that things had gone awry here. That moral revolution was eating its children." Now Germany's vaunted "coming to the terms with the past" seems inimical to multiculturalism as it becomes the vehicle for a new form of postnational nationalism, and as German elites wring their hands about the "imported antisemitism" of Arab refugees and others who disturb the tidy terms of redemptive philosemitism.

Sultan Doughan: I wish I could say that I am surprised by the current debate and how it has generated a new terrain for placing some scholars as friends and others as enemies. The debate seems to me very polarized: "more or less Holocaust memory," "comparing or not comparing genocides," "Europe vs. the rest." There is very little nuance in the debate itself, which is not reflective of actual scholarly debates, at least judging from the viewpoint of the American academy. Michael's statement on the Habermasian position as the winner of the 1986 debate shows how this is more than a debate among historians and about history. Rather, it is about the normative relation one should have with the Holocaust within a range of modern genocides.

Certainly, the debate of 1986 cemented the public meaning of the Holocaust after the Cold War. The memorial debates in the 1990s, spearheaded by Reinhart Koselleck, were concerned with how to represent victimhood and death, specifically that of Jews vis-a-vis other groups who were victims of the Nazi regime, in memorial practice. What is interesting about that debate is the emergence of certain questions *after* the Historikerstreit. If the Holocaust is unique, how do you represent death—Jewish death, that of Roma and Sinti, but also death of "homosexuals"? Are they all equal victims of war united by death? Or do you have to represent how they were killed in order to explain how they were governed during and before the Holocaust? These questions underlie past debates about building a Holocaust memorial with the aim of giving space to the victims, and it becomes a problem of how to represent hierarchies of religious, racial, and sexual differences and intersections without reifying Nazi categories. In a way, Koselleck makes a binary argument, claiming that you can either represent the victims or the system. As an anthropologist, I hold that you can show the workings of the system through the lived experiences of the victims. But this is not just a question about representation, it also reveals how descendants of those groups are regarded in society today, what kind of positions they can take, and how they have to speak. So, instead of arguing for more or less Holocaust memory, I would urge us to pay attention to its quality. More Holocaust memory can also mean blurred memory and less specificity, as we are currently experiencing. In fact, I think that we are mistaking performed national memory for Holocaust history. Beyond representation and meaning, I focus on what these debates *do*, what memorials *do*. What does exceptionalizing the Holocaust *do*? What do these discourses bring into motion? How do they inform policies?

My research on citizenship, religious difference, and migration grows out of the debates and developments of the early 2000s that Michael laid out, but there is an additional layer to my work: "the war on terror." Securitization discourse has shifted former immigrant groups, specifically Middle Easterners, from the category of the *Auslander* to Muslim. This shift came at a time of civic and legal equality for Middle Eastern migrants, who had just been greeted into Germany as a nation of immigrants. Within ten years of liberalizing citizenship for non-Europeans, I observed how a new integration policy targeted these former labor migrants and refugees as Muslims, and with that as potential Islamic extremists and antisemites. And I actually regard these integration policies and the hyper-vigilance that came with it as part of liberalism.

Holocaust memory became a moral compass in this time. Many of my interlocutors, mostly civic educators and social workers, did not have any issue with learning or teaching Holocaust memory. Quite the opposite, they often found the question of religious and ethnic difference buried in it, or the experience of being a refugee, or the question of Palestine. They would regard Holocaust history as opening up a world and a language for their own experiences. But as you know, this in itself can become a problem in Germany, if you regard the Holocaust as a nodal point of histories and political structures, rather than the unique exception of modernity. This is perhaps already an element of multidirectionality—not on the epistemological level Michael describes, but rather as a lived reality for many immigrants. In a sense, what Michael is demanding publicly is already experienced but not verbalized openly. To say this publicly would cause social death, especially if you are a person of color and visibly Muslim. Certain accusations with regards to the Holocaust and antisemitism can force people out of their jobs, socially isolate them, or revoke their funding, etc. and have their colleagues dissociate from them as if they had never known one another. The consequences are real and painful, as I know from some of my interlocutors, because there is no space for reconciliation or clarification.

JC: Dirk, you have been called a "*Gleichmacher*"—an equater or relativizer with respect to the Holocaust. This accusation paints you as violating the German taboo about challenging the Holocaust's uniqueness, which you argued in "The German Catechism" is an essentially theological claim, not a social-scientific one. You argued in response that *Vergleichung*, comparison, is not *Gleichsetzung*, conflation, and that we historians "trade in complexity and not in binaries or simplicity." "Where journalists and politicians see historical facts," you said, "we see contingent interpretations." Indeed, many of the "intertwined" histories of colonialism and genocide, including the Holocaust, that you've worked on were already accepted by the Anglophone historiographical consensus in the early 2000s. One can follow this comparative approach through dozens of articles, volumes, and issues of *The Journal of Genocide Research* since you became its editor in 2011. Recent debates, then, are not really about new facts or even interpretations. Similarly, Michael's book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, from 2009, was only just translated into German; and it did not invent new comparisons, but gives a history of decades of comparisons undertaken by mostly Black and Jewish thinkers since the Second World War. How do you explain these divergences and temporal lags between historical understanding and public memory?

Michael Rothberg: To address the politics of comparison generally, beyond the German case—and also Sultan's earlier comment on "lived multidirectionality"—I would say that sometimes public memory and activist discourse run ahead of scholarship as well. One of the most remarkable discoveries I made when working on *Multidirectional Memory* was the prevalence of connections made between the Holocaust and the October 17, 1961 police massacre in Paris of peacefully demonstrating Algerians. Right from the moment of the event, observers on the left saw disturbing echoes of the Nazi period in the rounding up, detention, torture, and massacre of Algerians. It was only decades later that it was revealed that the man responsible for the events of 1961—Paris police chief Maurice Papon—was also responsible for the deportation of Jews to Nazi camps under the Vichy regime; activists were ahead of historical research in this case. And, in general, it was only activists, writers, and non-professional historians who kept the memory of the October 17 massacre alive when it was being largely ignored by both scholarship and the state. So, like Sultan, I believe that multidirectional connections often exist at the everyday level long before they are granted recognition or legitimacy by the historical guild.

Dirk Moses: I began the Catechism piece by observing that we scholars had been discussing these issues for over twenty years—and were in effect reprising debates Michael and others honor from the 1950s. In my latest book, *The Problems of Genocide*, I show how they can be traced to the late 1930 and 1940s. Commentators have always understood Nazism as a form of violent expansionism that imported and radicalized modes of colonial rule and destruction into Europe. The current debate makes clear that the scholarly and public spheres operate according to different rules because they have contrasting purposes. The scholarly sphere is driven by innovation, the public sphere by stability, because it constitutes a site of collective identity formation. German president Steinmeier said words to this effect in his speech opening the Humboldt Forum. Unlike other commentators, he respected rather than disdained academic work, but insisted on the significance of the political domain. I don't dispute that, and I welcomed Jürgen Habermas's intervention, which Steinmeier effectively endorsed by suggesting that public memory was not "frozen" and needed to account for migrants' experiences.

JC: Let's address Habermas's evolving position directly. He was the central figure on the liberal side of the 1980s Historikerstreit, and in September 2021 he also weighed in on the latest debate. In the 1980s, he exemplified what Dirk has called "the non-German German," opposing revisionist, conservative positions such as that of Nolte, and advocated German acceptance of singular guilt for Nazi crimes. In his recent short essay, Habermas reiterated the centrality of the Holocaust to postwar German memory and identity, but he also admitted that the hard-won "catechism" no longer reflects the changing composition of German society, in which upwards of a quarter of the population now has a migration background and the first Black German woman recently entered the Bundestag. Memory, he suggested, should not remain a frozen catechism but must evolve and expand with the diversifying body politic to include other historical traumas such as colonialism, racial violence, and migration. Dirk has already noted how a similar position was recently articulated by President Steinmeier, such that one could even say the correct interpretation of official Holocaust memory is multidirectional memory! On the other hand, figures such as the U.S.-Israeli scholar Omri Boehm have argued that Habermas's resigned liberal politics of communicative rationality has betrayed itself on issues like his silence about human rights abuses and violations of international law in Israel. Were you surprised that Habermas revised his position? Does he still have insights to contribute on this issue?

MR: I really welcomed Habermas's intervention, and I was also impressed by Steinmeier's speech at the opening of the Humboldt Forum (though I liked Chimamanda Adichie's speech even more). Habermas seemed to "get it"—to realize that we are not still fighting the 1986 Historikerstreit; he understands that different things are at stake and that Germany today is a different country (not that it wasn't already "postmigrant" in the 1980s, however). A new memory culture is to be welcomed—and does not have to necessitate the erasure of the gains that were made through grassroots and public sphere struggles in the 1980s and 1990s. That said, it was then disappointing to find Habermas's same short essay appended to a new volume collecting journalistic pieces by Saul Friedländer, Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher, and Dan Diner about these debates. While these are all scholars I admire enormously and who have made untold contributions to our understanding of the Holocaust, their contributions to this volume display precisely the rigidity and dogmatism the three of us are responding to. They are not in touch with—and don't even seem to acknowledge—the demographic and cultural changes in Germany in recent decades or the ways that the hard-won liberal discourse of Holocaust memory has begun to have illiberal effects in the public sphere, as a whole host of examples illustrate.

JC: At least one important part of the academic historical consensus *does* seem to have changed. As Michael notes, leading historians have advanced paradigms for understanding the Holocaust as a singularly "fundamental" crime (Saul Friedländer), as "incongruous" (Götz Aly), or as a "civilizational rupture" (Dan Diner)—now hegemonic approaches that are canonized in the new volume with a foreword by Habermas. Lately, however, these frameworks have been challenged as particular ways of narrating the Holocaust from a Germanocentric standpoint. As the German-Jewish intellectual Micha Brumlik put it, if the by now well-established historical understanding of colonialism as not a barbaric exception but an essential part of Europe's "civilizing mission" is true, then "Auschwitz', in all its singularity, must be seen as the climax of a trend that began long before—at the latest with the expansion of Europe towards Africa and the Americas." To what extent do "multidirectional" and "entangled" approaches still allow for retaining the special place of the Holocaust in German history and memory?

DM: Brumlik made that concession in a regrettably querulous discussion of my essays, although without having read my book, which makes precisely that argument about the Holocaust being a climax of a trend. You can see him losing faith in Diner's "civilizational rupture" argument as he finally contemplates all the mass crimes committed in western civilization's name that academic scholarship has laid bare. Of course, the descendants of those victims have been telling their stories all along, but few in Germany are interested in hearing them because they believe that the answer to the Nazi past is returning the country to the fold of western civilization. As a result, liberal elites such as the contributors to that new book berate younger and non-white scholars and attack postcolonial studies and Black Lives Matter because they undermine this "answer" to the Nazi past. They are finally prepared to acknowledge, say, the Imperial German genocide of the Herero and Nama people, but only if it's seen as categorically different—i.e., subordinate to—the Holocaust. I covered these debates already twenty years ago. To be clear, I think Holocaust commemoration should retain its central place in Germany, but not in its current partisan form that is implicated in an illiberal political culture characterized by taboos, inquisitions, and denunciations directed against migrants and progressive Jews.

MR: I agree with Dirk about the parochial or provincial nature of the German insistence on a "unique" civilizational rupture, but I do also think there's a real issue here—one that is related to Sultan's point about the "quality" of the memory at stake and about the risks of blurring different histories. One frustrating aspect of these debates is how often we seem to be speaking past each other, perhaps because we're operating at different levels of abstraction and addressing different phenomena (history vs. memory, for example). There is a place for large-scale arguments of the sort that Dirk makes in *The Problems of Genocide* that allow us to see long-term patterns and discourses; and then there's also a need to zoom in on the particularities of different histories. The Holocaust has crucial aspects that are particular to it; so does the transatlantic slave trade and the genocide of indigenous peoples in settler colonies. Since my focus is the memory of political violence rather than the history of political violence, the questions that seem most urgent to me concern the ethics of comparison, which we need to take into account in the evaluation of memory cultures. In a follow up to *Multidirectional Memory* called "From Gaza to Warsaw," I map out different versions of multidirectionality and make an ethical and political case for what I call "differentiated solidarity": the ability to create transcultural links without erasing distinctions, which I see in a text like Du Bois's "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto." That's the ultimate direction of the normative project of multidirectional memory.

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February 4, 2022

By Jonathon Catlin

This is the second installment of Jonathon Catlin's two-part conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg about recent debates in Germany concerning the history and memory of the Holocaust and colonialism. Part one explored the central issues at stake in the latest debates and their relation to the German Historians' Debate of the 1980s. Part two engages the relationship of minorities to official Holocaust memory in a diversifying Germany, the role of scholarly positionality, and the relationship between scholarship and activism.

Jonathon Catlin: Michael, you have been working with Yasemin Yildiz on book called "memory citizenship" about German-Turkish and other migrant encounters with Holocaust memory in Germany. You describe a "double-bind": minorities in Germany are told they *must* remember the Holocaust in order to become Germans, but also that they *cannot* remember the Holocaust because it is not their history. The formation of German identity as a nation of guilty perpetrators thereby inherently tends to exclude minorities from becoming "real" Germans.

Scholars working on this issue from an ethnographic perspective, such as you, Sultan, as well as Esra Özyürek and Irit Dekel, have shown how aspects of German Holocaust memory culture, such as discourse and memorials centered on a special German-Jewish or Judeo-Christian bond, often exclude and marginalize people of color in Germany. Some argue that guilt and the accusation of "ontological" antisemitism is "subcontracted" (Özyürek) or "outsourced" (El-Hassan) to those with migrant backgrounds. While some with migrant backgrounds have been charged with being insufficiently empathetic to Holocaust victims, Sultan's fieldwork suggests that they can relate quite strongly to the history of the Holocaust, but often as victims of contemporary racism and discrimination. I was struck by a line in a forthcoming article of yours, based on field work visiting Auschwitz with a school group, in which you show how Holocaust memory is "universalized" while at the same time those with migrant backgrounds can be excluded from identifying with it. One of the Muslim guides, you write, "internalized an external gaze onto Muslims, as if inadvertently confirming that Muslim difference is incommensurable with the notion of 'humanity' proposed for the trip." At the same time, "The idea of identification with Jews as humans and erasing Jewish difference enabled some ethnic German students to imagine themselves under attack" from racialized notions of Islamist terrorism.

Michael and Dirk have also participated in the online video series "This is Germany," which pokes fun at the German phrase "Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund" (people with a migration background) by turning it on its head with the phrase "Menschen mit Nazihintergrund" (people with a Nazi background). Dirk, as you recently put the issue pointedly at the Einstein Forum symposium, the Holocaust memory regime that "had once discursively empowered multiculturalism is now directed against migrants and refugees, especially from the Middle East." You have also written of the "affective colonization" of Middle Eastern, and specifically Germans of Palestinian origin, whose perspectives seem to be inassimilable. As Sultan has written, "instead of civil courage," the value ostensibly taught by the civil education programs examined in your fieldwork, many educators of minority backgrounds leading those trainings "learned to self-silence or to talk in whispers and cry behind closed doors, not knowing how to address the generationally transmitted experience of displacement they were feeling."

Many have noted the lack of diversity in the memory debates with which we began, and in German media and academia generally. Against this tendency, Zoé Samudzi has powerfully stressed historical links between the Nazi period and racial science and colonialism in Africa. Mirjam Brusius has argued that the debate is not about historical comparison as such but rather "about finding more nuance, complicating what we believe we know, and looking for the ways in which other groups of people have used these histories to give force to their own struggles." It has become clear that Germany has poor vocabulary for discussing "race," a notion tainted by its role in Nazi thinking. At the same time, I was struck by how Sultan emphasizes the role of religion and the othering of Muslims as evidence of not so much an "incomplete secularization," but rather the way "religious reason, memory politics, and citizenship are enmeshed in the secular state with far reaching consequences as to who belongs." To what extent do you see the doubling down on what Michael calls "competitive memory" in recent years as activating older histories of prejudice, versus as a new chapter in addressing the "minority question" in Europe?

Sultan Doughan: Allow me to clarify the dynamics in my fieldwork. I worked with civic education projects primarily funded to combat Islamic extremism. They mobilized Holocaust education and memory to teach tolerance, but they were not based at memorial sites. In fact, they regarded Holocaust memorials as old-fashioned forms of engaging history: frozen, moralizing, and too ritualized. Yet the schools they catered to thought memorial sites, especially former concentration camps, had a certain authenticity. Thus my research took me to Auschwitz and other sites of mass extermination. Most of the educators, social workers, and community organizers I encountered were of Middle Eastern descent, and based on my findings, I can say that individual guilt was not forced onto them. Most of the hard discourse about memory and migration in public is much softer in these domains because you must reach immigrant communities. You cannot punish them if you want them to change. My fieldwork taught me a lot about the delicate nature of this work, and about my own assumptions and prejudices.

Educational practices were rather playful, game-like, and based on role play. The organizations usually emphasized responsibility and agency, while guilt was seen as obstructing a renewed bond with the past. These are civic education projects invested in forging liberal subjects for a demographically changing Germany; hence they emphasized to the students that they were defenders of liberal democracy and that they should regard this as a gift. The students, in contrast, complained that they were discriminated against and that they were victims: "what about us?" or "why always Jews?" were common reactions, which was interpreted as victim-competition, and as potentially antisemitic. On an institutional level, I think there is an extreme anxiety that these new immigrants (actually German-born citizens) could in fact bring back discussions about race and racism, equal rights despite religious and ethnic difference, and a rethinking of secularism, which are basically unfinished debates German-Jews began some two hundred years ago, before their collective claims were disrupted by the Holocaust.

What you quoted from my forthcoming article, "Desiring Memorials: Jews, Muslims and the Human of Citizenship," deals exactly with that anxiety, which was shared across ethnic and religious backgrounds. For many middle-class people who have undergone German education and socialization, talking about race, racial relations and ethno-religious differences is extremely uncomfortable. I include myself in this. I had to wrap my head around how race was so easily invoked in the U.S. context. In Germany, you downplay differences and try to look for commonalities, or you just practice mimicry and assimilate. At the same time, many things that would be considered racist in the U.S. pass in Germany as an "objective" description of how Muslims, and sometimes Jews, are. And this is a problem, because on the one hand, you cannot describe differences other than through a racializing language and on the other, you have internalized that racism and racialization are strictly Nazi procedures and do not exist.

I have another forthcoming article in which I discuss "postracial pedagogies" in Germany after the Holocaust and how this ultimately turns into a play of seeking out depoliticized sentiments and prejudices such as hate based on the wrong ideology. This becomes particularly complex in educational praxis that centers the figure of the Jew as the historical and categorical victim of racism. The premise here is that Jews are not different at all, but were made different by the Nazis through pseudo-science. As an anthropologist, I would rather ask how Jews were governed with regards to their traditional and religious particularities, because this is where the issue of race emerges. Why should Jews or Muslims resemble Christians or Christian-secularized Germans? Can there be any space for self-determination for minorities in Germany? But this is not the conversation we are having, and I think if this conversation happens at all it should not be about Jews, but about the Christian-secularized gaze and the universality it assumes.

The notion of humanity (*Menschheit*), as my interlocutors mobilized it for their Auschwitz trip, appealed to a shared commonality of being human, before and outside of betraying ethno-religious differences. But this notion became difficult to maintain, for each new ethno-religious difference that was revealed became provocative, and sometimes purposefully so. The notion of the human centers the figure of the victimized Jew, but it does so by disregarding any potential difference besides the reference "Jewish." What made the person recognizably Jewish was the experience of the Holocaust and the loss of Jewish communal life. Students encountered a Jewish person as a Holocaust survivor and took from that encounter that she was a normal person, just like anyone else. Certainly, the experience of the Holocaust belongs to survivors and their descendants, but is this the only feature of being Jewish in Germany? So the notion of humanity, and specifically the secular human of German citizenship, mobilizes the figure of the Jew, but in a way that it resembles a Christian-secularized German. This has a lot to do with how Holocaust memory is organized in the Western European public sphere. Although displayed and visible, it conceals the crux of the matter, namely that we are dealing with longer-standing structural issues of religious difference, minoritization, and the crisis of citizenship.

So let me be clear: I do not think that "Muslims are the new Jews." We are in a very different historical and political time, and yet, the exceptionalism and triumphalism of Holocaust debates in Germany occlude unreflected issues surrounding religious difference and citizenship. The minority question is certainly connected to these debates, because the last two decades have delayed equal collective rights, as they are constitutionally outlined, with the security argument that Muslims are not fit for German secularism and liberalism. The Muslim has emerged as a problem and is being managed. What is new this time around is that neoliberal work on the self, or "Muslim improvement," as I would call it, has replaced older forms of labor and is funded by youth projects, surveilled by administrative institutions, and amplified through social media. The major difference between now and older racial relations is that German Jews could become liberal subjects, and perhaps that's why they were so threatening to Christians in Germany. Today's range of immigrants, I believe, will remain immobile Muslim laboring subjects, not improved enough yet, or with one slight mistake can be disposed of again. So, yes, in my scholarship I address the minority question as one that cannot be asked in Germany.

JC: Another question that often remains unaskable is the role of identities in scholarly debates. Michael, I was struck by the frankness with which you write about your own positionality as a scholar in your 2019 book, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Your family, with a European Jewish background, emigrated to the U.S. around the turn of the last century, such that you are not directly complicit in formal slavery in the U.S., nor were your ancestors directly victimized by the Holocaust. Yet you remain *implicated*, in separate, though sometimes overlapping ways, by lines of historical domination and victimization, advantage and disadvantage, that continue to bear on the present. Reflecting on your own experience led you to develop a moral theory of "implication" that goes beyond the reductive binary of victim and perpetrator. Dirk, you come from a settler colony, Australia, which in my understanding exhibits more public consciousness of that history of violence than the U.S. You have said that in the German context something about your Australian approach "triggered" what you call "anxieties in Holocaust and genocide studies" about repressed histories of colonialism. Sultan, you have also addressed these issues in both German and American academic contexts for many years. How much room do you allow for positionality in your roles as public intellectuals, especially when speaking to a German audience with evidently little appreciation for histories of colonial violence and of the diversity of non-Zionist Jewish orientations?

Dirk Moses: You are right to note that my hailing from the settler colony of Australia is a key formation for me. Indigenous colleagues and friends played an important role in broadening my horizons. You are also right to point to the limited imaginative capacity of German journalists and even some academics to understand positionality, in part, I think, because they continue to inhabit a revolutionary temporality. Because the Historikerstreit began a moral refoundation of the German republic in a twenty-year period from the mid-1980s, subsequent memory debates are framed in its terms. Thus I am often denounced as a leftwing Nolte despite the absurdity of the moniker. Its memorable battles are restaged although circumstances have changed. Yet the trope is clearly irresistible, as even such a careful and distinguished historian as Sebastian Conrad was denounced as a latter-day Nolte by his colleague Martin Schulze-Wessel for daring to contextualize Holocaust memory in global perspective rather than adhere to it as an article of faith.

SD: Like Michael and Dirk, I am of course implicated in different histories of violence and domination. My father came to Germany in 1961 as a guest worker from Turkey, but he was actually not Turkish-Sunni, but Syrian-Alawi. Although indigenous to the region, my father's family culturally perished between what is now Turkey and Syria and assimilated into Turkishness. My mother's family is of central Asian descent and migrated to the Black Sea region, but because they were Sunni and acquired land, they rose successfully into the Turkish middle-class. In Germany, where I was born and grew up, I was just a Turk, of course, and that was both a self-identification and an official insult in my childhood.

During my fieldwork some people refused to work with me or do interviews because they saw me as either too pro- or anti- their work, or either too committed or not committed enough to their worldview. These were perceptions of me, of course, because I never claimed such positions. In hindsight, I can see that I must have made many people uncomfortable with my mere presence in places where they discussed Muslim youth and their antisemitism and extremism—especially because I did not just nod and agree, but asked questions. The most common response was: "Why do you ask that question?" For me this indicated that I should not question the way the world is, that I should not participate, but just observe. In a way this is indicative of the minority position in Germany: you are on the receiving end and disagreement or deviation cannot be accepted as a different position that can coexist, but is often seen as hostile and destructive. German academic spaces were not any different. I think I have no place in German academia. Regardless of my achievements, I have been told I am still not the right kind of German. Shouldn't this make us all consider where we are with regards to incorporating differences and diverse viewpoints in German institutions? I speak from the position of the scholar in exile, as do many other German women and scholars of color who work on Germany critically but from abroad, where our work is respected and valued. At Clark, I certainly allow my students to develop their scholarly positionality, but I also encourage them to question and rethink set positions. Thinking for yourself can be the most dangerous activism in our times.

Michael Rothberg: I just want to affirm what Sultan has said. I know so many German scholars of color who have left Germany because they can't bear the everyday racism and because they know that they have little chance of success in the German academy. The U.S. and U.K. have been more welcoming, despite all the serious problems here. I also know scholars of color in Germany and who, with good reason, are afraid to speak about the issues we're discussing because they worry about the fallout of being perceived as deviating from the "catechism."

As far as my own self-positioning: I always thought of *The Implicated Subject* as a kind of "autobiographical" project, but it was only after a colleague urged me to speak about my own position that I decided to include that passage in the introduction. I'm glad I did, and whenever I speak about the book I start from my own implication as a beneficiary of histories of racial violence and colonialism in the Americas.

When we were preparing the interview that opens the German translation of *Multidirectional Memory* I deliberately decided to speak autobiographically. I naively believed that presenting my Jewish-American "credentials" might ward off some of the accusations of "antisemitism" and "Holocaust relativization" that I knew were a possibility—though I never imaged things would get as bad as they did. I was wrong, as I started to realize when the *Spiegel* published a picture of me with the caption "Scholar Rothberg: Holocaust memory functions like a zero-sum game"—a complete inversion of my argument. Or when another critic intoned, "Rothberg will not take away German responsibility" (Claudius Seidl)—as if that had anything at all to do with my argument. Although there were many people who welcomed the book—and the Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (The Federal Agency for Civic Education) even issued a paperback version of it—there was a surprising inability to grasp the basic arguments. But I think that reception also tells us something important about the current state of discourse on antisemitism and the Holocaust in Germany: not only do "Muslims," Palestinians, and other people of color continue to be targeted for the kind of disciplining that Sultan describes, but there is no (longer?) hesitancy in targeting Jews and Jewish organizations as "antisemitic" when they challenge aspects of the hegemonic discourse, especially on Israel. So, in the U.S., I think of self-positioning as a way of taking responsibility for my status as an implicated subject, while in the German context I think of it as testing the limits of what is sayable.

JC: As you have all alluded to, academic freedom and freedom of expression in the public sphere in both Germany and the U.S. have become a matter of concern. Dirk writes of a "new illiberalism." Aleida Assmann proclaimed in the wake of the Mbembe affair that the specter of the accusation of antisemitism is "haunting Germany," and figures ranging from Peter Schäfer of the Jewish Museum Berlin to German-Palestinian doctor and journalist Nemi El-Hassan have lost their positions in pressure campaigns Micha Brumlik has likened to a McCarthyist witch hunt. As a result, scholars contributing to this debate have felt pressured to remain silent or publish anonymously. Even in the U.S., Princeton University withdrew support for an event on the topic of our exchange here.

You have all taken stances on contentious issues that came with risks to your careers and reputations. When you were at the University of Illinois, Michael, you were an outspoken advocate of Steven Salaita, an Indigenous Studies scholar with a Palestinian background who was fired from a position at that university for political speech critical of Israel and ultimately paid out a remarkable settlement. At that time, you defended the right of scholars "to engage the uneven field of interpretive power" in the public sphere and "to offer counter-narratives," even unpopular ones, against hegemonic accounts. How do you balance the scholarly and political aspects of that task? To put the question more pointedly to Dirk: your polemical approach in "The German Catechism" has met significant criticism, even among generally sympathetic thinkers. In light of the backlash that ensued, would you still defend the approach you took?

MR: I don't consider myself a political activist (or at least not a very good one!), but I do think that ideas are political and intellectuals have political responsibilities. What I've noticed about myself is that I respond very strongly when I recognize an injustice that is being performed in my name. In the case of Steven Salaita, or again with Achille Mbembe, I felt that prominent actors were speaking in the name of or in defense of Jews—or at least of perceived Jewish interests—in ways that I found disturbing: ways that essentially collapsed the State of Israel with Jewishness as such. That makes me angry, and it makes me want to speak out. Of course, there are lots of things done in my name that I object to—and that's why, like many people, I'll go to antiwar demonstrations, or what have you. But in cases like those of Salaita or Mbembe the additional factor is that they also speak to my expertise as a scholar in Jewish studies and Holocaust studies. Not only am I angry, but I feel I have something to say because I know some things about the relevant topics! It was clear to me in the Mbembe case, for instance, that his statements were, among other things, part of the tradition of multidirectional memory I trace in my book and that they had nothing to do with antisemitism or Holocaust relativization. In such moments, the scholarly and the political can overlap, though of course that's not always the case.

DM: I don't think my intervention was that polemical; certainly not compared to attacks endured by Mbembe, Michael, and others. If anything, it was written with an "Arendt-inspired tone," as Dan Stone observed. Amazingly, the mainstream view is that all was well in Germany until I made waves by casting a pebble into its placid pond. That is of course a self-serving and fanciful notion in view of the cases you mentioned. I did not start anything; rather, I simply called out this sort of bullying and proffered an explanation for it: namely, that a fairly small group of opinion-formers in the media, politics, and academia seek to control public narratives about Holocaust commemoration and the country's security commitment to Israel that they enforce as the country's *Staatsraison*. I then showed how each of the catechism's five articles of faith can be rethought by applying the findings of academic research. None of this made any impact other than provoking indignation. Of course, why would one expect these authorities to admit the abuse of power they wield? Quite predictably, they dug in their heels, blissfully unaware of their blind spots. For instance, in a radio debate with Jürgen Zimmerer in January 2021, the historians Norbert Frei and Sybille Steinbacher in one breath denied the existence of the catechism and in the next asserted that Germans must abide by the *Staatsraison*, all while equating postcolonial studies and far-right politics. Who can be surprised, then, that the "debate" was marked by serial misquoting to the point of inventing quotations, confirming my observation about the degeneration of public discussion: "the high priests want to conduct it like an inquisition, denouncing heresy and ritually incanting the catechism as a substitute for argumentation." Yet they have failed profoundly: a huge percentage of Germans are racist against Jews, Muslims, Blacks, and others, while about a third wrongly think their grandparents resisted the Nazis. Neither did their Holocaust education prevent the rise of the AfD. Instead of accepting responsibility for the inability of their pedagogical model to reach Germans, they lash out at critics.

That said, I think the historian Wolfgang Reinhard's intervention, which seemed to imply that Holocaust memory from the U.S. has been imposed in Germany, is neither accurate nor helpful. His tone and terms are reminiscent of the resistance to Holocaust memorialization in the 1980s and 1990s. He also underplays the important West German activism on the subject analyzed by Jenny Wüstenberg in *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany* (2018). As I have written in a number of places, this activism was very important in liberalizing Germany in the 1980s and 1990s. The problem is the perversion of this admirable enegy into coercive state policy over the last fifteen years. That is where the illiberalism lies. It is remarkable that certain colleagues seem to miss this distinction.

I noticed that the political-theological language I used triggered many of those invested in this culture. They may not realize that political theology is a venerable German intellectual tradition, as is the collective psychological approach of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich. Together, they supply the analytical tools to account for the intense emotions I explored in my first book. Iris Hefets's psychoanalytical approach accounts for the failure of reality-checking, and thus of learning processes, in the German public sphere. The psychic defense mechanisms are so entrenched that my little essay was hardly likely to destabilize them. What is remarkable is that it touched a nerve. This sensitivity warrants reflection. Unfortunately, the febrile political culture is deteriorating further as we see in the cases of Nemi El-Hassan and the Dokumenta 15: more heresy trials. Some German colleagues I know are reasonably sanguine about the situation, but they live in villa districts and don't mix with people like Nemi El-Hassan. Other colleagues, who are Germans of "migration-background," assured me that the catechism essay expressed what they long said in private company but dare not utter in public for fear of retribution. There you have the enlightened Germany that has mastered its past.

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Featured Image: Cracking stelae of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which was completed in 2004 (courtesy of Pexels, creative commons).

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