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# "People with a Nazi Background": Race, Memory, and Responsibility

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IT MIGHT SEEM that everything has already been said about historical responsibility for Germany's National Socialist past. Yet the topic remains explosive. In

February, artist Moshtari Hilal and political geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah proposed the phrase "Menschen mit Nazihintergrund" [people with a Nazi background] to describe descendants of Nazi supporters, which has since prompted an acrimonious debate. Introduced during an Instagram Live discussion, Hilal and Varatharajah's phrase playfully calls upon the common appellation for minorities whose families migrated to Germany, "Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund," but their intervention was meant seriously.

Self-described "children of refugees," Hilal and Varatharajah seek to intervene in the German present both by ascribing an identity to the usually unmarked majority population and by breaking with what they see as a widespread silence in "normal" German families about their relation to the National Socialist past. They seek to make visible "a material continuity and intransparent ownership of Nazi-capital by major and popular figures in the German



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cultural landscape.”

Capital can pass between generations inconspicuously, and Hilal and Varatharajah open a seldom-posed question, asking us to consider how some Germans continue to benefit from the Nazi regime decades after its demise. Their intervention targets the beneficiaries of National Socialism, families who profited from the regime and who continue to enjoy the profits of Nazi expropriation.

In their Instagram conversation, Hilal and Varatharajah singled out two individuals from the contemporary German cultural scene: an art collector and the owner of a new queer-feminist bookstore in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. Given the large-scale continuities one can find between Nazi-era and contemporary corporations, the choice of an art collector and a bookstore owner struck many as odd. But Hilal and Varatharajah wanted to illuminate areas that have thus far received less discussion: intimate, familial continuities and unspoken links to the Nazi past among people in cultural and politically progressive spheres.

While some critics have suggested that the targets were not well chosen, the two provocateurs nevertheless put their finger on an important issue. By indicating the inequalities of wealth and status that define Germany's multicultural present, Hilal and Varatharajah have uncovered the lacunae that inhabit confrontations with the Nazi past.

The intervention is not meant as a scholarly contribution, yet its focus on material beneficiaries refers to an area of

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ongoing focus in recent histories of National Socialism. In an interview, Varatharajah recounts discovering the history of the "Jewish auctions," in which the German state sold off the expropriated possessions of its victims to "Aryan" Germans. Born in a refugee camp, Varatharajah remembers that most of their family's possessions were either secondhand donations or had been rescued from garbage dumps. They began to wonder if they had not grown up amid goods that had been stolen from other German minorities during the Nazi era. In turn, they became interested in the material remains of Nazi crimes and the ways they continue to contribute to unequal relations in the present.

Hilal and Varatharajah's provocation produced diametrically opposed responses. Some, like journalist Jule Hoffmann, praised the move, describing in *Die Zeit* how the term "people with a Nazi background" broke a taboo among some in the third and fourth post-National Socialist generations about their families' pasts. Confirming Hoffmann's point, a Twitter and Instagram hashtag, #MeinNazihintergrund [My Nazi background], elicited testimonials about such familial entanglements.

The idea of labeling people with a "Nazi background" was also met with opposition — including personal threats to Hilal and Varatharajah. In one of the more nuanced critiques, Meron Mendel of the Anne Frank Educational Centre responded from the perspective of someone outside the majoritarian German society. Speaking as a Jew whose own family had been largely murdered or dispossessed during the Shoah, Mendel declared his support for the

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creation of “a post-migrant Germany, a living together on equal terms, a conversation among equals.” He worried that the new identity category would further segment the German public rather than create a common cultural memory “for all people in the land, independent of ethnicity or religion.”

Mendel recognized, of course, that Germany possesses “a particular responsibility as the successor state of the Nazi regime,” but insisted that such responsibility cannot be conceptualized in terms of biological heritage.

How can historical responsibility for racist crimes — the Nazis’ and others’ — be acknowledged without reproducing the racial categories that lay behind the crimes in the first place? On the one hand, there is a need to recognize the crimes for what they were. This requires acknowledging the perpetrators’ racialized conceptual framework and the reality of the actions that followed from it. On the other hand, any just response to those crimes must also break the logic of that framework and undo its racist presuppositions.

Does Hilal and Varatharajah’s provocation imply that German responsibility is “biologically transmitted,” as Mendel argues? In focusing on familial inheritances, it may seem that the duo risks such a suggestion. Yet, in foregrounding what they call material continuities — continuities of inherited *capital*, not genes — they refrain from grounding their intervention in notions of race or biology. If they nevertheless single out postwar “ethnic” Germans for a particular responsibility, however, do they prevent the construction of a common post-migrant

culture? Can we both insist on the particularity of responsibility and promote a broader culture of solidarity across ostensibly separate identities? I believe the answer is yes. But such a combination requires a new approach to reconciling with the past, one that goes beyond the dominant model in Germany.

In my book *The Implicated Subject*, I develop a conceptual vocabulary for discussing the kinds of historical — and contemporary — responsibilities that are at stake in Hilal and Varatharajah's intervention. Inspired by philosopher Karl Jaspers's *The Question of German Guilt* and Hannah Arendt's writings on responsibility, I introduce the concepts of the *implicated subject* and *implication* to describe the indirect ways that people enable and inherit histories of violence. Implicated subjects do not themselves perpetrate crimes but are implicated in questions of historical and political responsibility nonetheless.

The example of post-Holocaust Germans serves as a paradigm for what I call *diachronic implication*, the kind of entanglement faced by people who are successors to a specific history of racist violence. To be German requires remembering the Holocaust and confronting the Nazis' genocidal policies. Yet such a confrontation risks simply repeating the original problem if it does not challenge the very notion of Germanness that made genocide possible in the first place.

Migrants and minorities in Germany know this problem all too well. They frequently face conflicting directives — what Yasemin Yildiz and I have called the *migrant double bind*: to

be German requires remembering the Holocaust, but if you are a migrant or racialized minority, you are repeatedly told that this is not your history. Untying this double bind requires undoing German identity itself.

The proposal of "Menschen mit Nazihintergrund" illuminates a different dimension of Germans' implication in National Socialism: not simply the ideological legacies of racialized identity, but also the material benefits that have outlived the defeated regime. Two different versions of the implicated subject are at stake here: while all Germans are successors to National Socialism, a smaller number can be described as beneficiaries. It is the latter that Hilal and Varatharajah seek to identify. Identifying beneficiaries may work against the notion of a common cultural memory; yet, if we make no distinctions between Germans in the present, we lose the ability to address the current effects of past violence.

Some societies agree to forgo a confrontation with beneficiaries in order to move forward. This happened in South Africa, where the Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressed only "gross human rights violations" and left aside the more mundane ways in which White people benefited from the apartheid regime. But histories of violence do not possess a simple endpoint. They persist in ways simultaneously ideological, material, and psychic. The extreme inequality that remains in post-apartheid South Africa is case in point. The situation in Germany is of course different, but the worthy goal of creating a common memory cannot ignore the ways that violent histories produce ongoing inequality.

Such a dilemma also resonates in societies marked by the afterlife of slavery. Nobody in good conscience could argue that the impact of transatlantic slavery ended with abolition; rather, it persists in both the ongoing racialization of identities and the material inequalities that attend those identities. You cannot eliminate the former without addressing the latter. In *The Implicated Subject*, I discuss the Legacies of British Slavery project. The project, created by the historians Nicholas Draper and Catherine Hall, examines the fact that the only reparations paid after abolition in Britain went to former slave owners. Their project thus seeks to catalog those "reparations" and trace how they manifested materially. Their database allows users to search for individual slave owners and to track the compensation they received for the enslaved people they had owned. The point is not to "name and shame" the descendants of slaveowners but to prompt research on the afterlives of slavery and the way these afterlives continue to perpetuate inequality today.

Beneficiaries are not "guilty" of the crimes from which they have benefited. Yet violent histories sometimes produce guilt and shame for perpetrators' descendants. Implicated subjects must confront not only these emotional legacies but also their responsibility for symbolic and material forms of reparation. Such reparations are the duty of society at large but especially of all those who benefit from injustices, including those who are "genealogically" implicated in the past through family inheritance.

I am familiar with these complicated and sensitive issues.

As the descendant of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century, I am neither guilty of slavery and the original dispossession of Indigenous peoples nor genealogically implicated in those crimes. Yet, as a White person who need not fear the violence of the police or vigilantes, and who lives and works on land stolen from its Indigenous inhabitants, I benefit both ideologically and materially from the United States's founding and ongoing crimes. Like post-Holocaust Germans, I am an implicated subject.

So are Hilal and Varatharajah. Although they do not benefit in the same way that White Germans do, they also bear responsibility for coming to terms with the Nazi past. But that is why their intervention should be welcomed: it represents exactly that engagement with the past that German society claims it wants from its minority and migrant members but rarely recognizes.

The notion of "people with a Nazi background" produces discomfort. Yet it also provides an opportunity to address the paradoxes at the heart of German society: the need to acknowledge both the particular and universal dimensions of historical responsibility. What we need — in Germany and elsewhere — is a differentiated solidarity that constructs commonality across the recognition of differences. Such a solidarity can create a common, pluralistic culture, but it requires us first to confront the relations of power and inequality that continue to mark the present.

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