

THE SPECTERS OF COMPARISON

The Memorial of the Murdered Jews of Europe: Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Germany | Photo (detail): Mara Brandl © picture alliance/imageBROKER

Achille Mbembe, arguably Africa's most prominent historian and philosopher, has been accused of anti-Semitism. The ensuing debate raises fundamental questions about the culture of memory and freedom of expression.

By Michael Rothberg

Germany is haunted by the specter of comparison. This specter represents an unintended consequence of one of postwar German society's most laudable achievements: the development over the course of several decades of a culture of memory premised on taking responsibility for the Nazi genocide of European Jews. As Holocaust memory became a linchpin of Germany's official public culture in the post-unification period — with the opening of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe a concrete symbol of that centrality — the Holocaust also began to occupy a quasi-sacred place as a unique event in the nation's memorial landscape. Defining the Holocaust as unique — in official memory culture if not in scholarship — removes it from the field of ordinary historical understanding, which necessarily relies on comparison and relative commensurability between different events. This sacralization of the Holocaust's uniqueness is not unique to Germany, but it has come to take a particular — and particularly extreme — form in the Federal Republic in recent years. Mainstream German public discourse assumes that comparing the Holocaust to other events minimizes this German-initiated crime and thus undermines the seriousness of German claims to responsibility, an assumption that has led to a determined policing of both public and scholarly expression.

Many histories of violence

The insistence on the Holocaust's uniqueness in the German commemorative landscape has resulted in haunting specters that cluster around two autonomous, but frequently linked hot-button issues: the question of how to relate the Holocaust to other histories of violence, especially the history and aftermath of European colonialism; and the question of what constitutes a legitimate critique of the State of Israel, a state whose self-conception is, like Germany's, also closely tied to the events of the Holocaust.

These two haunting specters have returned in the most recent intellectual-political scandal to emerge out of Germany: the accusations of antisemitism and Holocaust “relativization” against the South Africa-based, Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe. A world-renowned scholar of colonialism and its legacies, Mbembe was already well known in Germany before this recent affair; some of his books have been rapidly translated into German and he has received a number of awards, accolades, and distinguished visiting positions in the German academy. The accusations against Mbembe, initiated by Lorenz Deutsch, an FDP politician from North Rhine-Westphalia, and given greater visibility by Felix Klein, Germany's Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and for the Fight against Antisemitism, have left Mbembe's reputation in Germany in tatters, although it seems unlikely that they will have the same effect beyond the Federal Republic. What does this affair teach us about the current status of German public culture?

Comparison and relativization

The German establishment's accusations against Mbembe derive from passages in his essay “*The Society of Enmity*,” which appears in German in the book *Politik der Feindschaft* (2017). The first passage concerns a comparison (but not an equation, as Deutsch claims) between South African apartheid and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. In Germany, it is simply taken for granted that such a comparison is intrinsically antisemitic. Without interrogating this assumption — as I would, along with dozens of former Knesset members and many other Israeli citizens and Jews around the world who have spoken out about what they see as apartheid-like policies in the occupied territories — there are no grounds for discussion. I turn instead to the second passage, which involves a juxtaposition between apartheid and the Nazi genocide: “The apartheid system in South Africa and the destruction of Jews in Europe — the latter, though, in an extreme fashion and within a quite different setting — constituted two emblematic manifestations of [a] phantasy of separation” (see “*The Society of Enmity*,” p. 25). I find neither equation nor “relativization” in this

passage, as Mbembe's critics claim. Instead, Mbembe clearly describes the Holocaust as both "extreme" and as the product of a different historical context from the one that produced apartheid. Mbembe's claim is also less a comparison than a speculative claim about the underlying conditions that make racist systems possible. His focus is on their common construction of an enemy and the concomitant desires and fantasies of separation and destruction that accompany that construction.

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This construction, along with these desires and fantasies, is what Mbembe means by the "society of enmity." One can contest this approach as an explanation of the Holocaust (or apartheid), but in fact much scholarship on the Nazi genocide investigates just this: the ideological construction of the "Jew" as an enemy of the *Volksgemeinschaft* who must be eliminated.

Competitive versus multidirectional memory

The Mbembe case reveals significant fault lines in German society. The rapidity with which Mbembe has become a *persona non grata* in some official circles reveals that a powerful consensus remains in Germany concerning the incommensurability of the Holocaust. It also suggests that that consensus about the commemoration of Jewish suffering under the Nazis can be collapsed into an uncritical defense of Israel and to the censure of perspectives sympathetic to the Palestinians.

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At the same time, numerous intellectuals — both within Germany and beyond, both Jewish and non-Jewish — have come to Mbembe's defense. The defense of Mbembe from such prominent German scholars as Aleida Assmann and Micha Brumlik suggests that the ruling consensus in Germany has become open to contestation. Today's Germany is caught between two models of cultural memory: a dominant model of competitive memory and an emergent model of what I have called "multidirectional memory."

In the model of competitive memory, collective memories are seen as crowding each other out of the public sphere. Understanding collective memories according to the logic of the zero-sum game, this model derives from the fear that bringing memory of the Holocaust into contact with other memories of violence — through comparisons with colonialism, apartheid, or occupation — will lead to the diminution, dilution, and even denial of the Holocaust. Those concerned with the memories of slavery and colonialism often articulate a similar fear: that an over-emphasis on the Holocaust is depriving other histories of visibility. But does public memory work like this? And, to address German fears directly, must Holocaust comparisons lead to relativization and the evacuation of responsibility?

My theory of multidirectional memory suggests that — even when memory cultures are subject to impassioned, even angry, conflict — memory does not obey the logic of the zero-sum game. Rather, all memory cultures develop dialogically — through borrowing, appropriation, juxtaposition, and echoing of other histories and other traditions of memory. The result of memory conflict is not less memory but more, even if the field of public memory remains unequal. Part of what we see in the Mbembe affair is the well-known fact that as Holocaust memory became globalized it came to serve as a platform for the articulation of other memories of violence — especially those touching on slavery and colonialism. But the now-familiar form of Holocaust memory that circulates globally itself emerged out of the earlier era of decolonization and out of dialogue with other histories that now seem to be competitively pitted against it.

Mbembe's writings grow out of a multidirectional tradition that has, for the past seventy years, reflected on the relationship between the Holocaust and the racist violence that emerged from centuries of the enslavement, colonization, and segregation of African and African diaspora peoples by Europeans and their descendants.

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This tradition includes Aimé Césaire’s polemical *Discourse on Colonialism*, in which he described Nazi brutality as a “crime against the white man” that “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.” It also includes the writings of the African American intellectual W.E. B. Du Bois, who visited the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto and wrote movingly about how it had transformed his understanding of racism. The visit, Du Bois wrote from the midst of Jim Crow America, led him to realize that “the problem of slavery, emancipation, and caste in the United States was no longer . . . a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it.” Revising his own understanding of race does not, however, lead Du Bois to erase all differences between diverse forms of racism; rather, he remarks that “nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw in 1949.” Neither “separate and unique,” nor “equal” — this is the multidirectional tradition of thinking comparatively about racist violence that one finds across the era of decolonization and that lives on in thinkers such as Mbembe.

The theory of multidirectional memory does not presuppose that all articulations of public memory are equally valid; we certainly need an ethics of comparison to distinguish the valences of multidirectional articulations. Some comparisons deserve to be taken seriously; some do not. Some comparisons lead to greater solidarity among victims; some lead to increased conflict. Some comparisons may turn into forms of facile equation, but comparison usually involves distinctions of genre and scale. In this context, the theory of multidirectional memory suggests, above all, that the fear of comparison that currently reigns in Germany could itself be productively rethought. Instead of seeing every juxtaposition of the Holocaust with colonialism or apartheid as a threat to Germans’ responsibility-based identity, Germans might instead reflect on the broader histories and responsibilities that come into view when we pause to take multidirectional comparisons seriously. While engagement with the Holocaust is and should remain a touchstone of German identity, there is also a pressing need to engage with the legacies of German and European colonialism and with Germany’s implication in the structural racism and economic inequality of the present. Because of how closely linked the aftermath of the Nazi genocide is to the occupation of Palestine, Germans would also do well to reflect on their implication in that ongoing injustice. Instead of targeting Mbembe because of the uncomfortable issues he raises, all of us who are invested in coming to terms with injustices past and present might turn to his writings as a source of insight.

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Writing in the 1960s, the Austrian-Belgian Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry argued that the proper attitude of post-Holocaust Germans was that of “self-mistrust” [Selbstmisstrauen]. I believe Améry’s caution is even more crucial today, precisely because Germany has accomplished so much in the realm of “working through the past” [Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung]. It seems to me that, instead of positioning itself as the arbiter of antisemitism and the unquestioning defender of Israeli policy, Germany might return to the practice of “self-mistrust”: it might welcome the specters of comparison and view them through a multidirectional lens.

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