

Insisting on Uniqueness: Shame and Guilt in German Memory Culture and the Denial of Palestinian Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the affects of shame and guilt that underpin the German Holocaust memory culture, exemplified by the uniqueness thesis, and how this contributes to the denial of Palestinian perspectives in German society. It will approach this topic through the case study of the 'Mbembe Affair' in 2020. Achille Mbembe's decolonial work challenged the core dogmas of German memory culture by suggesting connections between the Holocaust and colonialism and revealed a fierce insistence on the Holocaust's uniqueness in German society. In order to demonstrate that this insistence on uniqueness and its underlying affects play a crucial part in the denial of Palestinian perspectives, the paper first introduces the uniqueness thesis, its implications and counter-narratives. Subsequently, the collective affect of shame and guilt are explored as underlying drivers for this insistence on the Holocaust's uniqueness. As part of this, it will be demonstrated that a German memory culture shaped by these affects leads to the denial of Palestinian perspectives and experiences of Israeli settler colonisation.

Keywords: Affects, Holocaust Memory, Colonialism, Denial of Palestinians.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore the underlying affects of the German memory culture and their role in the denial of Palestinian perspectives in German society. In doing so, I focus on the so-called 'uniqueness thesis' as one of the core beliefs of German memory culture and will trace the affects of shame and guilt that underpin this belief. I will then demonstrate how these affects translate into denying Palestinian perspectives in German society.

The choice of the uniqueness thesis as the main subject for this discussion is based on it occupying a central position in the dispute about Achille Mbembe that took place in Germany in 2020. Mbembe, a Cameroonian philosopher and leading figure of post-colonial thinking, was invited to give the opening speech to the Ruhrtriennale, an annual German art festival. The invitation of Mbembe was received with criticism and demands for a disinvitation were made by various members of the German public based on several accusations, but most prominently, on the accusation of relativising the Holocaust.

Within the news coverage of this discourse, the accusations that Mbembe relativises the Holocaust lead back to his work challenging the idea that the Holocaust is unique. As a postcolonial scholar focused on research of colonialism and racism, Mbembe understands the Holocaust as a continuation of these dynamics rather than as a separate phenomenon. It is for this reason that the Mbembe dispute caused what has been called the 'second historian's dispute', following into the footsteps of the famous

'historian's dispute' in the mid-1980s, in which different readings of the Holocaust were debated. The news coverage of the dispute mainly focused on discussions of the unique character of the Holocaust and showed a clear tendency to insist on this uniqueness.

The Mbembe dispute is one incident of a wider pattern of silencing campaigns against solidarity with Palestine in Germany. Within the last few years, there has been an increasing number of cases in which individuals and groups were targeted with demands for their disinvitation and cancellation, such as the cases of Nemi El-Hassan, the School for Unlearning Zionism, documenta 15 and Deutsche Welle. This dynamic has been especially evident since the adoption of the Anti-BDS resolution by the German parliament in 2019, with the campaigns choosing more prominent targets and receiving more media attention. Even though the silencing of Palestine solidarity as well as anti-Palestinian racism are not exclusive to Germany, they are especially successful there. This is an indicator of the role of affects - such as guilt and shame - that shape the post-Holocaust German society. However, it is also worth highlighting that the denial of Palestinian narratives is not exclusively caused by affects, as can be seen in the spread of anti-Palestinian racism across the Western world. As demonstrated by other scholars, it is also a manifestation of colonial racism against Indigenous people, Islamophobia in the context of global geopolitics and Zionist instrumentalisation of Holocaust memory for political purposes (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2019).

In order to demonstrate that the insistence on uniqueness and its underlying affects play a crucial part in the denial of Palestinian perspectives, I will begin by introducing the uniqueness thesis and the reason for it becoming the centre of debate in the Mbembe dispute. Secondly, I explore the role of the collective affect of shame and guilt in this insistence on uniqueness, and how a German memory culture shaped by these leads to the denial of Palestinian perspectives.

'German guilt' has centred in discussions of German post-Holocaust society, and it is often this sense of collective guilt that gives the country its reputation of having successfully dealt with its atrocious past. Even though it has been over-theorised, there are some overlooked aspects of guilt, especially from a decolonial perspective. It is important to connect theorisations of affect to material realities and by doing so, to bring to the foreground the real-life impacts of collective affects in terms of identity production, racialisation, and power.

2. THE UNIQUENESS THESIS, ITS IMPLICATIONS AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

In an interview with the national radio station Deutschlandfunk Kultur, one of the main instigators of the campaign against Mbembe, Felix Klein, supports his criticism of Mbembe by asserting that "uniqueness of the Holocaust" is an "important narrative for the memory culture in Germany, as well as for the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany¹" (Aguigah, Klein, and Gerk 2020). The word and idea of 'uniqueness' (and 'singularity') can be traced through much of the media coverage of the Mbembe debate (Elbe 2020; Leggewie 2020; Schindler 2020; Cheema and Mendel 2020). The debate that started as a mere attempt to disinvite Mbembe from an art festival turned into one of the mayor upheavals in German society that re-negotiates its regimes of memory.

The idea of the Holocaust's uniqueness, as seen in the quote above, is based on the so-called 'uniqueness thesis', a framework that constructs the Holocaust as a unique historical event that cannot be compared with any other historical atrocity, and antisemitism as a singular phenomenon that cannot be regarded as another form of racism. According to Dirk Moses, this reading of the Holocaust found its ways from scholarship into the Holocaust memory culture by the 1980s, to the extent that "now many leftist and liberal Germans began to understand that being a 'good' post-Holocaust subject meant incorporating this belief into their self-understanding and international image" (Moses 2021b).

The Mbembe discourse started to shake this regime up. Suddenly, many journalists began to ask whether comparing the Holocaust to other genocides – a practice seen as controversial and inappropriate - can indeed be considered illegitimate. Experts started to be invited to interviews to confirm that comparisons are a common scholarly practice and valuable for historical analyses. Susan

¹ Author's own translation throughout paper unless stated otherwise.

Neiman, an American philosopher, asked “[ho]w to relate the genocide of European Jews to other crimes against humanity without denying its uniqueness?” (Aguigah, Assmann, and Neiman 2020). While challenges to certain aspects of the uniqueness thesis, such as the ban on comparisons, have been reflected on by the media coverage of the dispute, an insistence on the Holocaust’s uniqueness as a result of comparisons is not challenged.

It is this insistence on the uniqueness thesis that Dirk Moses records in his article *The German Catechism*, which summarises the five core beliefs of German memory culture. Firstly, the uniqueness of the Holocaust which Moses interprets as based on the limited understanding of the Holocaust as the “extermination of the Jews for the sake of extermination itself” (Moses 2021b). Secondly, as a result of its uniqueness, the Holocaust is presented as a ‘civilisational rupture’ and “the moral foundation of [Germany]” (Moses 2021b). Thirdly, Germany’s moral conclusion from this is, according to Moses, the state’s special responsibility to Jews and Israel. Fourthly, the idea that the Holocaust is unique is supported by the construction of antisemitism as a distinctive prejudice as opposed to another form of racism, and as a ‘distinctly German prejudice’. Lastly, Moses identifies the equation of antizionism with antisemitism. With *The German Catechism*, Moses observed a dynamic that has become increasingly prevalent in German society in the last years: the uniqueness of the Holocaust and support for Israel are seen as interconnected, self-evident conclusions from the Holocaust, and attempts to take responsibility for perpetrating the Holocaust.

The uniqueness thesis is heavily debated by scholars who warn that a belief in uniqueness of the Holocaust creates a hierarchy of suffering (Moses 2021a; Rothberg 2009). By insisting on the Holocaust’s uniqueness, the Holocaust is presented as the ‘crime of crimes’, the ‘ultimate evil’. This sets a benchmark for atrocities to be categorised as genocides and leads to a competition amongst groups to have their suffering recognised (Moses 2021a, 11). Further, Michael Rothberg has warned that a hierarchy of suffering leads to a removal of “suffering from the field of historical agency” and has developed the approach of *Multidirectional Memory* to counteract this moral problem (Rothberg 2009, 9).

The continuity thesis as the counterpart to the uniqueness thesis places the Holocaust on a continuum of violence, racism, modernity, and imperialism, and therefore encourages connections to colonialism and other atrocities. This understanding of the Holocaust is very prominent in *Postcolonial Studies*, with scholars such as Achille Mbembe, Edward Said, Aimé Césaire, W. E. B. Du Bois and Juergen Zimmerer all supporting this view. It is for this reason that the ‘second historian’s dispute’ has been triggered by Mbembe in particular due to his work being grounded in the continuity thesis. As this is not compatible with the core beliefs of German memory culture, many of the news articles that were published about the Mbembe dispute frame postcolonialism as a whole as problematic and antisemitic (Hoyer 2022; Laurin 2020; Mangold 2020; Posener 2020; Cheema and Mendel 2020).

3. AFFECTS

For a full understanding of why Mbembe’s challenge to the uniqueness thesis is met with such fierce pushback, we need to consider the role of affects. According to Moses, the ‘German Catechism’ is “internalized by tens of millions as the path to national redemption from its sinful past” (Moses 2021b). While Moses focuses his analysis on the religious motifs of German memory culture, I argue that a comprehension of the affects sustaining this regime of memory will uncover the depth of denial of Palestinian perspectives in German society. After years of many silencing campaigns against Palestinians and those in solidarity with Palestinian liberation, it becomes obvious that German memory culture not only contributes to the denial of Palestinians but is the main driver behind it. While this is not to suggest that affects are the only cause for this dynamic, highlighting the underlying affects below will advance understanding of the experiences of the Palestinian diaspora in Germany, and the dynamics they are up against.

3.1. The Affect of Shame

The affect of shame can be conceptualised with three main features that distinguish it from guilt. Firstly, shame appears when one has failed to live up to one's ideals (Ahmed 2014, 108). Secondly, shame requires an audience of outsiders that can witness one's shameful action (Dresler-Hawke and Liu 2006, 135). Thirdly, shame seeks to hide or deny oneself and one's wrongdoings (Heimannsberg and Schmidt 1994, xix; Olick 2010, 68).

According to Sara Ahmed, it is the first point that connects shame to collective identity: "[s]hame collapses the 'I' with the 'we' in the failure to transform the social ideal into action" (Ahmed 2014: 109). When a nation collectively witnesses its own failures and injustices – and has them witnessed by outsiders - it creates a sense of collective shame (Ahmed 2014: 108). As shame seeks to hide its failures, it needs to be turned into pride again. Ahmed continues: "a failure which, when witnessed, confirms the ideal, and makes possible a return to pride. In other words, the transference of bad feeling to the subject in shame is only temporary, as the 'transference' can become evidence of the restoration of an identity of which we can be proud" (Ahmed 2014: 109–10). Accordingly, the collective feeling of shame about the Holocaust becomes attached to German identity, and in order to escape the shame, the collective identity needs to be reshaped from shameful to prideful. Hence, German shame serves a temporary function to overcome a past of horrendous crimes, and eventually paves the way for a return to the feeling of pride. I argue that the subject of this new pride is the German memory culture which creates a new prideful ideal for German collective identity. It serves as evidence that the shameful past has been left behind, and that amendments have been made.

As the witnessing of the failure to live up to one's ideals is a core feature of shame, I suggest that the same external validation is required for shame to turn into pride. Thus, it must be acknowledged by others that amendments have been made, and that the new German identity is indeed separate from the old identity. For the new German identity to become prideful, German memory culture needs to be acknowledged by others as the best way to learn from the past. By insisting on the Holocaust's uniqueness, this pride is intensified, as it makes a recovery from this shameful past even more prideful. It is due to this need to be witnessed that German society attempts to universalise its memory culture to prove that it has reached the only legitimate conclusion from the Holocaust.

This newly found pride in this memory culture is the core of the new German identity and hence, any challenge to the components of the memory culture is perceived as a threat and portrayed as antisemitic, thus, part of the 'old identity'. This creates an exclusive society since "the ideal image of the nation [...] is based on the image of some and not others [and] is sustained through the conversion of shame to pride" (Ahmed 2014: 113). German society therefore excludes those who do not share the same core beliefs of the 'German Catechism' that the new collective identity is created upon. In this sense, when shame translates back into pride, it revives itself, but it does not transform into something truly new (Olick 2010, 90). The 'new German identity', therefore, deceives into believing in renewal while repeating old patterns.

This dynamic negatively impacts marginalised voices, especially Germans with migration background, who are targeted as they carry with them different perspectives on the Holocaust, and often experiences of other atrocities. Palestinians in particular are subject to this, as they oppose several core beliefs of the German catechism. The fact that Palestinians not only have their own experiences of ethnic cleansing and trauma, but also that their experiences of the ongoing Nakba are directly linked to the Holocaust (just as much as to European colonialism), are considered harmful to the uniqueness thesis. Further, Israel is the most important witness of the 'improved' German new identity, as for Germany, it embodies the Holocaust victims. Hence, Palestinian perspectives on Israel as an aggressor and settler colonial state must be denied in order to uphold Israel's legitimacy for the purpose of witnessing Germany's transference. It is for this reason that Israel's very existence is one of the core beliefs of the German memory culture, and that Mbembe was targeted for outlining colonial realities in Israel/Palestine.

3.2. The Affect of Guilt

The affect of guilt exemplifies this dynamic clearly. Here, two main aspects of it will be explored: firstly, guilt arises through an ‘internalized conviction of sin’ (Olick 2010: 68), hence, in contrast to shame, no external witness is required for the affect to arise. Secondly, the affect of guilt is experienced as a burden that needs to be lifted through confession (Olick 2010: 90). According to Eyerman, for guilt to become a collective affect, it requires “identifying with perpetrators [...] and [...] establishing such identification within a wider collectivity” (Eyerman 2019:169). If this identification fails, guilt and any responsibility that comes with it is rejected. Hence, rejection can be seen as another way to escape the burden of guilt.

If guilt entails confession and if the insistence on the Holocaust’s uniqueness obstructs a proper acknowledgement of German colonialism, it can be inferred that the affect of guilt within German memory culture does not include guilt about colonialism. Therefore, I conceptualise German guilt as expressed in the memory culture as twofold: guilt about the Holocaust, and the absence of guilt about colonialism. The belief in the Holocaust’s uniqueness, thus, serves not only as a confession, but also as a refusal to confess to the crimes of colonialism.

If guilt arises from an ‘internalised conviction of sin’, the absence of guilt about colonialism implies that the German collective has not recognised colonialism as ‘sinful’. The uniqueness thesis, according to Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, plays an important part in this, as the isolation of the Holocaust “as an anomaly [...] preserves the Western Christian (secular) self-image as the exclusive bearer of democratization, secularization, and progress” (Raz-Krakotzkin 2019, 84). Hence, by avoiding the confession of colonialism, German society not only rejects increasing its guilt, but it also keeps the lessons from the Holocaust simple as it evades tackling structural racism and allows the continuous presence of a colonial power relationship.

This is revealed by the postcolonial perspective that insists on incorporating responsibility for colonialism into the memory culture. By bringing to the surface more atrocities for the German collective to be guilty about, postcolonialism poses a threat to the unburdened German identity. Further, postcolonialism reveals how German society is still guilty and complicit. Rothberg and Zimmerer argue that “it’s about nothing less than fending off a debate about colonial crimes and, in connection with this, about uncritically saving a European modernity, securing a white hegemonic position at home and the dominant position of the ‘West’ abroad” (Rothberg and Zimmerer 2021). Thus, I argue that the insistence on the Holocaust’s uniqueness serves as a barrier from actual responsibility in the form of structural transformation and decolonisation.

Scholars have long warned that guilt obstructs taking responsibility because of its tendency to wallow and to centre the self (Köhler, Arendt, and Blücher 2000: 84–85; Olick 2010: 89). This is confirmed by the Mbembe dispute which was created by the media coverage to be solely about German memory culture. Even though the initial instigation was caused by Mbembe embracing Palestinian perspectives by conceptualising Israel as a settler colonial state, there was no proper engagement with these analyses within the German media coverage. On the contrary, the settler colonial nature of Israel was outright denied and support for Israel was portrayed as a necessity resulting from the Holocaust’s uniqueness (Elbe 2020). From a guilt perspective, support for Israel serves as a compensation for German crimes, and therefore unburdens German society from its guilt. Acknowledging the settler colonial reality in Israel and Palestine would bring awareness to the continuity of colonial power dynamics, and Germany’s involvement in it. It would then re-burden German society with its guilt. In other words, Palestinians as the colonised victims of Israel pose a threat to Germany’s evasion of guilt, and those who voice Palestinian perspectives, including postcolonial scholars, are targeted and silenced. The erasure of Palestinian perspectives is therefore a direct result of German guilt, and can only be counter-acted by “centring the Palestinians in their own story [sic]” (Anonymous 2020: 9).

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the affects of shame and guilt actively shape the German memory culture in a way that denies Palestinian perspectives. Shame's tendency to hide its failures uses memory culture for the purpose of creating a new prideful collective identity. This creates an exclusive society that feels threatened by any challenges to the core beliefs of the memory culture. As Palestinians not only carry their own stories of trauma and atrocities but also challenge the role of Israel as a legitimate witness of German amendments, their perspectives are denied. Guilt is part of German memory culture in a twofold way: as guilt about the Holocaust and then as a lack of guilt about German colonialism. German memory culture serves as an unburdening of this Holocaust guilt, and the uniqueness thesis helps to avoid tackling the continuity of colonial power relations and structural racism. Palestinian perspectives as subjects to Israeli settler colonialism bring to the surface this continuity, would re-burden German society with its guilt and therefore need to be denied. Thus, through the affects of shame and guilt, German memory culture is "stylized to make itself immune from violent treatment of Palestinians" (Anonymous 2020, 5) and it is therefore crucial to gain a proper understanding of its affective dynamics in order to counteract this process. The Mbembe dispute highlights the denial that Palestinians face as a collective who have been excluded from the debate and media coverage. It shows just how deeply anchored the denial of Palestinian perspectives, trauma and suffering is in German memory culture, to the extent that it effectively upholds colonial power relations within German society.

This article has found that these dynamics are maintained by an insistence on the uniqueness thesis which, in turn, is a manifestation of collective shame and guilt. As established by Dirk Moses, the uniqueness thesis is one of the core beliefs that the current German memory culture is based upon. In an open letter in solidarity with Mbembe, a group of African intellectuals states: "[n]ot only do all peoples have a right to a memory culture, but all memory cultures also have the same right to recognition and narration" (Lado, Bitouh, and Inou 2020). An insistence on uniqueness contradicts this right. Uniqueness is a misleading dogma as all historical events, atrocities and genocides have their own unique features – not only the Holocaust. Ultimately, it only serves German society in its return to pride, avoidance of responsibility for colonialism and sustainment of colonial power relations.

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