

VANISHING POINTS OF MEMORY
Doubled Consciousness: The Holocaust and Colonialism

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—*Sample Translation*—

by Gesche Ipsen



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'What do you want to know now?' asks the gatekeeper. 'You're quite insatiable.' 'Since everyone seeks the law,' says the man, 'why is it that in all these years no one besides me has asked to gain access?' The gatekeeper realises that he is on the point of death, and – to reach what's left of the man's hearing – bellows at him, 'I couldn't have admitted anyone else, because this door was meant just for you. I'll go and close it now.'

FRANZ KAFKA, 'BEFORE THE LAW' (1915)

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Introduction

A Prize-Giving and Its Consequences – Achille Mbembe in Germany

[...] For many European and Western thinkers, the Holocaust is the worst atrocity in European memory. Yet outside Europe, particularly in those places (such as, for example, in the Arab world and in Africa) where the economic and political effects of colonialism are felt most acutely, it is the memory of colonial atrocities that is uppermost in people's minds. Is it perhaps impossible to universalise your 'own' suffering? And whenever these two so-called narratives meet, they not only compete with each other, but are frequently seen as analogous, to the extent that any form of comparison ends up diminishing individual experience. There have of course been, and continue to be, attempts to synthesise these experiences, but such attempts – including, for example, Hannah Arendt's – are often dismissed as too controversial and too ideological. Some have also proposed that the Holocaust and colonialism should be tackled and thought through in parallel. What these approaches have in common is that they seek a deeper understanding of a complex history; for instance, some postcolonial theorists believe that it is possible to argue that issues that are at the heart of Jewish history – assimilation, exile, the rights of minorities, homelessness, emancipation, and so on – cross boundaries. In Germany, this approach is as yet in its infancy, partly because it is still considered more or less taboo.

There is no reason, therefore, not to engage with the work of Achille Mbembe with an open mind. He discusses these issues from his particular perspective, which he himself describes as *raison nègre* (i.e. not as *raison noire*), which literally means 'Negro reason' (and not merely 'Black

reason'). In using this term, he deliberately adopts the racist, colonialist thought patterns which assume that anyone who is not white is incapable of reason. Not only that: one of the consequences of this point of view, when considered against the backdrop of centuries of European oppression, is how easy it becomes to construe Israel as a white, European colonial power. In this, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are rather pushed into the background. It doubtless wasn't only in Germany that people vehemently disagreed with this, since many Jews, both in and outside Israel, think of the state as liberating, even as guaranteeing their survival.

The controversy that arose in the run-up to Mbembe's keynote address at the Ruhr Triennale festival in August 2020 (an invitation that was later rescinded) merely highlighted the degree to which these two narratives are in competition with each other. The state of Israel is evidently regarded and described differently by each side. Some see Mbembe as an African intellectual whose attitude to Israel is highly critical, and who, moreover, believes that the state and its settlement policy is colonialist; while others insist that there is a line between the legitimate criticism of Israel and the illegitimate denial of its right to exist. In the eyes of his critics, Mbembe has crossed that line. The question of where exactly this line is has always been problematic in the context of this debate, because it is impossible to establish where exactly criticism begins and ends. Mbembe himself makes no secret of the fact that he believes Israel to be a colonial settler state, a view which those who see it as a safe haven for Jews naturally find objectionable. The key question is: what is it you are looking at, and from what position and with which historical perspective are you looking at it? Those who discern in Israel a brutal and violent political configuration – an oppressive settler state – are directing their gaze at the geography of the Middle East; they see power rather than powerlessness, sovereignty rather than homelessness. Theirs is a gaze that focuses on the Middle East as a space. Yet when this gaze broadens to take in Jewish history, that is, when space becomes time, then persecution, powerlessness and even extermination are brought to the forefront. According to the one perspective, Jews are white and part of the history of Western colonisation of those who are not white, while the other argues that Jews are not part of the white hegemony, but have themselves been persecuted in Europe as a colonised minority; and Zionism, i.e. the movement that insists on Jewish people's right to exercise political sovereignty, can thus itself be described as an anti-colonial liberation movement.

How, if at all, can the two perspectives be reconciled? The question is one of politics, as well as of the academic representation of the politics involved. When it comes to the latter, postcolonialism and Holocaust studies are highly contentious academic disciplines. Both are trying to be simultaneously academic and political, and when the controversy around Mbembe

brought these two fields – both of whom lack sufficient points of reference within Germany itself – in direct contact with each other, they collided head-on. Despite mass immigration, Germany is still an ethnic community whose remembrance of past atrocities is particular and surrounded by taboos. Yet Felix Klein and Achille Mbembe aren't contemporaries, and their arguments are rooted in their respective generations' specific view of the world.

Postcolonial and Jewish voices are especially insistent on their particularity. Mbembe is an intellectual from Cameroon living in South Africa, a specialist in postcolonial studies whose frame of reference is South African apartheid, i.e. institutionalised racial segregation; a concept that has crossed the region's borders and been universalised as institutional racism. And then there is Felix Klein, German Commissioner for Jewish Life and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism, who considers it his duty in the context of his role to protect Israel from external attack. Comparisons with South Africa are central to this debate: the apartheid regime, which only ended in 1994, is seen as racist, and hence illegitimate; and comparing Israel to South Africa therefore necessarily defines Israel as also racist and illegitimate – as shown, for example, by the UN's Resolution 3379, adopted in late 1975, which denounced Israel as a racist state. The resolution was revoked in 1991; but this did nothing to erase comparisons of Israel with South Africa, or the relationship between boycott movements against South Africa and Israel.

Yet for a different generation of Germans, the word 'boycott' continues to evoke the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. This was made clear when the motion 'To present a united front against the BDS movement – and fight anti-Semitism' was passed by the German parliament on 17 May 2019:

The BDS's pattern of argumentation and methods are anti-Semitic. Furthermore, the campaign's call for a cultural boycott of Israeli artists, and for attaching stickers to Israeli goods designed to deter people from buying them, are reminders of the most appalling chapter in German history. The BDS movement's 'Don't Buy' stickers for Israeli products inevitably evoke associations with the Nazi slogan 'Don't buy from Jews!', and other such graffiti scrawled on façades and shop windows.¹

This also served to inextricably link the boycott of Israel to the Nazi-era boycott of Jewish businesses. It was a claim that could not remain unanswered, of course, and in December 2020 an association of public cultural and academic institutions responded to the resolution with its

¹ For the motion, see <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/101/1910191.pdf>; for the announcement of the motion's passing, see <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw20-de-bds-642892> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-48312928>.

description of what it saw as the reality of the situation, entitled 'Initiative GG 5.3: Openness to the World'.² It was a cultural elite's reply to a political elite, which raised the question of who, in this dispute, had a monopoly over the truth – as it marked out the front lines between politics on the one side, and academia and culture on the other.

Of course, the key figures in the debate must deal in universals if they want to convince their audience. But if you look more closely at the arguments put forward by the two sides, it becomes clear that they are both trying to explain the particular in terms of the universal. On the one hand you have the enlightened elite, which believes in a global human rights discourse, born of the shock of the Holocaust. The Holocaust thus becomes the point of departure whence crimes against humanity – which universalise individual atrocities – are apprehended and mourned. What is decisive here is the concept of genocide; yet it also brings with it the problem that Auschwitz ceases to be distinguishable as a singular atrocity. Truths that have hitherto been considered self-evident are thereby called into question, and specifically German taboos are broken. When Klein, in his role of official government representative, strives to defend these self-evident truths in Germany, is he making a constructive contribution to the debate, congruent with the uniqueness of Auschwitz and Germany's reason of state? And is it not also part and parcel of the democratic process to call this, in turn, into question? Are both sides arguably right, when you consider the matter from their respective standpoints? Is such a thing even possible, in this kind of debate – or can we go beyond politics to arrive at the truth?

This is what this essay is about. Like a revolving door, the whole will revolve around these stories whenever it proves necessary to show that you cannot talk about theory without recounting individual experience. In the process, we will encounter both European and non-European philosophies, which occasionally exclude, sometimes augment and often contradict each other. They all attempt to describe the same reality in their own way – they are like paintings at an exhibition, on which visitors gaze in order to literally get the picture. Each chapter is chaperoned by philosophers, who thus also contribute to the content of each chapter. Yet this essay is not just about philosophers; it is also about geographical and political spaces, such as Germany, France, Africa, the US and the Middle East.

I begin with the sociology of knowledge, formulated in Germany during the Weimar Republic, arguing that this way of thinking was particular to a Jewish milieu that conceived of the sociology of knowledge and its concepts in order to describe fluid thought. This chapter's chaperone is Karl Mannheim – he is the conceptual travelling companion whose sociology of

² See https://www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201210_PlaedoyerFuerWeltoffenheit.pdf (the English translation starts on p. 3).

knowledge also helped shape this essay's theoretical framework. I try to show that the sociological aspect of the sociology of knowledge is the product of the dialectic between Jewish assimilation and emancipation. Mannheim's key concept is that of perspective – and a perspective, i.e. a view of the world and how we interpret it, originates in individual experience. At the same time, it represents a critique of a fundamental conception of scholarship, according to which scholars enjoy a privileged position outside that which they observe, so that, assuming you are equipped with the right theoretical apparatus, you can look at something from the outside in; in short, that there is a vantage point from where you can discover the truth. It is precisely this debate – conducted among Jewish intellectuals, and between Jewish intellectuals and those around them – which has repeatedly seized on these topics as existential questions, and thus opened the door to the questions that arise from colonialism.

Chapter 2 is accompanied by Alfred Dreyfus, Franz Kafka and Hannah Arendt. There, I will sketch the critical period of Jewish emancipation in Europe, and try to identify its links to postcolonialism. Next, Chapter 3 is dedicated to the tension between universalism and particularism in the thinking of Hannah Arendt, whom we encounter in this chapter not only as a philosopher, but as an activist, too. This tension between thought and activism has also shaped today's debate around the Holocaust and colonialism; we will think through these two concepts in this chapter, and I endeavour to show that Arendt in fact dealt with these two evils both together and separately. Arendt then leads us to non-European minorities, and I will shed light on Arendt's intellectual position with regard to colonialism in Africa, and African Americans in the US. As is so often the case with Arendt, her attitude is ambivalent, and open to much misinterpretation.

Chapter 4 is accompanied by francophone philosophers involved in the struggle for colonial liberation – yet they are not the only ones; we will be tracing interactions in the thoughts of Jews and Black people, and Frantz Fanon, Claude Lanzmann, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Améry will be our companions here. The next three chapters introduce Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire and Edward Said. They explore the possibility and impossibilities of hybrid identity in relation to colonialism, post-colonialism, anti-Semitism and Zionism, and describe the consequences of these patterns of thought via different descriptions of the state of Israel and its foundation. Is Israel an emancipatory or colonialist project? Can it be both simultaneously?

In Chapter 8, we'll return to Germany, and try to understand global Germany from the perspective of colonialism; and in the final chapter, we will revisit the questions asked in this introduction. How can – how should – we interpret the current debate, in historical and sociological terms?