RePLITO

Introduction: Memory Politics and “Minority Management” in Europe

Hannah Tzuberi, Schirin Amir-Moazami

Published on: Feb 04, 2022

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Memory of the genocidal annihilation of European Jewry permeates the (German) political present and continues to inform collective and individual political emotions. It is specifically in relation to the Holocaust that the question of historical justice also interposes itself as a site of national (or “post-national”) self-articulation. It foregrounds itself in questions such as “What kind of policies exactly does or should the acknowledgement and memorialization of the Holocaust entertain? How does or should historical responsibility materialize? What are the contours of a political collective that is founded on the memory of the Holocaust, and relatedly, a normative rejection of monocultural nationalism and anti-Semitism?”

Over the past decades, the representation of memory work in Germany, in particular, as an exemplar model of “coming to terms” with its genocidal past has become diffracted. Questions related to the subterranean, disavowed *continuities* and recursions of racial violence press themselves into the foreground. Moreover, the relationship of Holocaust memorialization to other memories of violence in past and present, such as colonialism and imperialism has gained salience recently: What is remembered with which purposes and how? What is disremembered or actively forgotten, strategically discarded or occluded? Who are the authoritative and authorized “carriers” of memory? And most importantly: How, when and why do genocidal atrocities and relations of injustice become inscribed into the present, allowing for some forms of *contemporary* violence to pass either unnoticed, or to circumvent linkage with the memory of past violence?

These questions of memory work and its political distribution and public display have immediate implications for the ways in which minoritized populations in Europe live together within a broader web of oftentimes disavowed dependencies and entanglements. Yet, while it is through reference to the memory of the Holocaust that the claim for a recognition of “other victims” gradually emerges, the think pieces gathered in this collection start off from the assumption that mechanisms of subjugation, exclusion and hierarchy live on in liberal democracies. Precisely because individual liberties and principles of equality have become institutionalized, persistent racialized exclusions are often not immediately tangible. For example, in German memory culture, the category of race is often allocated to the past—to the experience of the genocidal state and the workings of “pseudo-science”—and *severed* from the category “religion.” Previous forms of racialization of Jewish minorities have gained reconfigured currency today with regard to Muslims as today’s Europe’s quintessential Other. While we can observe a “reforestation of Jewish life” in post-1989 Germany

([Tzuberi, 2020](#)), simultaneous antagonism and violence against minorities – Jews and Muslims for that matter – framed as “religious” in particular ways have prevailed. What can we make of the simultaneity of a “boom” of “things Jewish” in post-1989 Germany and the raising antagonism/violence against both Muslims and Jews? Is there a relationality between desire and disgust and is this relationality perhaps entangled with the dialectics of memory and forgetting of *past* desires and disgusts?

This set of questions was the starting point for an international lecture series and MA seminar during the summer term of 2021 organized in the framework of RePLITO. The “think pieces” collected in this knowledge archive are the first written results of these conversations. The lectures were held during a wave of heated debates in the German public sphere triggered by German Palestinians’ solidarity protests against the asymmetrical warfare on Palestinian civilians. Parallel to that, the so-called “second *Historikerstreit*” emerged, for which the translation of Michael Rothberg’s book [*Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*](#) into German (11 years after its first publication English!) had already paved a fertile ground. In addition, controversies about the definition(s) of anti-Semitism time and again erupt in the public sphere, and increasingly inscribe themselves into institutional policies, educational frameworks and individual subjectivities. These debates, we suggest, are indicative of some deeper ingrained predicaments that structure the relationship between memory politics and “minority management” in contemporary Europe.

The notion of “minority management”, as coined by Anya Topolski ([2017](#)), suggests in the first place that a “minority” is neither a pre-constituted entity, nor even merely a quantitative category. Rather, minorities are produced by conditions of hierarchy *within* the order of secular-liberal nation-states ([Amir-Moazami, 2020](#)). Managing minorities in Topolski’s terms pertains to a political structure in which minorities are spotted, inspected and categorized in their distinct difference, at times absorbed by majoritarian rule, at times segregated or persecuted. The *secular* nation-state has been complicit in the production of *religious* minorities, and the very notion of minority is rooted in a Christian legacy ([Asad, 2003: ch. 5](#)). The example of Jews in the Middle Ages in Europe shows, Topolski argues, that the exposure of minorities to the scrutiny and good will of ruling elites is predicated on a political-theological structure of minority management. Topolski exemplifies this with the institution of “*shtadlanut*” (intercession) which has been gradually secularized. Today it is the secular nation-state that gestures towards recognition, integration or less benignly: assimilation of

religious minorities, while constantly making sure that the minority remains both legible and governable within the grammars of prototypes of “good religion”.

The politico-theological legacy that undergirds this management, however, conventionally remains opaque because liberal freedoms are robustly institutionalized and because minority recognition, assimilation or more recently integration is conventionally considered the antidote to exclusion and/or segregation. Liberal discourses with a “difference-embracing” agenda thus require scrutinizing as to their difficult to grasp, unwritten undercurrents: How do policies and discourses of inclusion *not* necessarily safeguard against state intervention, coercion, and violence, but on the contrary, act as their vehicle? How do they fail to protect religion and its practitioners, and help create new identities, reify religious difference, and enhance state regulation of religious life? As demonstrated in each of the think pieces of this series, the structure of distribution of who and under which conditions can expect the grace of the state continues to provoke tensions: The minoritized group under scrutiny displaces its identification towards the arbitrating power of the state – “a force entitled to set the exams and mark the performance” ([Bauman, 1991: 107](#)).

Moreover, the structure of intercessions also in its secularized configuration continues to cause frictions both within and amongst different minoritized groups and replicates antagonistic subject positions of “Pariahs” and “Parvenus”. Such frictions occur not only within the “communities” (“good Jews” vs. “bad Jews”, “good Muslims” vs. “bad Muslims”). They also occur between Muslims and Jews – who had previously been subsumed under the notion of the “Semite”. The violent imperial knowledge order which once associated and hierarchized Jews and Muslims as “Semites” is today often discarded or actively forgotten, the “Semite” bifurcated and sliced into a Jewish victim and a Muslim aggressor, and anti-Semitism politically and epistemologically severed from racism. What Gil Anidjar has called the “Semitic hypothesis”, the lumping together of Jewish and Arab race and religion in much of modern scholarship, indeed also provides an entrance point to conjoin the seemingly distinct archives of metropole and colony: of minority regulation inside the nation-state and imperialism beyond national borders.

Today, frictions between Jews and Muslims in Europe are provoked, for example, by “unequal rights” granted to Jews and Muslims ([Lavi: 2009](#)), and by the uneven distribution of power in the context of memory work. A case in point is the domain of Holocaust education. In Germany initiatives garnered towards education on the Holocaust and the related formation of responsible, self-aware citizens increasingly

imply students of Middle Eastern backgrounds as not-yet-fully educated subjects, whose "moral citizenship" is lacking. Muslims or people marked as such have not only become suspicious of potentially venturing into Islamism. Suspicion of Islamism has been increasingly coupled with suspicion of anti-Semitism both by political authorities and by public opinion. Meanwhile, the non-Muslim German majority has allegedly "learned its lessons" to the extent of fantasmically merging with an imagined figure of the Jew. More often than not do the political programs that have been launched to direct Holocaust education at the specific target group of Muslims take into consideration that these new "minor citizens" ([Doughan](#)) – especially those of Palestinian backgrounds – might have a different relationship to German history than those whose grandparents were in one way or another implicated in the Nazi regime. Yet there is a notable absence of a discursive space in the German public sphere to articulate such divergent relationships. As Sultan Doughan argues in her piece, people of Middle Eastern background instead tend to be dragged into a memory work that expects them to embody the affective grammar vis-à-vis the German past that has dominated memory politics in Germany since the late 1990s. Any complication or rejection of this imperative to embody German responsibility is read as a refusal of the dictum of "Never Again", or worst, as yet another proof for "Muslim antisemitism".

The blind spots of uneven memory work can however also operate in much more subtle ways. Memory workers have become increasingly alert to the exclusionary mechanisms inscribed into European nation-states which are formally subjected to norms of liberty and equality. Especially during the past decade, memory work has therefore partly striven for the inclusion of marginalized voices. Inclusionary moves are, however, not immune from the broader operations of minority management. As Victoria Bishop Kendzia shows, memory work in Germany that is aimed at inclusion of multiple memories of suffering and exclusion tends to replicate a certain clumsiness characteristic of the ways in which plurality has been dealt with in Germany since the inception of the guest-worker system: the celebration of diversity and the simultaneous incapacity (or unwillingness) to carefully listen to the other's needs, wants and fears. The Other is both marked and absorbed by the benign gestures of "peaceful coexistence", by extracting knowledge and by imposing knowledge regimes that replicate Orientalized difference. Bishop's case-studies are prime examples of Slavoj Žižek's characterization of liberal multicultural politics which are based on and enabled by a division between the "antiseptic Other" and the "concrete Other" ([2013](#), [\[1998\]](#)): cultural plurality is celebrated as an enrichment as long as it is void of normative conflicts, and as long as the antiseptic Other does not question the terms of

the conversation. The concrete Other, in turn, is more difficult to “accommodate” because s/he reveals concreteness by raising uncomfortable claims to liberal pluralism. In her embodied concreteness, she thus brings to the fore imbalanced power structures entailed in the uneven distribution of desire and disgust. She turns the very decision of when minorized memories are considered enriching or conflictual into an object of inquiry, and renders the particular, contingent premises of this decision visible, and “criticizable”. The concrete Other thus can deny the quest to be absorbable into a dominant and hegemonic framework of “correct” memorization.

A critical inquiry into memory politics in relation to minority management in all these cases means shifting the gaze from the minority to the conditions that (re)produce the very minority in their minor statuses.

Shifting the gaze can also mean to recall the nodal points in which different kinds of racisms nurturing genocidal violences were connected or distinguished and hierarchically ordered. Cultural production which both represent and shape sensibilities can provide a starting point for such an endeavor. *Cinéma vérité* and movies like *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), more specifically, provide such an archive: Ben Ratskoff’s piece shows how the audiovisual technology and testimonial form of *cinéma vérité* gave these memories the authenticity and gravitas that is now habitually ascribed to the figure of the Holocaust survivor. Yet, as Ratskoff’s analysis also demonstrates, the discourses and practices of decolonization and Holocaust memory were not only mutually constitutive and overlapping. They were also often arranged into complex hierarchical relations – a hierarchization that remains occluded by the documentary’s claims to authenticity and transparency, as well as by its staged, choreographed multidirectional encounter(s). One such encounter, Ratskoff shows, “is neither trivial nor transient but signals the constitution of a postwar pattern in which the white European’s knowledge of antisemitism is authorized through a denial of a colonial gaze on Europe”. A rereading and recuperation of key scenes in *Chronicles of a Summer* can thus give us clues to the complex genealogy of the struggles and conflicts we are facing today in regard to the loaded field of dominant and subordinate memories in the distribution of memory politics.

By no means do the think pieces gathered here fully cover the complex relation of minority management and memory politics in contemporary Europe. Yet they may serve as possible starting points for an analysis and interrogation of this relation. Collectively they do, moreover, point to the necessity to move one’s analytical lenses beyond the taken-for-granted linear temporalities, upon which a “healed”

contemporary Europe was born out of past catastrophe(s) and now requires defense, rather than interrogation.

Further Readings:

Amir-Moazami, Schirin (2020) "Minorities: Empirical and Political-Theoretical Reflections on a Cunning Concept", in Dirk-Berg Schlosser, Bertrand Badie, Leonardo Morlino (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Political Science*, London: Sage, 1514-29.

Anidjar, Gil (2007) *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal (2003) *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt (1991) *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity.

Lavi, Shai (2009) "Unequal Rites - Jews, Muslims and the History of Ritual Slaughter in Germany", in Shai Lavi and Jose Brunner (eds.), *Juden und Muslime in Deutschland. Recht, Religion, Identität. Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 37: 164-84

Rothberg, Michael (2009) *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Topolski, Anya (2017) "Good Jew, bad Jew ... good Muslim, bad Muslim: 'managing Europe's others'", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41 (12): 2179-96.

Tzuberi, Hannah (2020) "'Reforesting' Jews: The German State and the Construction of 'New German Judaism'", *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 27 (3): 199-224.

Žižek, Slavoj (1998) *Ein Plädoyer für die Intoleranz*. Vienna: Passagen.

Citations

1. Tzuberi, Hannah. 2020. "»Reforesting« Jews: The German State and the Construction of »New German Judaism«." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 27 (3): 199. <https://doi.org/10.1628/jsq-2020-0015>. ↵
2. Topolski, Anya. 2017. "Good Jew, Bad Jew ... Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: 'Managing' Europe's Others." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41 (12): 2179-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1391402>. ↵

3. Amir-Moazami, Schirin. 2020. "Minorities: Empirical and Political-Theoretical Reflections on a Cunning Concept." In *The SAGE Handbook of Political Science*, 1508–23. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714333.n92>. ↵
4. Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press. <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=5403>. ↵
5. Bauman, Zygmunt. 1991. *Modernity and Ambivalence . Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity. ↵
6. Lavi, Shai (2009) "Unequal Rites - Jews, Muslims and the History of Ritual Slaughter in Germany", in Shai Lavi and Jose Brunner (eds.), *Juden und Muslime in Deutschland. Recht, Religion, Identität. Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, vol. 37: 164-84 ↵
7. Žižek, Slavoj. 2013. *Ein Plädoyer für die Intoleranz / Slavoj Žižek. Ein Plädoyer für die Intoleranz*. 6.Aufl., dt. Erstausg. Passagen Forum. Wien: Passagen-Verl. ↵