RePLITO

Inclusive Strategies in the German Culture of Memory? Challenges and Possibilities

Victoria Bishop Kendzia¹

¹Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Published on: Feb 04, 2022

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

In recent years memory work in educational institutions (in Germany) has increasingly expanded to address intercultural settings. Often these initiatives are well intended, and yet they operate in exclusionary ways and tend to reproduce exclusions. I have explored some of these in depth in my 2017 monograph: *Visitors to the House of Memory: Identity and Political Education at the Jewish Museum Berlin*. Between 2007 and 2011, I accompanied several groups of high school students from diverse districts of Berlin. I was present both in preparatory session and also asked students after their visits about their experiences and impressions. There I sought to analyze a number of initiatives of the Jewish Museum Berlin that aim to be inclusive, such as tours specifically aimed at visitors of Turkish background, tours that emphasize the similarities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and looked at a new academy housed in a building opposite the main museum, aimed at researching diversity and engaging with a broader public.

At the time, I was optimistic about the possibilities for inclusion. But my own experiences with such initiatives aimed at inclusion have tempered this optimism: The group of high school students who were from the *Neukölln* district of Berlin and were of predominantly Turkish and Arab background were generally treated with suspicion and contempt as they went through the museum. They did not have a guided tour and the staff were not specifically prepared for them. The staff either avoided them or dismissed their questions altogether – very similar to what Damani Partridge describes in his anthropological research with youth visits to Auschwitz. The youth liaison who accompanied the group commented that the state-funded project to encourage those of Turkish and Arab background to approach the topic and visit the site was not about making space for their participation, but rather aimed to render them less irritating residents of the nation-state ([Partridge, 2010: 848](#)).

At one point during the visit in the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB), however, two of the students broke off from the group and did eventually manage to find a guide who was happy to answer their specific questions. This guide was an exception to the rule – she received the young pupils with warmth, interest, and took their questions seriously. In hindsight, I would surmise that the guide approached the pupils as visitors first, without ascribing any particular “migrant” status to them. My aim here is to explore certain challenges in recognizing and supporting such exceptions.

In searching out allies in an endeavor to arrive at a more inclusive culture of memory – one that does not leave anyone who cannot claim guilt or other iterations of it (a

special German responsibility, atonement, for example) out of the conversation – there are plenty of pitfalls. What follows are concrete illustrations of the problems that can arise.

The Rabbit and the Mosque

From 2010 to 2011, I co-led a school project in which artists and ethnologists sought to bring ethnological methods into the schools. The project was part of a Master's level seminar entitled 'Ethnology in the School'. It was framed as a fun and educational project week, whereby pupils from the most disadvantaged part of the city could explore and give voice to issues of concern to them. They would then be able to present the artistic products of this endeavor in a public exhibition. We worked with grade seven pupils, from a school in a so-called Berlin 'hotspot' of tensions (*Brennpunkt*, in German). This alludes to the catchment area where the school was situated. It was a school with a vast majority of pupils of Turkish and Arab background, many of whom had only recently arrived in Germany. The project was proposed by the artists, who had been working in anti-racism endeavors for a number of years.

The project got off to an encouraging start. We even secured exhibition space to present the work of the pupils in the prestigious *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* (HKdW). The artists, the other ethnologists (who were Master's degree students) and myself (as a teaching assistant) met early on to go over the plans. During the meeting, one of the artists, who proposed and led the project, casually asked me what I was hoping to accomplish. I answered that I was interested to see if the field methods we would be working with might help the pupils to make sense of their daily lives, and any issues of concern to them that might arise. She then scoffed a little (perhaps my aim was too modest?), turned to me and said: "I want to rescue them before they set off bombs!" I was too floored to reply. We had not even met the pupils and they were already potential terrorists in her eyes! I brought my misgivings about this framing to the attention of the other ethnologists, the artists themselves, and the professor in charge. Yes, it was unfortunate, I was told, but we can't go back now as we have a responsibility to the ethnology students, who needed the credit points from this project. From this point on, all we could do was try to mitigate the situation to the best of our limited ability.

Here is one instance of what transpired: One of the pupils, a girl, was excited about her pet rabbit and wanted to do something about that. Caring for her pet, etc. Great, a nice topic I thought, something that means a lot to her.

Another girl wanted to do a project about her family and celebrations. At this point, the artist in charge recommended that she emphasize how she isn't allowed to venture out without a male relative. This was neither true nor of interest to her. In fact, she had told me that her father encouraged her to get a good education, a profession so she could make her own living from and not have to be dependent on a man. I felt a strong need to shield her from what I saw as a clear attempt to compel her to play the role of a disadvantaged Muslim girl. Consequently, I stuck with her, leaving the other pupil to work on her rabbit idea alone for a while. After some deliberation, the pupil I was working with now decided to explore how her family celebrates New Year's Eve in Berlin – complete with fireworks and festive meals. Next, I returned to the first girl to see how her work was going. She looked up at me and sounding a bit dejected said: "I wanted to do rabbit, but I'm doing mosque." (In German: *Ich wollte Hase, aber ich mache Moschee*). She spent the project week making a cardboard version of a prayer mat.

Another group of pupils had prepared a video about why their bus was often late, resulting in them coming late to school and being scolded for this. In Berlin, pupils take regular public transit busses to school. The pupils' video showed the extreme overcrowding of the bus in the hour before school starting time (8 a.m.). The bus driver blamed the unruly kids for slowing things down. Many pupils had to wait for a second or even third bus. I could relate to the pupil's story, all the more so because this is also something my daughter, who has to take a bus to her high school, has often experienced. When she explained that her coming late was a result of the first three buses being full, they told her to try and get an earlier one. This would mean catching a bus well before 7 a.m. and having to wait outside the school building, even in winter, as pupils are only allowed to enter at 7:50. Needless to say, I sympathized with the pupils' efforts to highlight the issue. Clearly, this was of concern to them personally and they were also looking for empathy and possible solutions to the busing problem.

Enter the project initiators again. They supported the group with ideas and editing of the material. In the final product, the bus starts in Berlin (with actual video footage) and then transforms into an animated version that also travels on to Israel/Palestine and Turkey. Yes, I'm serious, somehow even this issue with the city buses (one many Berlin pupils certainly have in common) had to highlight their difference. There was also no explanation given as to why the bus suddenly changed its route.

In my view, this project was not about creating any kind of participation for the pupils, but rather something that could exploit them – have them perform the role of the

“migrant”. It exoticized them, deliberately circumventing issues that might render them less the Other. The initiators benefited from appearing to foster diversity, with a juicy exhibition at the HKdW on their CVs, while the ethnology students got their required ECTS points for their degrees.

Brother John in the Berlin Philharmonic

Another school, another project. This time I was not directly involved, but as it was in my daughters’ primary school, I attended the event in question. This was not in a so-called Berlin hotspot. The majority of the pupils there are of German background. The principal at the time (let’s call her Ms. K.) had touted a lovely project whereby the pupils of the school would get to rehearse and then perform at the Berlin Philharmonic. This would culminate in a performance there which included a rendition of Brother John sung in four European languages (German, French, Italian, and English). It was this event that I attended. It was fun and everyone seemed to enjoy it. Ms. K. made points about diversity and inclusiveness in her speech introducing the event.

A few weeks later, when I was walking my dog, I met up with an acquaintance (a fellow dog walker). She was German, married to an Italian and had moved about two years previously to Berlin. Earlier on, she had asked about my daughters’ school and I recommended it heartily. I had told her that my girls had a wonderful teacher for the first two grades and that her daughter should try to get into her class. Now I asked her if her daughter had managed to get into the class that I mentioned. No, she said. The principal (Ms. K.), upon hearing that her daughter’s first language was Italian and her German was not perfect, said that they didn’t want to take on her in as they had too many migrants already.

Once again, this clueless Canadian was shocked. I told her that her daughter had a right to a place in the school. They had to take her! The mother, however, said that if the principal felt that way about her daughter, she would be better off elsewhere. I couldn’t disagree with her. They relocated, opting for Spain, shortly thereafter.

I would summarize the situations above as illustrating the caveat along the lines of *beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing*. Individuals may appear to care about diversity and inclusiveness, but actions can show that they are far more interested in appearing morally superior – in looking like good, open-minded Germans, especially in the limelight of key institutions like the HKdW and the Philharmonic. These experiences expose the structural pitfalls of the politics of diversity recognition: Ms. K. and the

artists perform a liberal, tolerant, “open-minded” version of Germanness, but they also depend on the problematic Otherness of the pupils, for example. by framing them as kids whose school bus moves from Berlin to their alleged homeland. Liberal diversity politics interpolates them as objects of white compassion. Further, this compassion is only afforded if the pupils do not make life difficult for society-at-large (as not having perfect German might do in the classroom setting).

Where to from here?

Sadly, I am not as optimistic as I once was. I had hoped Rothberg’s concept of multi-directional memory might fight some, albeit limited, traction here, allowing for connections between varying experiences of oppression. In this context, the Holocaust could serve as a touchstone and a narrative that can open up conversations between people as human beings. Alas, I do not see this happening. So, the interventions remain small-scale.

One small project I have become aware of involves actually including pupils of diverse backgrounds in conversations about the Jewish narrative, asking what they are interested in. Very human questions arise from these mediations: ‘Would a *Jewish girl ever date me?*’ is an example of the kind of questions that came up. There is something to be gained from meeting the pupils where they are, and then going from there. Listening to them rather than compelling them to fit into one or the other boxes could start to encourage true participation.

In candid conversations with staff at the JMB, they have conceded that many have the will to become more inclusive, but lack the competencies. This resonated with me. It may even be that some of the project participants I mentioned above might have been willing to foster meaningful inclusion, but they lacked insight into their own shortcomings, prejudices, and assumptions. Perhaps training programs for staff at institutions like the JMB, in which instructors hail from varied backgrounds, might go a long way to building these competencies. Clearly, some already have them, like the guide who did address the pupils with respect. But for this to be the rule rather than the exception, the institutions would have to invest more in people: training, supporting, and paying staff well in order to retain them.

I would like to end on a less pessimistic note: I have been teaching at the university level on the topic of Germany’s difficult heritage and its relevance to issues of contemporary racism for many years now. I do encounter more and more young people (potential future history workers?) who are able to see the top-down, colonial

nature of the prevailing culture of memory. This does give some cause for cautious optimism for the future, if not for the present. If supportive environments, based on fostering competencies can be built with them, perhaps difference may be managed in a more inclusive way.

Further reading

Dekel, Irit. 2014. "Jews and Others and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin."

Anthropological Journal of European Cultures 23 (2): 71-84

Partridge, Damani J. 2010. "Holocaust Mahnmal (Memorial): Monumental Memory Amidst Contemporary Race." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (4): 820-50.

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

Citations

1. Partridge, Damani J. 2010. "Holocaust Mahnmal (Memorial): Monumental Memory amidst Contemporary Race." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (4): 820-50. [↗](#)