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'VICTIMHOOD IS A TRICKY TERRAIN TO NEGOTIATE'

MICHAEL ROTHBERG IN CONVERSATION WITH
MIRJAM SARAH BRUSIUS

*Michael Rothberg has challenged the underlying logic of competitive victimhood (Opferkonkurrenz), the theme of this special issue, in conflicts of memory. His book *Multidirectional Memory* shows that memory conflict can be productive, generating more memory through various forms of dialogism.¹ In this model, different memory traditions draw on each other and emerge together in 'non-zero-sum' ways.² The multidirectional dynamic he proposes also has implications for thinking about victimhood. Moving beyond the victim-perpetrator binary, he argues that we need a new category for people who enable and benefit from violence without being perpetrators themselves. Instead, such people can understand themselves as 'implicated subjects' who occupy 'positions of power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm'.³ In this interview, we will discuss how a more complex map of memory and historical responsibility can also produce new alliances and solidarities, a topic he will explore in his forthcoming book *Memory Citizenship* (co-authored with Yasemin Yildiz).*

MIRJAM SARAH BRUSIUS (MSB): In 2020 we published a round table that drew on your book *Multidirectional Memory* and looked at the Holocaust's entanglement with global history, empire, and colonialism. Much has happened since (see my introduction to this special issue). To what extent do you think recent debates in Germany around its memory culture have moved the discussion about multidirectional memory forward, or in fact hindered it?

MICHAEL ROTHBERG (MR): I go back and forth between bouts of optimism and pessimism. There are moments when I see German memory culture opening up in positive ways and moments when I

¹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, Calif., 2009). ² *Ibid.* 243.

³ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, Calif., 2019), 1.

think people are so dug into their positions that positive change will be very difficult to accomplish.

To understand what is going on, I think it's worth stepping back for a moment. The translation of *Multidirectional Memory* appeared because there were scholars in Germany who felt that the perspective the book offers could help in the effort of democratizing German memory culture and making it possible to articulate memories of migration and colonialism, among other histories, alongside memory of the Shoah.⁴ I was excited to have the translation because I also thought – after several years of working on migration and memory in the German context – that a multidirectional perspective could be illuminating. Translation takes time, though, and I think neither the editors nor I could have imagined the context in which the book would eventually appear in 2021. There are many ways to tell the story, but 2019 was certainly a turning point because of the Bundestag's resolution against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which further politicized accusations of antisemitism and set the stage for the resignation of Peter Schäfer from the Jewish Museum Berlin, the controversy around the work of Achille Mbembe, and the whole *Historikerstreit 2.0* that followed from the Mbembe dispute. In other words, *Multidirectional Memory* appeared in Germany in the midst of an already acrimonious context that was primed for further controversy.

My impression is that that controversy derives from an entrenched divide between a powerful contingent of establishment journalists and politicians as well as activists from the *antideutsch* (anti-German) camp on one side, and a group of scholars, progressive journalists, museum and cultural institution workers, and decolonial/migrant/Black activists on the other. The former group strongly defends a vision of the Holocaust as singular and incomparable, rejects the possibility of thinking about antisemitism alongside other forms of racism, and describes any but the mildest forms of criticism of Israel as antisemitic. The latter group is seeking to understand and situate the Holocaust in relation to other histories of violence, to open space for memories of colonialism, to conceptualize reparations in the wake of colonial genocide and looting, to think in intersectional ways about forms of oppression and

⁴ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirektionale Erinnerung: Holocaustgedenken im Zeitalter der Dekolonisierung*, trans. Max Henninger (Berlin, 2021).

prejudice, and to defend space for rational, critical discussion of Israeli policy and Palestinian rights. The former group strongly rejected the arguments of *Multidirectional Memory*—usually without bothering to read or understand the book—while some members of the latter group see the multidirectional framework as a way of grounding an alternative to the dominant paradigm of singularity. My sense is that right now there is something like a deadlock. There has been some progress in recent years in integrating memories of colonialism into the German public sphere, but the discourse on antisemitism and Israel remains difficult to bring onto a rational terrain.

MSB: You are now working with Yasemin Yildiz on a book called *Memory Citizenship*. This book talks about migrant encounters with Holocaust memory in Germany. You have argued that a 'double bind' dominates German memory culture. On the one hand, minorities are required to commemorate the Holocaust in order to be or become 'real Germans', but on the other, they are denied that commemoration as it is not their own history. How do you think this affects not just people's identities and discourses on exclusion and inclusion, but also hierarchical thinking in German society at large?

MR: I think what we call the 'migrant double bind' is precisely the result of hierarchical thinking in mainstream Germany. First of all, this double bind is built on a pre-existing 'German paradox', as we termed it. Like Hanno Loewy and others writing in the first fifteen or so years of the twenty-first century, we noticed that German Holocaust memory had effectively become racialized. Taking responsibility for the Nazi genocide was conceived as a quasi-ethnic inheritance. For instance, the Social Democratic politician Klaus von Dohnanyi wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1998 that 'German identity cannot be defined today any more precisely than through our common descent from those who did it, who welcomed it or at least permitted it.'⁵ As Dan Diner put it at the same moment, and in the midst of debates about the citizenship law, '*ius sanguinis* is

⁵ Klaus von Dohnanyi, 'Eine Friedensrede: Martin Walsers notwendige Klage', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 Nov. 1998. Cited in Hanno Loewy, 'A History of Ambivalence: Post-Reunification German Identity and the Holocaust', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36/2 (2002), 3–13, at 11.

being prolonged by the rituals of memory and remembrance.⁶ In such a situation, we see the coming together of the German model of taking responsibility for the Holocaust and the reproduction of a racialized, ‘blood’-based notion of German identity (based on common descent and *ius sanguinis*). This is a paradox since, within such a conceptual framework, the act of taking responsibility for the Shoah actually strengthens the hold of the very exclusive, racially based notion of German identity that accompanied the Holocaust in the first place.

Until the change of citizenship law in 2000, which made it somewhat easier for immigrants and post-migrants to be naturalized as German citizens, migrants were usually considered to be outside memory culture. But at this point the double bind came into play: formal equality of citizenship for some migrants was countered with a notion of belonging that remained ethnic and that was premised on remembrance of the Holocaust. I think a lot of what is happening today in the so-called *Historikerstreit 2.0* emerges from this context of paradox and double bind. Another way to say this is that the discourse on the Holocaust has become hierarchical: there are certain authorized standpoints and there are other standpoints that are given less credence. This isn’t only a matter of race – ideological protocols of remembrance also come into the picture – but it certainly is partly a matter of racialized conceptions of citizenship and memory.

MSB: A recent conference, ‘Hijacking Memory’, looked at the appropriation of Holocaust remembrance by the far right.⁷ To what extent could this appropriation spur *Opferkonkurrenz*?

MR: I don’t know if I would say that the far right is involved in *Opferkonkurrenz* necessarily, but I would certainly agree that they tend to mobilize a discourse of victimization. I think this is true far beyond Germany and far beyond questions related to Holocaust memory. One of the key elements of contemporary far-right ideology – but which was also present at earlier moments, including in the Nazi movement – is

⁶ Dan Diner, ‘Nation, Migration, and Memory: On Historical Concepts of Citizenship’, *Constellations*, 4/3 (1998), 303.

⁷ ‘Hijacking Memory: The Holocaust and the New Right’, conference held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 9–12 June 2022, at [https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2022/hijacking_memory/start.php], accessed 30 June 2022.

the presentation of the dominant White society as victimized by racial minorities and immigrants. It's essentially a victim-perpetrator inversion in which racists depict themselves as victims of those they victimize. The most prominent example of this currently – and something that has apparently motivated numerous mass killings in the US and elsewhere – is the so-called Great Replacement Theory, which asserts that a conspiracy exists to replace the White population with People of Colour. This racist 'theory' also beautifully illustrates some of the connections between antisemitism and anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant racisms, since Jews are considered the enablers of this 'replacement'. I don't see this as *Opferkonkurrenz*, though – I see it as the exploitation of the discourse of victimization and the violent appropriation of the experiences of actually victimized groups.

MSB: In this special issue, we are trying to historicize, analyse, and above all problematize the discourse of victimhood in post-war Germany. What lessons could be drawn from such an approach, looking in particular at the historical trajectories of *Opferkonkurrenz*? What alternatives are there to what you have described as 'the possessive investment' in the concept of victimhood?⁸

MR: I think discourses of victimhood are a tricky terrain to negotiate because one has to hold in mind a few quite different attitudes simultaneously, as I've suggested elsewhere. First, we have to recognize that experiences of victimization are real: some people and some groups really are victims of violence. I don't see how we can talk about, say, the Holocaust or police violence against People of Colour without understanding that victims are real. Next, however, I think we have to be careful about reducing individuals or groups to an essentialized notion of victimhood. People – whether they are in a Nazi-constructed ghetto or an impoverished urban centre – are not only victims; they are also agents, even when they are confronting difficult, even impossible, circumstances. We have to avoid ontologizing or essentializing victim status because doing so takes the experience out of history – being a victim is a historical experience, not a pre-given

⁸ Michael Rothberg and Ankur Datta, 'Exploring Victimhood', *Seminar*, 727 (2020), at [https://www.india-seminar.com/2020/727/727_michael_rothberg.htm], accessed 6 July 2020.

identity. Grasping the historicity of victimhood helps us understand a final point: the need for caution about how victimhood can come to be a desirable status that can be appropriated as a kind of cultural capital or even as a means of reproducing violence, which the case of the far right illustrates. Embracing the identity of victim is something different, I would argue, from speaking from an experience of victimization and claiming redress or reparation. Such claims seek to transform the world, not to reify the identity of victimhood.

To my mind, the discourse of *Opferkonkurrenz* does not do much to help us confront these various aspects of victimhood. As an ideological term, *Opferkonkurrenz* short-circuits reflection on victimization by only considering the third point I've mentioned—the fact that victimhood can become a form of cultural capital. This does happen, as I've just said, but we need to be careful about reproducing that logic in our own thinking and analysis. We need instead to go behind the concept and understand the circumstances of its emergence and mobilization as an ideological weapon serving *somebody's* interests. This analysis is what I take it you are offering in this special issue.

MSB: In your and Yasemin Yildiz's research on the 'migrant archives of Holocaust remembrance' in contemporary Germany, you detected the possibility of alternative ways of conceptualizing the relations between different histories and memories of violence.⁹ Can you give an example?

MR: There is no single way that migrants to Germany remember the Holocaust or that migration inflects Holocaust memory. Experiences of migration, like migrant and host communities themselves, are irreducibly plural. That said, I think the experience that the Turkish-German writer Zafer Şenocak famously described as 'immigrating to . . . Germany's recent past' has, in fact, created all kinds of fascinating constellations of memory.¹⁰ One very moving example

⁹ Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz, 'Memory Citizenship: Migrant Archives of Holocaust Remembrance in Contemporary Germany', *Parallax*, 17/4 (2011), 32-48.

¹⁰ Zafer Şenocak, *Atlas of a Tropical Germany*, trans. and ed. Leslie A. Adelson (Lincoln, NE, 2000), 6; originally published in 1993 as *Atlas des tropischen Deutschland*. The essay from which this well-known quotation is taken was written together with Bülent Tulay.

that has deservedly received some attention is that of the late writer Doğan Akhanlı. Akhanlı was a left-wing activist who fled to Germany from his native Turkey, and was later imprisoned there again in what became an international scandal. Although he had been active in the Kurdish cause in Turkey, for example, he did not become interested in the Armenian Genocide (and its denial) until he got to Germany. He was inspired by the German model of confronting the past to take up the challenge of confronting Turkey's genocidal past, but he also developed a model that is at least somewhat at odds with the German disinclination to 'compare' the Holocaust. Akhanlı gave street tours revealing what he called 'relational histories' (*Beziehungsgeschichten*) that brought together German, Jewish, Turkish, Armenian, and Greek histories, for instance. His work was very much about recovering multidirectional layers of history and memory in urban space, without reducing one story to another.

There are other instances of such multidirectional memory work that I think are important and that we discuss in our book—for instance, the music and activism of the late Esther Bejarano and her collaboration with the migrant hip-hop group Microphone Mafia. Under the banner of anti-fascism, they brought together Yiddish songs from the Nazi ghettos with a strong anti-racist vision focused on the contemporary persistence of neo-Nazi violence against migrants and People of Colour. Not all of our examples are explicitly political in that way, but in the context of the heated debates about Holocaust memory, antisemitism, and Israel/Palestine, almost all acts of migrant memory have some implicit political dimension.

MSB: The new book you're currently writing includes examples of experiences that concern Palestine and its connection with Holocaust commemoration. Yet this connection does not happen as a direct comparison or a competition between victims. Germany is currently a long way from what scholars have been looking at for a while now: the entangled and intertwined histories of the Nakba and the Holocaust. Why would more engagement with the Palestinian experience also be important for Holocaust remembrance in Germany?

MR: I certainly know examples that bring together Holocaust memory and Palestine in ways that I would consider non-reductive

and non-competitive. I also recommend Sa'ed Atshan and Katharina Galor's *The Moral Triangle*, a highly differentiated ethnographic study of Germans, Jews, and Palestinians in Berlin, for its humanistic and reconciliatory approach.¹¹ But there's no doubt that the conjunction of Palestine and the Holocaust is often conflictual—especially in Germany—precisely because the two stories are simultaneously distinct and entangled. I think I might frame your question differently, though. It's not so much that more engagement with Palestinian experience is important for Holocaust remembrance in Germany. Rather, engagement with Palestinian experience on its own terms is important in itself. My worry is that a certain conception of the Holocaust and of antisemitism—a conception based on the incomparability of each—is making it nearly impossible to recognize the legitimacy of Palestinian claims and the Palestinian narrative and yet, at the same time, requiring the question of Palestine to orbit around Holocaust memory. This is a dynamic I've recently been thinking of as 'warped multidirectionality': the dominant paradigm of Holocaust memory in Germany paradoxically forces the Holocaust into relation with other histories, but in such a way that it distorts them. It's impossible to extricate Palestine from the Holocaust, but also impossible to articulate an autonomous Palestinian position that doesn't pay homage to it. Loosening the hold of the dominant paradigm of uniqueness will decrease the level of competition and conflict because it will allow other memories a greater degree of autonomy.

MSB: The German-Iranian writer Asal Dardan once mentioned that incorporating experiences of complicity and privilege from abroad into German memory culture could also be a useful exercise.¹² After all, not all minorities arriving in Germany were minorities in their countries of origin. Some held positions of power and operated in hierarchical systems of oppression. Do you see opportunities for Germany's multicultural society and its memory culture in a more intersectional approach, relating as much to class (and gender) as to race?

¹¹ Sa'ed Atshan and Katharina Galor, *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians* (Durham, NC, 2020).

¹² Sasha Marianna Salzmann and Asal Dardan, 'Heimat, Umbruch, Nähe: Zeit für neue deutsche Literatur', panel discussion at Fünf: Internationales Literaturfest lit.Ruhr, 6 Oct. 2021.

MR: That's a fascinating and important insight. As I said already, I think it's essential to consider migration in all its multi-dimensionality. I'm most familiar with migration from Turkey, but already there you have various kinds of distinctions that are salient between, for example, people of Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian descent, or class differences between those who came as labour migrants and those who came as refugees or students. Here I would refer to my work on 'implication' and the 'implicated subject', which explores the way people contribute to and benefit from histories of violence and structures of inequality without being direct perpetrators themselves.¹³ Again, the example of Doğan Akhanlı is relevant—someone who recognized his implication in the Armenian Genocide and developed forms of memory activism to address it and create new forms of solidarity. Immigrants—at least those who will be read as 'People of Colour'—who come to Germany with class privilege will probably occupy positions of what I call 'complex implication'.¹⁴ That is, they will have lines of connection to histories of privilege and even perpetration while occupying relatively subordinate positions in Germany's racialized hierarchy. Complex implication is widespread, but no less important to account for, I believe, especially if our interest is in intersectional political, cultural, or intellectual projects.

MSB: You also detect a new type of *Opferkonkurrenz* in which minority groups get trapped: empathetic responses are considered 'inappropriate', and identifying with Jewish victims, according to some, risks displacing Jewish victimhood, undermining Germany's normative Holocaust memory. As a result, Muslim minorities in particular are meant to respond in a certain way that internalizes, but does not appropriate knowledge about the Holocaust—the implicit assumption being that many are intrinsically antisemitic. I'd like to join this argument with the one you're making on an urgent need for alliances—the second key topic raised in the round table later in this special issue and one that has a long history in Germany, though it is unfortunately not well known. What would have to happen, what is needed, for these new 'forms of solidarity' to become more visible?

¹³ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

MR: I think this is a good example for seeing how pernicious the discourse of *Opferkonkurrenz* can be. As Esra Özyürek and other anthropologists like Sultan Doughan and Damani Partridge have shown, there's an elaborate disciplinary discourse that attempts to constrain how immigrants and racialized minorities respond to the Holocaust.¹⁵ As Özyürek in particular demonstrates, agents of the dominant memory regime in Germany regularly reject and stigmatize minorities' empathetic responses to the Holocaust, which might include identifying with the victims or feeling fear about becoming a victim of racial violence.¹⁶ Instead of acting like 'repentant perpetrators,' as good Germans are supposed to, many minorities bring their own experiences of violence and exclusion to their confrontation with the Nazi past, and that manifests in complicated affective responses to the commemoration of the Holocaust.

The dominant discourse often tries to classify those responses as *Opferkonkurrenz* because they are not otherwise legible within existing frames of reference. And, of course, sometimes minorities (like majority citizens) do articulate what I've called competitive memory or relativize the extremity of the Holocaust. But I also see something else in the kinds of examples Özyürek discusses: grounds for a possible solidarity among differently victimized or marginalized groups. I don't think such feelings of solidarity are particularly rare in contemporary Germany; on the contrary, they are often actualized in various kinds of collective action—perhaps especially in the cultural realm. For the past fifteen years I've been observing—and writing about—all kinds of cultural work that brings together differently situated minorities and migrants, sometimes also in collaboration with 'majority' Germans, in places like the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse and the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, and in various initiatives involving people

¹⁵ See e.g. Esra Özyürek, 'Rethinking Empathy: Emotions Triggered by the Holocaust among the Muslim-Minority in Germany', *Anthropological Theory*, 18/4 (2018), 456–77; Damani Partridge, 'Holocaust *Mahnmal* (Memorial): Monumental Memory amidst Contemporary Race', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 52/4 (2010), 820–50; Sultan Doughan, 'Desiring Memorials: Jews, Muslims, and the Human of Citizenship', in Samuel Sami Everett and Ben Gidley (eds.), *Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience* (Leiden, 2022), 46–70.

¹⁶ Özyürek, 'Rethinking Empathy'.

with Jewish and Muslim family backgrounds. The examples of Doğan Akhanlı and Bejarano and Microphone Mafia, which I mentioned earlier, are also part of this picture.

The major problem, it seems to me, is not on the side of 'victim' or minority groups, but in the difficulty that mainstream German society has in recognizing and valuing these forms of solidarity. I guess I would say, then, that the issue is less about carrying out these visions of solidarity on the practical level than about breaking through the hegemonic frames that either ignore this kind of work, fetishize it under the rubric of a consumable form of diversity, or—especially when Holocaust memory is at stake—seek to discipline and constrain it. The latter point about the Holocaust brings us back to the opening of our conversation and illustrates to me the importance of memory culture in the various debates unfolding in Germany today: memory culture is a site of struggle between clashing understandings of collective belonging and collective responsibility. Against the orthodoxy that seeks to maintain homogeneity and banish relationality, we need to strengthen the intersectional and radically democratic currents in memory culture and across civil society.

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