



DISCRIMINATING MINDS

three perspectives on racism

Ism v. ism

BY AGNES MONKA

For weeks now, a veritable mudslinging has taken place among intellectuals, journalists and historians in the feuilleton section of German newspapers. The controversy covers all the themes it takes to get Germans hot under the collar: freedom of speech, the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and Israel, along with apartheid, racism and colonialism. How did it come to this?

The key figure in the debate is the Cameroonian-born political scientist, historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe. He was invited to be the keynote speaker at the 2020 Ruhrtriennale, a leading arts festival in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), where he was to give a lecture on his longstanding research into colonial history.

On March 23, however, Lorenz Deutsch, cultural policy spokesperson for the Free Democrats (FDP) state parliamentary group in NRW, wrote an open letter to the artistic director of the Ruhrtriennale, Stefanie Carp, urging her to disinvite Mbembe. He pointed to clear agreements that had been made two years prior with regard to invitations extended to BDS activists; BDS stands for boycott, disinvestment and sanctions and is an international movement aimed at influencing Israeli policy relating to the occupied territories. Deutsch noted that Carp had invited Young Fathers – a hip-hop band known for its support of the BDS campaign – to attend the festival in 2018; after coming under pressure from the federal government and other artists, however, she subsequently disinvited the band.

What does all of this have to do with Achille Mbembe? According to Deutsch, Mbembe had signed a call for an academic boycott of Israel. He also argued that parts of Mbembe's essay "The Society of Enmity" were so problematic that he was simply not tenable as a keynote speaker.

Deutsch quoted a passage in which Mbembe writes that the Israeli occupation is a "fanatical policy of destruction aimed at transforming the life of Palestinians into a heap of ruins or a pile of garbage destined for cleansing." Mbembe writes further in the same essay: "In South Africa, the mounds of ruins never did reach such a scale," and "the apartheid system in South Africa and the destruction of Jews in Europe – the latter, though, in an extreme fashion and within a quite different setting – constituted two emblematic manifestations of this fantasy of separation."

According to Deutsch, by drawing this comparison, Mbembe is relativizing the Holocaust while also placing today's Jews in a position similar to that of the Nazis. He therefore urged Carp to consider rescinding the invitation.

A few days later, the debate was joined by Felix Klein, the federal government's Commissioner

for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism. Not only did he charge Mbembe with relativizing the Holocaust, he also accused him of calling into question Israel's right to exist, albeit without providing any further evidence of his claim. Klein, too, called for Mbembe to be disinvited to the festival. NRW's minister of culture then convened a special meeting of the Ruhrtriennale supervisory board at which Carp was made to answer for her decision to issue the invitation. Mbembe, the renowned philosopher and colonialism expert, was now officially being branded an anti-Semite thanks to the involvement of Klein.

Soon thereafter, the subject became an even hotter media topic, although the focus was no longer on the comparison of apartheid and the Holocaust – a comparison that, incidentally, historians of the Holocaust have not considered problematic for decades.

In the feuilleton section of Germany's major papers, one side argued that Mbembe was indeed speaking from a "different setting." In this sense, a comparison could not be seen as a relativization and was certainly not cause to restrict Mbembe's freedom of speech in this way. The other side, however, continued to find evidence of Mbembe's problematic view of Israel. For example, in the foreword to a collection of essays titled *Apartheid Israel: The Politics of an Analogy*, he writes: "And since all they [Israel] are willing to offer is a fight to the finish, since what they are willing to do is to go all the way – carnage, destruction, incremental extermination – the time has come for global isolation."

This was followed by further open letters and expressions of solidarity from Jewish researchers who called on Felix Klein to step down. On May 8, Mbembe took to Facebook to argue that Lorenz Deutsch had not wanted to see a "negro" at the Ruhrtriennale and had therefore made him into an "anti-Semitic negro," so as to be able to disinvite him.

In mid-May, the next open letter appeared, this time signed by 700 African intellectuals, writers and artists – at least that was the claim. Upon closer inspection of the list of names, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* determined that many of the signatories were neither intellectuals nor Africans. The letter lost even more clout by beginning with the fully unsubstantiated claim that the people calling for Mbembe to be disinvited were representatives of an extreme right-wing lobby in Germany. Writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Mbembe argued that although he respected German taboos, they were not the taboos of all other people in the world. He asked for an apology from Klein, who then refused to give him one.

Coming to the defense of both sides were a number of academics, journalists and researchers, with varying degrees of foam at the mouth. Others tried to mediate, but they could not

prevent what soon escalated into a fruitless exchange of blows in the papers, for example between an upset Alan Pössner, who called for the end of public funding for events that promoted the hatred of Israel, and a stunned Stephan Detjen, who denounced the state's interference in fundamental human rights.

What got lost along the way was the fact that the Ruhrtriennale had long since been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why has this debate raged on so long and with such vehemence? Because debates over the Holocaust automatically touch the core of what it means to be German. Indeed, the Federal Republic defines itself as a post-Holocaust society, or in the words of former Federal President Joachim Gauck: "There is no German identity without Auschwitz."

Still, even if everyone feels personally addressed by the debate, does that automatically mean we should all chime in? No. The thing that makes this debate interesting is not the many open letters – all inevitably written in superlatives – nor the many calls for the greatest number of heads to roll on all sides. The most interesting aspect is that it has taken one single incident to prompt the realization that Germans – in all of the additional contexts that have opened up in the wake of the debate – are very far from a social consensus without actually knowing it.

And this is likely the reason why any ultimate resolution of the matter is still far away. Indeed, everyone seems to have their own interpretation of why the Mbembe case constitutes a scandal, whether it's a relativization of the Holocaust, an attack on Israel, support for BDS, the disinvitation and defamation of an African colonial researcher or an infringement on the freedom of speech and art. These are all sensitive issues that encourage those involved to immediately take up irreconcilable stances, to declare every objection unforgivable and to brand every opponent an incorrigible racist, an anti-Semite or a self-proclaimed "guardian of public morals."

Yet another thing that has gone unnoticed is the fact that the Munich Center for Holocaust Studies and the Hugo Valentin Centre in Uppsala, Sweden, are organizing a conference set to take place in Munich in November 2020. This gathering intends to bring together researchers in the fields of colonialism, genocide and the Holocaust to engage in the very things that were rendered impossible in the debate over Mbembe, namely an unimpeded discourse in the spirit of goodwill and a series of mutual encounters based on the desire to learn from and with each other.

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Racism is a two-way street

BY NAÏLA CHIKHI

I was still a child when I eye-witnessed racist behavior for the first time. It was in Algeria, the country of my birth. A "white" schoolmate of mine was harassing another schoolmate because of the darker color of his skin. I was also confronted with anti-Semitism in my childhood. I myself experienced discrimination several years later during my first semester at university in Paris, when a lecturer of mine suggested that I should have become a cleaning woman instead of studying for a degree.

And, of course, I've encountered racism in Germany. Racism is everywhere, all over the world. It can be directed by mainstream society against "foreigners" in general, against minorities in general as well as against specific minorities. The spectrum ranges from brutal murders and targeted killings to what we call everyday racism.

For example, more than a few Germans "without a migration background" find it impressive when binational children speak Spanish or English in addition to German, only to get up in arms when Turkish or Lebanese children switch to their native language in lieu of German. And xenophobia is still on display at state institutions. When I taught German as a foreign or second language, students of mine would often report being treated in a derogatory and aggressive manner by public officials as well as suffering racial profiling during police checks.

But there's also racism by minorities against mainstream society as well as against other minorities. It's not uncommon that marriages or even friendships are forbidden not only between migrants and Germans, but also between Turks and Kurds, or Moroccans and African-Germans, or Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, or Muslims and atheists.

This humiliating and contemptible treatment of "the other" is finding ever-stronger purchase in schoolyards. Mobbing at schools based on religious affiliation, ideology, sex, origin or skin color is nothing less than a portent of anti-Semitism, sexism and racism. While mobbing was initially more noticeable among children from majority segments of society, it has now become more common among children with migration backgrounds.

As children often emulate their parents and others in their surroundings, it begs the question: Have some migrants become xenophobes themselves? Or are all people more or less racists?

When migrants leave their countries of origin, they need support and orientation in the countries where they settle. For decades, both France and Germany have resisted being

seen as immigration countries and have thus neglected their integration policies. Left to their own devices, Gastarbeiter, or guest workers, build lives for themselves between factories and the Banlieue (suburbs) and import the norms and values of their home countries. The result is the propagation of communities not all that different from ghettos.

Within many of these communities, the lack of integration assistance reinforces a general dismissal of the culture of their host country. To fill the void, the well-trodden reactionary, patriarchal – read: religious – structures so widespread in many of their home countries take hold. The goal here has not been to foster integration, but rather to establish a parallel society defined by the norms of the cultures from which the newcomers came, cultures that are often diametrically opposed to the democratic societies of Germany and France.

In recent years, self-proclaimed representatives have placed these communities under their guardianship. Over time, their identitarian and communitarian policies have created a spatial, social and spiritual schism. As a result, society has been divided between the "we" and the "they."

The divisive identitarian approach is not unique to these self-proclaimed representatives. It is also found in right-wing extremist groups that work with rigidly authoritarian community structures and racist bogeymen.

And by force: arson, violent attacks, intimidation and death threats are just some of their unlawful tactics. Their resentment and hate are directed at "Mediterranean" migrants and Jewish compatriots.

If diversity leads to division and racist violence, it is all the more important to approach racism proactively, objectively and assertively as a universal phenomenon.

After the brutal murder of George Floyd, the racism debate reignited across the globe. This is a good thing. However, as a woman with a migration background, I find the current discussion surrounding "white privilege" both ethnocentric and misleading. "Being white" once again dominates the discourse as human rights violations are displaced from center stage. This is the approach of several no-doubt well-intentioned anti-racist activists. But their proponents should be aware that they are once again reducing individuals to the color of their skin.

The idea here is to target the unjust system, not the people it represents. The goal should be to combat the causes and instruments that prevent the equitable and respectful coexistence of fellow humans.

Only in 2005 did the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) introduce an integration course for newcomers to the country. From that point on, the Federal Republic – after a 50-year delay – no longer focused entirely on the economic integration of migrants, but on their linguistic and cultural integration as well. In coordination with other instruments, this should help dismantle the institutional disadvantages faced by migrants.

The economic and linguistic integration of migrants is indispensable. But in order to become responsible citizens within mainstream society, they must come to terms with the state's liberal democratic system of norms and find their bearings in relation to the enlightenment and the advantages of a humanist secular democracy.

The participation of political-religious groups in the integration activities of the state and in efforts to eliminate discrimination will be counterproductive. They are in fact the very people who constructed barriers of communitarianism and multiculturalism. Integration will never succeed if the anonymity of community is thrust upon migrants.

The French philosopher and author Henri Peña-Ruiz recently wrote: "To effectively fight racism, there are two invaluable maxims. The first is to remain vigilant as to the singularity of the human species. The second is to reject any abstract stratification of human groups, independent of whether this may derive from assertions related to nature or culture. An individual should never be drowned in a feeling of affiliation, nor should an ethnicity be judged through a global lens."

This underscores that a relativistic approach to culture has the further disadvantage of discouraging migrants from questioning and debating their community's norms that may violate certain human rights. This results in the deprivation of a migrant's opportunity to develop into a responsible citizen, which in itself is a form of racism.

Freedom and participation must be learned. The 100 training sessions comprising the BAMF integration courses cannot suffice to convey these skills, but at least they're a start. The path to self-determination is a lifelong learning process in which individuals recognize that they have rights but also obligations – and that these responsibilities should not be considered discriminatory in themselves. Individuals also learn that a modern, pluralistic society is built upon democratic and equitable consensus. Only a society comprising strongly emancipated individuals can demolish the walls that partition it.

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Redefining "us"

BY MARK TERKESSIDIS

After watching thousands of young Germans take to the streets in solidarity with US protesters demonstrating against the violent death of George Floyd, it looked as if some people in Germany were coming to understand – for the first time – that racism might also be a problem "over here." For decades, racial discrimination was seen as something that plagued the United States, not Germany. Post-war West German society thought its significant efforts to actively address its Nazi past rendered itself immune to racism. In a similar vein, many communist East Germans saw the concept of anti-racism as a constitutive *raison d'état*. Even after reunification, a majority of Germans were at most willing to admit to the existence of "xenophobia," but not to racism as such.

Mainstream opinion in Germany saw racism as a concept expressed by right-wing extremists, if at all. It was not considered an appropriate term to describe the negative daily experiences suffered by individuals of non-German backgrounds. Reports of these kinds of discrimination – which included such things as ongoing inequity when applying for a job, difficulties trying to rent an apartment and "ethnic profiling" during police checks – were often met with a shrug of the shoulders.

In today's Germany, however, the focus of attention is on the role played by the police, much like in the US after the death of George Floyd. And it's not the first time. Most recently, there has been an ongoing scandal surrounding the shoddy police investigation into a series of murders carried out by the extreme right-wing terror cell known as the National Socialist Underground or NSU. For years, the police steered its detective work in the wrong direction, thereby rendering the actual victims of the terror – eight people of Turkish descent and one of Greek origin – as perpetrators. The police seemed to think at the time that any murder taking place in the context of Germany's "foreign communities" was most likely linked to drug trafficking, debt-collection violence or some other form of organized crime.

When it was revealed that a far-right extremist group was responsible for the terror, subsequent investigative reports came to the sobering conclusion that the police force itself was plagued by routine misperceptions and subsequent action that assumed a self-evident link between criminal behavior and "individuals with a migration background."

But what were the implications of these revelations? It became clear that it wasn't a question of individual members of the police force having extremist positions or engaging in misconduct; it was the routines and practices of the police force itself that were having a discriminatory effect.

A similar investigation into race-related police failures was carried out in 1993 after the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager, in the United Kingdom. Six years later, in 1999, a commission headed by former High Court judge William MacPherson concluded its examination of the handling of the murder with a clear verdict: The problem plaguing the British police force was one of "institutional racism." This public inquiry was a milestone, as it showed that the issue was not racist behavior in the form of individual misconduct or isolated exceptions to the rule; the commission found that racism was deeply engrained in the institutional structure of the police force.

Most representative surveys undertaken since the 1990s indicate that a majority of Germans have "prejudices." The issue here, too, is not one of individual error; it is something that can be referred to as "racist knowledge," that is, a form of societal knowledge generally widespread and often reinforced across politics and the media. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this racist knowledge legitimizes the differences and inequalities between "us" and "them" – even though democratic principles forbid discrimination of this kind. Article 3 of Germany's Basic Law states that "No person shall be favored or disfavored because of sex, parentage, race, language, homeland and origin, faith or religious or political opinions." In reality, however, German society is characterized by a job-market "underclass," by discrimination in the realms of education and health and by the unequal treatment of and significantly higher risks of poverty for individuals with foreign backgrounds.

The Martinique-born psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon once wrote that a society was either racist or not; racism, he argued, was not accidental. Indeed, racism has played a significant role in the history of modernity. The initial contact made by Europeans overseas laid the very foundation for an anti-dialectical principle: When Columbus first set foot on land in the Caribbean, he did not seek dialogue with local inhabitants – he chose instead to read out a statement in Spanish declaring ownership of the land.

In this case, the "others" were simultaneously included and excluded. Without having been asked, they had suddenly come

under the domain of the Spanish crown. They were not even considered full subjects; they were merely individuals who now had to be educated in the "correct" religion and forced to engage in a "right-minded" form of labor. If they chose not to accept their new status, they would be designated as "barbarians" and face terrible consequences.

Even back then, this kind of violence did not go unchallenged, and there were fierce discussions on the legality of slavery in the 16th century. Unfortunately, when slavery was widely abolished in the 19th century, colonialism simply replaced it as the "better" and supposedly more humane alternative. Subsequently, during the process of decolonization, migration to rich Western countries began, thereby ushering in a new round of exclusion by inclusion. To this day, individuals in Germany who were recruited to work in factories in the 20th century are referred to as *Gastarbeiter*, or guest workers.

The problem is always seen as being "the others." People often consider "them" to be lazy, aggressive, loud, not yet mature and unwilling or even unable to integrate. In 2018, in the aftermath of anti-immigration riots in the town of Chemnitz, Germany's minister of the interior stated matter-of-factly that migration was "the mother of all problems."

Today, we in the West generally live in societies where racist divisions between "us" and "them" are no longer rooted in direct violence. Yet our markets, legal systems, cultural achievements and knowledge are still shaped to a certain degree by racism.

One encouraging aspect of the West is that it also created a tool with which to combat its own racist past and present, namely democracy. In heterogeneous democratic societies, different memories must be taken into account, different starting points must be considered and discrimination must be prevented. Democracy is not a zero-sum game, and the actions we are seeing today – the anti-racism protests, the toppling of racist monuments and the debates surrounding the renaming of buildings – can only help deepen democratic rights and give a fresh new meaning to the term "us."

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