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Achille Mbembe | 2015 | Heike Huslage-Koch/CC BY-SA (wikimedia commons)

POSTCOLONIALISM AND POST-HOLOCAUST: THE MBEMBE “AFFAIR”

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Over the past few months, the German media have been in turmoil due to a controversy that seems not to have found much repercussion outside Germany, but whose symptomatic nature deserves attention. The story can be told in just a few words. Born in Cameroon, a professor at the University of Witwatersrand, Achille Mbembe is the author of works that are well-known and extremely influential within the most recent postcolonial thought, such as *A Critique of Black Reason* or *Politics of Enmity*. His concept of “necropolitics”, i.e. the use of social and political power to decide who may be potentially exposed to the risk of death through forms of exclusion and of condemnation to precarious life



conditions, has definitively entered the vocabulary of contemporary theory. His work has been widely discussed in Europe, including in Germany, where he was awarded, in 2015, the important Scholl Siblings Prize, among other prestigious awards, such as the Ernst Bloch Prize.

The question arose following the invitation to Mbembe to provide the inaugural speech of the "Ruhrtriennale", a festival of music and arts in the Ruhr region. Because of the pandemics, the festival was meanwhile cancelled, but this did not prevent the continuation of the polemics caused by the invitation and triggered by an open letter by Lorenz Deutsch, a deputy of FDP (Liberal Democratic Party), of March 23 2020, to the director of the festival, Stefanie Carp. The letter levelled the charge of antisemitism against Mbembe, on the basis of two quotations taken out of context from the book *Politics of Enmity*. With the same precarious foundation, Felix Klein, the commissar of the federal government for the question of antisemitism, was quick to corroborate the charge and lend his authority to what became a ferocious campaign of defamation, in which, shortly afterwards, the Central Council of Jews in Germany also intervened, with a repetition of the same charge.

Where does Mbembe's antisemitism lie after all? In the book mentioned, reflecting on contemporary forms of surveillance and politics of segregation, a central topic in his work, the author provides as an example the Israeli settlement policy and the segregation of Palestinian territories. The fact that, although he is clear concerning the difference in scale and in context, he puts forward the Holocaust as the paramount example of the logics of segregation and exclusion in Western modernity, establishing a comparison between Nazi genocide and Apartheid politics, did but reinforce the uproar. The charge was further reinforced through the association of Mbembe with the BDS - Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, it is forbidden by law for any public institution to make available facilities to persons or groups that are involved in the BDS movement), although the sheer fact that he never expressed support to this movement is not subject to controversy.

The philosopher from Cameroon was not left alone, on the contrary, he was offered the support of authoritative voices, namely the subscribers of an "Appeal to solidarity with Achille Mbembe", made public on May 1 2020, in which, among other aspects, all "inappropriate use of the concept of antisemitism" is explicitly condemned. Well-known historians and intellectuals, prominent specialists of the Holocaust and colonialism, such as Aleida and Jan Assmann, Wolfgang Benz, Andreas Eckert, Omer Bartov, Moshe Zimmermann, Michael Rothberg or Dirk Moses, among many others, signed the



appeal, which is a model of intellectual intervention in its most noble and most necessary function of maintaining the field of public discussion clean from ideological blindness and open to the democratic respect of the human rights. A group of well-known Jewish intellectuals made a public statement as well, demanding the resignation of commissar Felix Klein.

It is not my aim to describe the polemics in any detail; meanwhile, it has ended, without those responsible for persecuting Mbembe and their supporters having at any moment judged appropriate to retract. I will just point out three closely related aspects that are fully representative of tendencies that have been gaining momentum and demand critical surveillance.

1. Cataloguing any critique of the state of Israel as a manifestation of antisemitism. It is true that the definition of antisemitism established by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), in its Budapest declaration of 2016, adopted by the German federal government in 2017 and by the German Council of University Presidents in 2019, declares that "criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic" (as against taking Israel as a target "as a Jewish collectivity"). However, the definition has made room for an enlargement of the concept which legitimizes the stigmatization of every criticism to the violent colonial practices of the state of Israel.
2. The dogma of the incomparability of the Holocaust. There are very good reasons to assert the absolute singularity of the Nazi genocide. But it is precisely such a singularity that lends to the Holocaust a paradigmatic significance; it not only legitimizes, it demands comparison with other processes of genocidal violence. Such a comparison, in the terms of the concept of "multidirectional memory" coined by Michael Rothberg, may in no way be taken as equivalent to relativizing and, even less, devaluing the significance of the Holocaust. On this topic, the declaration by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum of June 24 2019 condemning the use of Holocaust analogies - such as the simple expression "concentration camps" - brings about perverse consequences. This was highlighted in the open letter to the director of the Museum published on July 1 2019 in the [New York Times](#) and signed, among others, by Omer Bartov, Andrea Orzoff and Timothy Snyder. Vindicating their status not just as teachers and researchers, but as "global citizens", the subscribers do not hesitate in stating that a position such as the one taken by the Museum "makes learning from the past almost impossible".



3. The silence on colonialism. In the answer to his critics published on April 22 2020 in the weekly *Die Zeit*, Mbembe explains the reasons why it is impossible for him not to establish a relationship between colonialism and Holocaust. This is, apparently, the manifest cause for scandal. As a matter of fact, although recent research has amply demonstrated the many threads that connect Nazi genocide to the process of European colonialisms, the vast consensus that exists, namely in German society, on the meaning of the Holocaust is far from having been established also concerning the memory of colonialism. (1) The declaration of the Holocaust Museum quoted above completely forgets e.g. the simple fact that the word "Konzentrationslager", concentration camp, is not a Nazi creation, it surfaces, rather, in the context of the German genocidal practices in the wake of the repression of the uprising of the Nama and the Herero in German Southwest Africa in 1906. Mbembe insists, quite accurately, on the fact that the modern practices of segregation and exclusion through the establishment of racial or other differentiations based on the exercise of power and violence have colonial roots. From the point of view of an uncompromising condemnation of colonialism, the indictment of the present-day practices of the state of Israel is a logical consequence. And to condemn all forms of colonialism is not equivalent to taking on an ideological stance, it is, purely and simply, a moral imperative.

(1) See António Sousa Ribeiro (2010), "Reverses of Modernity: Post-colonialism and Post-Holocaust", in Manuela Ribeiro Sanches *et al.* (eds.), *Europe in Black and White. Immigration, Race, and Identity in the 'Old Continent'*. Bristol: Intellect, 143-53.

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