WHY BRITAIN SHOULD NOT FOLLOW GERMANY'S APPROACH TO RECOGNISING ITS RACIST LEGACY

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Abstract

Two recent articles published in the Guardian by Professor Susan Neiman and the 2018 European Book Prize winner, Géraldine Schwarz, in the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement suggest that Britain should follow Germany's example in dealing with its racist legacy. This opinion piece argues that it should not. While it is irrefutable that Germany has taken some important steps to face up to its Nazi past, to suggest that this means Germany has 'confronted its racist legacy' in a general sense is deeply misguided. I argue that this erroneous conclusion is due to a misunderstanding by both authors about what racism is, and how it operates. The UK, like any other ex-colonial power, should take a more principled and systematic approach to dealing with its racist legacy, and following the German example would undermine this.

I. Introduction

Two recent articles published in the Guardian by Professor Susan Neiman and the 2018 European Book Prize winner, Géraldine Schwarz, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement suggest that Britain should follow Germany's example in dealing with its racist legacy. This opinion piece argues that it should not. While it is irrefutable that Germany has taken some important steps to face up to its Nazi past, to suggest that this means Germany has 'confronted its racist legacy' in a general sense is deeply misguided. I argue that this erroneous conclusion is due to a misunderstanding by both authors about what racism is, and how it operates. The UK, like any other ex-colonial power, should take a more principled and systematic approach to dealing with its racist legacy, and following the German example would undermine this.

II. The Pervasive Narrative of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

The crux of Neiman's (2020) and Schwarz's (2020) articles is that Germany 'has confronted the terrors of its past' while other nations have yet to. The suggestion is therefore that Germany is leading by example and that Britain should 'learn from the Germans' (Neiman 2019). This narrative existed prior to the current Black Lives Matter movement (see MacGregor 2014). Its proponents commonly point to the existence of words (as well as the absence of similar terms in the English language) such as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) and *Mahnmal* (monuments of national shame) as proof of Germany's success story. The key problem with the argument made in both articles is that antisemitism and racism are taken as synonymous when in fact antisemitism is a type of racism.

III. The Ideology of Racism

Racism is an ideology that is ever changing, always adapting to suit the socio-political reality it operates in (Wieviorka 2020: 419-420). How racism is deployed differs between different racialised groups. However, the racialisation process can also vary over

time within a particular group. For example, early medieval Christian writing justified the 'inferiority' of Africans by associating their blackness with sin (Miles and Brown 2003: 26). Then, in the eighteenth century the environmentalist theory postulated that the climate inhabited by Africans, their societies and their habits of living were actually the reasons for their 'savagery' (Miles and Brown 2003: 38). Thereafter, during what is ironically referred to as the era of European Enlightenment, 'race science' justified the hierarchy of 'races' as a 'natural' phenomenon with Africans simply deemed 'non-civilisable' (Miles and Brown 2003: 40-41).

Meanwhile, the narratives through which Jews have been othered and which have been used to justify antisemitic behaviour have also changed over time. That said, they have primarily relied on cultural (religious) characteristics rather than somatic features. While in Roman times Jews were considered suspect because their monotheistic creed contradicted the polytheistic nature of Roman belief, early Christians premised their othering on the idea that Jewish people were responsible for the killing of Christ (Miles and Brown 2003: 30). Antisemitic tropes later developed to imagine Jews as insidious and disloyal capitalists (Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is one such example of this representation) with no attachment to the *Volk*.

While the markers of inherent negative characteristics used to devise discrete 'races' are distinct (colour and religion), these fluctuating racialisation processes share a common foundation that 'attributes a negative evaluation' to the racialised group (Miles and Brown 2003: 8) while ascribing positive characteristics to the (White) group doing the racialising.

This is not to suggest that the targets of biological and cultural racism (Modood 2005; see also Modood 1992; Modood *et al*. 1994) necessarily experience the same outcome. The point is simply to highlight that 'race', as is widely known in academia, is a social construct that can be premised on both phenotypical as well as cultural/religious traits. Antisemitism is thus *one* form of racism (see also Jansen and Meer 2020: 2), not the *only* form of racism. Hence, to claim that Germany has 'confronted its racist legacy' because it addressed the brutality of the Shoah would only be true if antisemitism was the only form of racism Germany has practiced. The country's often overlooked colonial history in East, South and South West Africa (i.e. extending to modern day Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, Tanzania, Kenya, Burundi, Nigeria, Namibia to name but a few) between 1884/85-1919 show this to be far from being the case.

IV. Namibia: An example of German racism that has not been adequately confronted

Between 1904 and 1907/8, Germany massacred three quarters of the Herero population and fifty per cent of the Nama people in Namibia, including men, women and children (Images, Lettres et Sons 2017). Water supplies were poisoned so that the local population would die of thirst, and surviving women were forced into sexual slavery to satisfy the urges of German soldiers and civilians. Other survivors, including women and children were sent to concentration camps and enslaved to work for the military and private German companies (Sarkin-Hughes 2011). After the genocide, the dead were decapitated and their heads given to the surviving womenfolk of the Herero people to boil and scalp so the skulls could be taken to Germany (Al Jazeera 2018).

Approximately 100,000 skulls were transported back to Europe in the interest of 'race science' to 'prove the superiority' of Whites over Blacks. Leaders of the Herero people have been campaigning to get the skulls of their ancestors returned since 2008 (Shigwedha 2018: 73). This has been a long and arduous process with the German government refusing to engage directly with the affected communities when the campaign began. The first repatriation of skulls took place in 2011, with subsequent ones in 2014 and 2018. While the German government has accepted 'moral responsibility', it still refuses to apologise for the genocide; it is said to be still 'considering how to apologise'. Hopes for an apology were dampened once again in June 2020 when the German government refused to corroborate President Geingob's announcement that it was finally ready to say sorry (Deutsche Welle 2020a).

If an essential step to 'coming to terms with the past' is, as Schwarz (2020) argues in her article, to take 'the perspective of the victim, the oppressed, the occupied, the humiliated. And being able to apologise', it is difficult to see how Germany can be said to be living its much celebrated term, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Furthermore, not only are streets, plazas, and statues commemorating the legacies of colonialists like Adolf Lüderitz still in place across the country to this day (Deutsche Welle 2020b), but Germany has also refused to engage in any serious discussion on reparations (Deutsche Welle 2020c). It is worth noting that reparations are not a foreign concept to Germany as they already provide 'annual payments to Holocaust victims and their descendants' (U.S. Department of State 2019: 6). All this is hardly the sign of a country that has 'confronted its racist legacy'.

V. Racism in Germany Today

The implication of the two Guardian articles and, more broadly, of the pervasive narrative that Germany has appropriately come to terms with its racist legacy, is that the country is better positioned to deal with racism today. However, evidence of systemic racism suggests that this is not the case. In Germany, eight of the country's sixteen states - Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Bremen, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Saarland - have legislated to ban the wearing of religious clothing by public primary school teachers (1). The idea is that teachers, as representative of the state, should abide by the principle of neutrality. However, '[f]ive of the states with religious clothing bans - Baden-Württemberg, Saarland, Hesse, Bavaria, and North Rhine-Westphalia - contain an exception for Christian symbols and clothing, phrased in references to the exhibition or representation of Christian-Western educational values, beliefs, and traditions' (Human Rights Watch 2009: 25-26). In Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Saarland not only is Christian attire spared but the kippa is also permissible because, unlike the hijab, it is deemed (without further explanation) not to be in 'breach of the neutrality requirement' (Human Rights Watch 2009: 28). These exemptions and the language used during the debates preceding the enactment of legislative change strongly suggest that the real target - rather than achieving neutrality - is the banning of clothing associated with a particular group, Muslims.

In fact, in both North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria official hearings referred to the 'headscarf ban' whereas in Hesse 'the chairman of the CDU party explained, "[w]ith the draft law introduced by us we

want to forbid Hessian teachers and civil servants from wearing the Islamic headscarf"' (cited in Human Rights Watch 2009: 29). In Baden-Württemberg, legislators went so far as to describe the headscarf as 'a fundamentalist statement for a theocratic political system' (quoted in Human Rights Watch 2009: 28). Not only have these bans been introduced, but challenges to the ban - all by Muslims women who wear the headscarf - have largely been upheld by the courts despite Germany's Constitutional Court ruling in 2015 that a blanket ban on the hijab would contravene the right to religious freedom (2) (BBC 2015). For example, in 2018, the Berlin judiciary upheld the removal of a primary school teacher from her post for wearing the hijab (Deutsche Welle 2018).

It is also not clear that contemporary social attitudes towards minorities in Germany are any better than in the UK. A Pew Research Centre (2019) report found that 18% of people in the UK had an unfavourable view of Muslims. In Germany it was one in four. In both countries 6% of the population were found to hold negative views of Jews. Meanwhile, 37% of Germans and 23% of Brits had unfavourable views of Romas. In 2018, Pew Research Centre also found that nearly one in two individuals in the UK (47%) and Germany (45%) would not welcome a Muslim into their family. For Jews it was 31% across both countries. In 2019, the survey *Verlorene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2018/19* by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, a German political foundation associated with but independent of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, found that 15% of Germans either agree or strongly agree that emigrating Germans should occupy a better social position than the local population simply on account of their

heritage. In Britain, the 2014 European Social Survey found that 18% of Britons agreed with the statement that 'some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent' (Kelley *et al.* 2017: 8). The 2019 survey also shows that 30% of Germans either agree or strongly agree that the number of Muslims in Germany makes them feel 'like a stranger in their own country'. It is worth keeping in mind that Muslims represent, as they do in the UK, only around 6% of the total population (Pew Research Centre 2017). Finally, while 22% of Britons in 2019 believed that the number of immigrants in the country 'should be reduced a lot' (Blinder and Richards 2020), the aforementioned survey found that 25% of Germans either agree or completely agree with the statement that there were 'too many foreigners' in their country.

In fact, Germany is among the European countries that most systematically overestimate the level of inward migration. On average, in 2016, Germans estimated that immigration levels were 14 percentage points higher than they actually were (12%). Britons had overestimated the real level (13%) by 12 percentage points (Duffy 2019: 99). When asked to estimate the number of Muslims in the country, Germans estimated the proportion to be four times higher than actual levels, while in Britain estimates were three times higher (Duffy 2019: 113). Perhaps most strikingly, when asked to estimate how the Muslim population would grow between 2016 and 2020, on average, Germans believed Muslims would account for more than one in three people in the country. In other words, they projected, based on their already hugely overestimated figure of the number of Muslims in the county, that in four years, the proportion of Muslims in Germany would grow by a whopping ten percentage

points. To be clear, Muslims accounted for 1 in 17 in 2016, and Germans projected that they would account for 1 in 3 by 2020. Understanding how people envisage demographic change often gives an appreciation of a society's attitude towards 'the other'. Indeed, these overestimates are insightful 'because they are related to our wider views of immigration and our political preferences: those who overestimate the scale of immigration tend to have more negative views of its impact' (Duffy 2019: 100) and are thus less accepting of people who don't look like them.

The decision by Mesut Özil, the German football international of Turkish ancestry, to retire from playing for the national team as a result of racism he suffered and the silence of the Deutsche Fußball Bund (Deutsche Welle 2019) puts a face to these statistics. The societal attitudes are also captured by the backlash back in 2013 when a father of Eritrean origin campaigned for a children's book to remove the n-word from its publications so that black kids like his daughter didn't have to be insulted each time they read the book. Nearly half of Germans (48%) objected to the removal of the racist term claiming that it was tantamount to censorship (Connolly 2013; see also Evans 2013). Finally, the Minister of Interior, Building and Community, Horst Seehofer, declaring in 2018 that 'Islam does not belong in Germany' is another example of the reality of xenophobic and anti-Muslim attitudes in the country (Huggler 2018). Overall, the evidence clearly suggests that Germany and Britain do not appear to share dissimilar social attitudes towards migrants and minority ethnic groups. In fact, in many instances Germany is worse than Britain and, in any case, it does not appear to have stamped out institutional racism.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

If we are to seize the current energy by the Black Lives Matter movement and take serious steps to tackle racism at both an individual and structural level, it is important for every society to take a critical look at itself. Otherwise we will not fully grasp the complexities and nuances underlying racism, and consequently confuse surface and cosmetic change for real transformation.

We thus have to acknowledge that groups are not all racialised in the same way and that they therefore suffer racism differently. Neither Neiman (2020) nor Schwarz (2020) acknowledge this. As such, facing one brutal part of its history (as Germany has done with antisemitism) does not mean that a country has faced its racist history in its entirety. This is tantamount to what Neiman (2020) calls a 'falsification of history'.

A country should not be selective in the types of racism or the history it acknowledges. It is in this vain that I argue that Britain should not follow Germany's example. Doing so would equate to Britain acknowledging the brutality of the slave trade but ignoring its pillaging of India (including modern day Pakistan and Bangladesh), its role in the Bengal Famine which led to 4 million deaths, its setting up of concentration camps in South Africa during the Boer war, the Mau Mau massacre in Kenya, as well as the atrocities of the Opium Wars in China to name but a few of its crimes. Britain should confront all of its past racist criminalities, commemorate the memory of all the victims, remove statues and emblems that glorify all of these atrocities, and take meaningful steps to compensate surviving affected communities and stamp out the inequalities they face today. Therefore,

rather than champion Germany's haphazard strategy to dealing with its racist legacy, we need to demand that ex-colonial powers, like Britain, take a more principled and systematic approach.

Notes

(1) In Baden-Württemberg and Berlin the ban is extended to kindergarten teachers, and in Berlin and Hesse the ban extends to civil servants too. See Human Rights Watch (2009: 25) for further details.
(2) It is worth noting that, in February 2020, the Federal Constitutional Courts also upheld a ban on the hijab for trainee lawyers.

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Biography

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