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collective amnesia and continuous anti-black racism in Germany: how the colonial past, and a reluctance to come to terms with it, causes daily difficulties and why historical learning alone does not help. an essay.

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The colonial past and the postcolonial present are still marginalized topics in Germany. Our school system, universities, teacher education, but also general society and government decisions are all complicit in this. In our essay, we discuss some very recent examples to show how current racism against Black People and People of Colour (BPoC) in Germany is connected to the past that we have not dealt with.

Keywords: Black People and People of Colour, BPoC, colonialism, Germany, racism, teacher education

Europe in the spring of 2022: Russia is waging a war of aggression in Ukraine that violates international law. The refugees arriving in Berlin tell of how they escaped the bombs and shelling and how parts of their families stayed behind as soldiers. Despite all the solidarity and willingness to help, it is already evident in the first days of the war that – as always – racism has a considerable influence on opportunities and scope for action, even more so during situations of war and flight. The students from Congo and Cameroon arriving from Kiev, whom my friend and I took in, report racist discrimination at bus stations in the border regions. They were repeatedly denied boarding because they were not 'real' Ukrainian refugees. As if through a burning glass, we realize in such situations that in this world racism is a determining factor between participation or exclusion and often between life and death every day. People who live as *white*[1] – read 'and privileged' – Europeans have long been able to look the other way or ignore the problem but now, the reality has arrived on our fold-out sofas in Berlin and elsewhere. After more than two months of this murderous war, neither Germany nor the EU can yet bring themselves to give third-country nationals assurances, for example, that they will be able to continue the studies they started in Ukraine.

The same tendency ignorance paired with a lack of reflection on one's own privileges and a lack of will to change, unfortunately also applies to several university research fields that would like to be spearheads of innovation but are often bastions of racism (and classism and sexism!) or, as Natasha Kelly put it, "Horte des Übels" (nuclei of evil) (Kelly, 2021). Germany remains a deeply racist society and this is – as we will show – linked to our colonial past or rather a certain amnesia about this past.

Teacher education often perpetuates this system and its power dynamics. History didactics as well as civic education that try to be critical of racism continue to eke out a niche existence[2], the voices

of Black People and People of Colour remain unheard, our disciplines perpetuate discrimination that continues to run primarily along the categories of difference: race, class and gender. A brief example to substantiate this perception comes from a recent issue of "Geschichte lernen", one of the largest history didactic journals aimed at researchers as well as at practitioners with a broad editorial team of well-connected professors of teacher education. This spring, the journal published a lesson plan idea in which a *white* author suggests that students play a bus ride situation in the segregated USA of the pre-civil rights movement (Jöhnck, 2022, pp. 33–37). The role cards read for example:

> You are the driver of a bus, and you stop at a bus stop. Several passengers are getting on. You greet white passengers in a very friendly way, black passengers you do not greet at all. You don't get involved in conversations between passengers.

Another card reads:

> You are a person with white skin. You get on the bus. In the middle of the bus there are two black people sitting next to each other. You go up to them. You ask them to give you both seats because you are white. Actually, you only need one seat. But you don't want to sit next to a person with black skin.

The young people are thus encouraged to rehearse racist actions and racist language in their roles. Of course, there is also no language sensitivity. For example, no comment is made on the problematic usage of the words "schwarz" (black) und "weiß" (white) throughout the article. A situation is initiated in which students who take their roles seriously can engage in racist acts of language (or even physical acts). This is even more worrying because it is suggested as an activity for pupils with special educational needs. Imagine this situation transposed to other subject areas of historical-political education. Could a role play card in the field of Holocaust education read: "You are a policeman and are working on deportation lists today. Interact with the mother of the Jewish family"? Or "You are a neighbour of the Jewish family and are emphatically friendly to the policemen, but you do not greet your Jewish neighbours"?

This exaggeration hopes to illustrate what is going wrong in the field of anti-Black racism and the coming to terms with post-colonial conditions in Germany (Not that everything is going well in anti-anti-Semitism work (not at all!), but to diametrically oppose German citizens of Jewish faith to the majority population in a linguistically insensitive way and to promote anti-Semitic thought patterns by assuming roles would probably have come to the attention of at least the editors or publishers).

Explanatory Approaches

Thus, the question arises as to where this lack of awareness comes from, how the connection between collective amnesia in the field of colonialism and continuous anti-Black racism is dealt with in social science didactics, and where the blind spots of teacher education and hence of school mediation practice lie.

The lack of awareness can certainly be explained by the fact that textbooks continue to present a dichotomizing and hierarchizing representation of Europeans and people from other continents in

almost all subject areas. Whether it is the voyages of Columbus, the trade with enslaved people, colonialism, etc., in almost all current textbooks there is a lack of racism-critical/ anti-racist reflections on the sources. *White* people are predominantly portrayed as progressive, developed, productive, industrious, etc. and are the agents. Meanwhile, the 'discovered' and conquered remain "silent groups" [3], whose backwardness and laziness allows the crimes committed against them seemingly to be justifiable. The ductus of superiority of this *white* narrative of progress, which is also reflected in political education in paternalistic patterns of interpretation and various topics ('development aid', 'child labour', etc.), is inherent in all structures of the German school system.

Further empirical findings on teaching practices, which go beyond textbook analysis, also show that the patterns of interpretation of students after lessons in the subject area are also not well reflected and too uncritical. In his dissertation, Patrick Mielke conducted interviews with students after lessons on the topic of colonialism and imperialism, in which the students made statements such as "Well, Germany didn't start anything until relatively late, very late […] and that's why everything good was already gone." (Mielke, 2020, p. 81) There is a clear interpretation in this regret about a missed opportunity. People in Germany know very little about German colonialism, play it down and view it under categories of (economic) usefulness for the colonizers. Most interpretations of colonialism are strongly influenced by economics – racism is clearly subordinated or even suppressed. This form of collective historical amnesia that prevails in this thematic field is one of the main reasons for the continuous anti-Black racism, which would certainly be more of a taboo and more sanctioned by society if we had a different form of collective memory and culture of remembrance. The destruction of cultures, the genocides and judicial scandals are hardly dealt with or addressed in the German education system or in our society. This also applies to the governments, which hardly and only very hesitantly tackle apologies and reparations to African countries which were affected by Germany's colonial rule.

A good example from which we can see how long the German state got away without coming to terms with colonial judicial scandals, is the petition currently being filed by Jean-Pierre Felix Eyoum on behalf of his great-granduncle Rudolf Duala Manga Bell.

> Rudolf Duala Manga Bell spent part of his youth in Germany, where he went to school and later wanted to study law. The German Empire later instrumentalised him as a liaison in the then German colony of Cameroon. He took peaceful action against increasingly brutal attacks by the colonial administration, using the rule of law. When the empire finally forbade him to leave Cameroon, he sent his confidant Ngoso Din to Germany as an emissary to fight – peacefully – against plans to establish an apartheid system in their hometown of Douala. To get rid of the inconvenient resisters, Duala Manga Bell and Ngoso Din were sentenced to death in a sham trial for high treason and executed by the Germans in 1914. Neither has been rehabilitated by the federal government to this day. (Blind Spots in the Sun, 2022)

There is no meaningful explanation for the still missing amnesty in a colonial justice scandal, in which even then (!) existing law was violated.

At the same time, in the field of anti-Black racism we are confronted with every day (re)traumatisation of those affected. In addition to M-pharmacies[4], N-kisses[5] etc., sculptures and

images from the colonial-era imagery are ubiquitously displayed and printed. Exoticism and racism are justified as a style of furnishing ('colonial style'). To morally legitimize the crimes of colonialism and to be able to continue them with a clear conscience, Europe invented its own Africa. Language was an important instrument to portray the continent as the homogeneous and inferior Other. BPoCs were dehumanized and racially categorized. Orientation was provided by naming *Black* people with the N- and M-word. Since the crimes of colonialism have not been dealt with before now, racist foreign names are still used today without reflection and with a shocking matter-of-factness. After the Second World War, educational work focused almost exclusively on anti-Semitism and coming to terms with the Shoah. For the German population, anti-Semitism is often synonymous with racism and since Germany, as the 'world champion of remembrance', often claims such an apparently successful reappraisal, the belief that Germany no longer has any problems with racism has become entrenched.

Experience shows that many *white* people still have a nostalgic, positive association with colonialism. The uncritical use of the M-word for product names, in street and pharmacy names leads to frequent reproduction of the term and gives it an apparent "normality" that makes it impossible for those affected to successfully intervene against its continued use. Stories about the M-word that claim that it is meant to honour Saint Mauritius or African medicine have turned out to be untenable upon closer examination, but they build an additional impregnable protective wall against the M-word and have the effect of racist mockery on affected people. At the same time, these stories provide the basis for gaslighting and victim blaming, should an affected person try to defend themselves against the continued use of the M-word. This deters many affected people from doing just that.

Lastly, one of the most important practices is the publicly visible culture of history in the form of memorials, which could have a broad social impact. Here, the lack of confrontation with colonialism becomes abundantly clear. There is still no central place of remembrance for all the *Black* people who were killed by German colonialism, whose cultures and identities were destroyed and who are still suffering the consequences on the African continent today. In short, we as a society do not commemorate the victims of the crimes of colonialism.

Conclusion

As a university teacher and an activist, it is our concern to pass on to students and young people the sense that history is always political. It is partly because of this mindset that our department of History Didactics and my colleague from Civic Education at the University of Marburg are organizing a special semester focusing on "Decolonize Teacher Education!". Seminars, field trips and a summer school will take place between April and July 2022. We hope to raise awareness among our students, the future multipliers, who will then be able to bring this new spirit into schools.

Studying history must include developing a moral compass to judge situations and the attitude not to remain silent when we see war, injustice, and racism. No one should teach history in school while trying to block out current world events. However, many approaches to teaching history and the associated theories still lack the present-oriented perspective that helps to act in the here and now against the long legacy of colonialism in the form of everyday racism. In our postcolonial world, this category of exclusion is still one of the most, if not the most, incisive and combines with class, gender and other modes of difference (religion, body, age, sexuality, etc.) to form a powerful system

of domination that no one can escape. In this respect, only a critique of racism that is also intersectional does justice to historical-political education. An intersectional critique of racism should become a compulsory part of teacher training as a cross-sectional task in all school subjects, so that we can fully recognize and specifically fight racism in our education system and our society. Because we cannot afford further decades of collective amnesia and anti-Black racism, as the global political situation once again proves in all urgency!

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1. We italicize the terms *white* and *Black* to indicate their construction as markers of difference and not as real skin tones. In addition, the B in Black is capitalized to refer to this empowering self-designation.
2. However, there are positive exceptions: for example, Karim Fereidooni (Bochum), who researches the critique of racism and political education.
3. As early as the 1970s, Klaus Bergmann recognized and criticized the problem of silent groups that are not given agency by (German-speaking) historiography, which is fixated on written sources, and the problem that no real multi-perspectivity can emerge in this way.
4. We want to avoid using degrading words in order not to reproduce them. Readers who are not familiar with the debate on the M-word in Germany, can find more information in this article written in English: Bowry, 2021.
5. For example, in 2021, a waitress at the Rietburgbahn restaurant in the Southern Palatinate, a popular tourist destination, pointed out to a family with a *Black* child who were ordering dessert that she would charge them more if they ordered the dessert as a chocolate foam kiss, whereas she would give them a discount if they ordered it as an M-kiss and it would be for free if ordered as an N-kiss. The real scandal, however, was not that a *white* waitress spoiled the weekend of a young family with a small child by using racist and degrading language, but the absurd and numerous letters to the editor of the newspaper "Die Rheinpfalz" from the *white* dominated society, in which people who were not affected thought they could judge whether there was any racism here and why the waitress should be defended (Houshami, 2021).