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The Other Side of *Erinnerungskultur*: About the Concept of History in German and Global Discourses on Memory and Human Rights

by Valentin Schwarz

Source: Deutschland im Herbst

The content of this text is a condensed version of the arguments presented in my MA thesis, which I handed in under the same title in November 2023.

Gabi Teichert is dissatisfied. The protagonist of Alexander Kluge's film *Die Patriotin* (1979) teaches history at a high school. She believes that no suitable material for her lessons can be found in the German past. By suitable she means: positive. An identity, values, accomplishments—something that she can teach her students with a clear conscience. However, looking at the history of her country, she sees only a series of catastrophes, of devastating events, culminating in National Socialism, the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Die Patriotin was released in 1979 and is mostly set in this period and the years immediately before. The film is marked by the West German crises of that era, above all the so-called 'German

Autumn’. The term refers to the kidnapping of industry bigwig Hanns Martin Schleyer and a Lufthansa airplane by the Red Army Faction (RAF),[1] as well as the state’s reaction to it. Even in the post-war period, with its continuities that emerged from the Nazi regime, the ‘economic miracle’ based on the exploitation of labor and, above all, the politically heated atmosphere of the 1970s, Gabi Teichert sees nothing suitable for history lessons.

From today’s perspective, however, the situation seems to have changed, as the title of a work by historian Edgar Wolfrum implies. The Federal Republic is now often seen as a “successful democracy”[2] whose development provides positive material for school lessons. An important factor is how the nation dealt with its own terrible history. The story goes like this: After the end of the Second World War, the German public was for a while largely silent about its past. This only changed in the wake of the protests of the 1968 movement.[3] Here, the personal and ideological entanglements between the Federal Republic and the Nazi regime were consistently denounced. This development finally solidified after the ‘Historikerstreit’ of 1986 and 87, in which the philosopher Jürgen Habermas argued against the historian Ernst Nolte and his nationalist historical revisionism. In this context, the *singularity thesis* emerged. Depending on the interpretation, it describes the incomparability or the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In the field of politics of memory, this also set the stage for the definitive return of a shortly thereafter reunified Germany to the circle of respected Western nations.

With Walter Benjamin in mind, such linear narratives of progress should generally be questioned as, according to the philosopher, they manifest a history of victors.[4] In addition, voices that criticize the current state of German memory culture (*Erinnerungskultur)* are becoming more frequent. The historian Dirk Moses, for example, writes of a “German catechism”.[5] In a controversial essay, he describes a ritualized way of dealing with the past. According to him, this marginalizes the positions of minorities in a post-migrant society. Defenders of the singularity thesis respond by accusing Moses’ and similar arguments of at least resembling anti-Semitic patterns. Since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in the Gaza Strip, this already evident constellation has become even more pronounced.

Violence After the End of History

This polarization is of concrete foreign and cultural policy relevance due to the nexus Germany-Israel-Palestine. Furthermore, the example of the German memory culture can also be used to reflect on different concepts of history on an abstract level. One theoretical entry point is US philosopher Robert Meister's book *After Evil*. There he criticizes the stance of treating the past as a terrible evil, but also as an evil that has actually passed. Following Meister's Marxist interpretation, injustices in capitalism cannot be reduced to a specific moment in time. Instead, they are structurally perpetuated.[6]

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek's terminology helps to explain this. He distinguishes between a subjective and an objective perspective on violence.[7] According to him, violence seen from a subjective viewpoint is caused by the actions of individual actors—"social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds".[8] Objectively approached violence, on the other hand, emerges from social conditions and is, therefore, more systemic than individual. Following Žižek, it would be wrong to think of it as two mutually exclusive categories. Instead, violence always has different characteristics. The perspective determines which of these are perceived.

Meister's main object of criticism is something he calls 'Human Rights Discourse'. According to his book, it is an argumentative pattern that has prevailed in the Western political public sphere, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union.[9] In it, the subjective perspective on violence dominates. The visible outcomes of already occurred violence are morally condemned, but not politically and historically contextualized. The basic assumption is that around 1989 a "[radical change in values] in the name of human rights"[10] took place in Western democracies, as cultural scientist Aleida Assmann writes. Her point is that the atrocities of the ideologically influenced 20th century—supposedly triggered by the cycle of revolution and counter-revolution—became part of a terrible past. Now however, we are living in the time "after evil"—that's the assumption underlying Human Rights Discourse according to Meister. The lesson from history would therefore be to remember past evil and to fight its possible return on time.[11]

After Evil was published in 2011. It is visibly influenced by US foreign policy in the Bush era and the early Obama years. After the 'end of history' proclaimed by economist Francis Fukuyama, the battle of the systems seemed to have been won;[12] the hegemonic role of the US-led West benefited a universal humanity, according to its own conviction; the pillars of the resulting world order were therefore human rights and the global, neoliberal economic system. In this understanding, both served to protect humanity against the return of the evil past. To preserve this state of affairs, it was now necessary to fight the enemies of this world order rhetorically and sometimes militarily as well. In this context, a rhetorical pattern developed of legitimizing one's own human rights violations by claiming that they were directed against fundamental enemies of human rights. This was most evident in the so-called War on Terror[13] after the attacks of September 11, 2001. George W. Bush increasingly spoke of an American responsibility to rid the world of evil. He did so in regard to the Iraq war, which was obviously in violation of international law. According to Meister, this creates a dichotomy. On the one side are those who defend human rights. It is their duty to put a stop to those who disregard human rights—even by military means if necessary.[14]

Meister's reflections are linked to the German memory culture in two ways. Firstly, because he describes how the local German way of dealing with the past serves as a model for the global Human Rights Discourse. The formula it introduces goes like this: the time of one's own atrocities has apparently passed, because these acts are condemned today. Those who remember and mourn are no longer perpetrators, beneficiaries or bystanders, but witnesses to past atrocities—and therefore on the side of the good.[15] On the other hand, global events also have an impact on the German case, according to Meister. This mainly refers to Israel's military actions. In the logic of Human Rights Discourse, after the Holocaust the Jewish state stands paradigmatically for the figure of the victim. This seemingly creates legitimacy for the Israeli government's decisions and in many cases discredits criticism of them.[16] An example are the German debates about alleged left-wing extremist or post-colonial anti-Semitism. Using the controversy surrounding *documenta fifteen* as a case study, the philosopher Ana Teixeira Pinto writes about this: "[It] is the way a global cultural war plays out locally. What Germany defends is not its Jewish citizenry [...] but a specific regulative discourse upon which 'the racial order of modernity rests'."[17] Following her, it is therefore a defense mechanism for a western-hierarchical worldview.

According to anthropologist Sultan Doughan and cultural scientist Hanan Toukan, one consequence of that interrelation is that Palestinian voices are often perceived as a threat in the German public sphere. The two theorists write: "Through their intimate connections with the knock-on effects of German genocide, they are an unwelcome reminder that this past is not all in the past."[18] The expulsions in the context of the Nakba[19], the decades of statelessness of Palestinians, the situation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and in the camps in Lebanon: all of this Doughan and Toukan implicitly connect to the Holocaust via the context of the Israeli state's founding. In this argument, the suffering of many Palestinians is indirectly caused to a certain extent by German crimes, too. The Palestinian issue thus stands for the structural consequences of the past, which still persist today. This is why, according to Doughan and Toukan, Palestinians often find themselves accused of being susceptible to anti-Semitism simply because of their supposed identity in the German public sphere. They complicate the idea that Germany first absorbed its singular guilt and then worked through it in part by showing solidarity with Israel.

Scenes of Two Funerals

Cracks are appearing in the linear progress narrative of Germany's reappraisal of its history. To further reflect on it, a temporal and methodological shift in perspective is interesting. The film *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978) is positioned at a historical threshold in this regard. When it was released, the 1968 movement had already established a conversation on the Nazi past in the West German public sphere. On the other hand, the direction of the debate seemed by no means fixed. An intensification of authoritarian tendencies, potentially leading to another uninhibited fascist state, lingered as a dangerous possibility.

The context: In the fall of 1977, the left-wing extremist Red Army Faction (RAF) initially kidnapped the chairman of the Federation of German Industries, Hanns Martin Schleyer. Their aim was to secure the release of imprisoned RAF members. The SPD-led West German government under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt responded with intensive searches and far-reaching anti-terrorism measures but did not respond to the kidnappers' demands. To increase the pressure even further, fighters from a subgroup of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which was allied with the RAF, hijacked an aircraft of the German company Lufthansa in the Somali capital Mogadishu. In the night leading up to October 18, a special unit of the German Federal Police stormed the plane and freed the hostages. On the morning of the same day, prominent RAF members Jan-Carl Raspe, Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader were found dead in their cells in a high-security prison in Stuttgart-Stammheim. One day later, the RAF announced the murder of Schleyer. At the same time, the heated public debate increasingly polarized West German society.

Deutschland im Herbst was released a few months later and is a joint project by various German filmmakers. The previously mentioned history teacher Gabi Teichert also appears in it for the first time. Episodes of different directors are framed by two documentary scenes of two funerals in Stuttgart, for which Alexander Kluge and Volker Schlöndorff are responsible. The film begins with footage of the official state ceremony in honor of the murdered Schleyer. Heavily armed police forces protect the political and economic leaders at the event from the perceived terrorist threat lurking outside. The quasi-militarized police are also present at the funeral of Baader, Ensslin and Raspe, which is shown at the end of the film. However, there is a marked contrast. At the Dornhalden cemetery, where the RAF-members are buried, the police forces 'surround' the mourners. The goal this time, it seems, is to protect the outside world from the participants of the funeral themselves. The film thus refers to the discursive demarcation line connected to the concept of terrorism visible around that time. Left-wingers feared that they would have to observe the Federal Republic drifting towards an authoritarian police state, justified by the state of emergency in the fight against the RAF.[20]

While at Schleyer's funeral the police watch out for danger from the outside (left), at the Dornhalden cemetery they focus on the mourners themselves (right). Source: Deutschland im Herbst.

Looking at it from today, at first glance, this fear does not seem to have come true—at least not to its full extent. However, the situation could be assessed somewhat differently using the terminology introduced by Dirk Moses in his work *The Problems of Genocide*. There he distinguishes between two forms of what he calls the pursuit of permanent security. This concept refers to violent political transgressions by a state intending to permanently cement its own security interests.[21] According to Moses, such transgressions can take on an illiberal form. Thereby he means the preventive suppression or even killing of groups that allegedly represent a potential danger from—very importantly—the perspective of the perpetrators. Moses includes genocides in this category, with the Holocaust as its paradigmatic form. The counterpart for him is the liberal pursuit of permanent security. Its dialectic begins by treating forms of the illiberal pursuit of permanent security as an absolute evil.[22] Such rhetoric, as Meister describes in his critique of Human Rights Discourse, excludes certain groups from the liberal idea of a universal humanity.[23]

Based on Meister and Moses, one could argue that the patterns of today's discursive demarcation lines are similar to those that could be observed in the German Autumn. However, the national and global levels are now intertwined to a greater extent than they were back then, as the German discussions about Israel and Palestine in particular illustrate.[24] Demarcation lines run in various constellations between a Western world community and the enemies of humanity, between progressive democracies and backward autocracies, between Christian values and the Islamic threat or between the Global North and the Global South. From this perspective, Human Rights Discourse and the German memory culture provide arguments to legitimize a Western liberal permanent security project. That relation can be connected to the triumph of neoliberalism in recent decades. Teixeira Pinto writes: “Saturated by colonial formations, principles like openness, universalism, humanism, freedom and individualism function in lockstep with the development of a globally-integrated economy rooted in Western hegemony.”[25]

This observation is linked to another strand of criticism that *Deutschland im Herbst* hints at. The film repeatedly focuses on the social conditions in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s and on a tradition of left-wing resistance in Germany. This happens, for example, through scenes with guest workers and songs dedicated to icons of the workers’ movement such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht or Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. One possible interpretation is that Kluge and his collaborators wanted to counteract the marginalization of left-wing positions in the wake of the German Autumn. Today, the political-economic demands of the protest movement of that time are mostly discredited by the fact that they were discursively interwoven with the violence of the RAF—and thus on the wrong side of the demarcation line surrounding terrorism. On the other hand, breaking the silence about the German past and denouncing the personal continuities between the Nazi regime and the Federal Republic is a widely acknowledged historical merit of the 68-generation.[26]

This points towards the following conclusion: If the material for history lessons is supposed to have improved since the German Autumn, then the social changes are to be found not in the structure of the political economy, but in the discourse on memory. Instead of a state full of old Nazis in a divided nation, the Federal Republic is now seen as a consolidated democracy playing a leading role in Europe. That it has—at least since the ‘Historikerstreit’—supposedly been exemplary in its commemoration of the Holocaust works as a confirmation. It would be conceivable to see the terror of the RAF as a symptom of unjust structures and social antagonisms—a perspective *Deutschland im Herbst* frequently refers to. Similarly, in the case of nationalist swings to the right and geopolitical outbreaks of violence today, the question could be raised as to what extent such developments might be linked to the global triumph of neoliberalism, for example. However, the public reaction in the German or Western public was and is mostly a different one: the vehement defence of the status quo.

The Age of Postponement

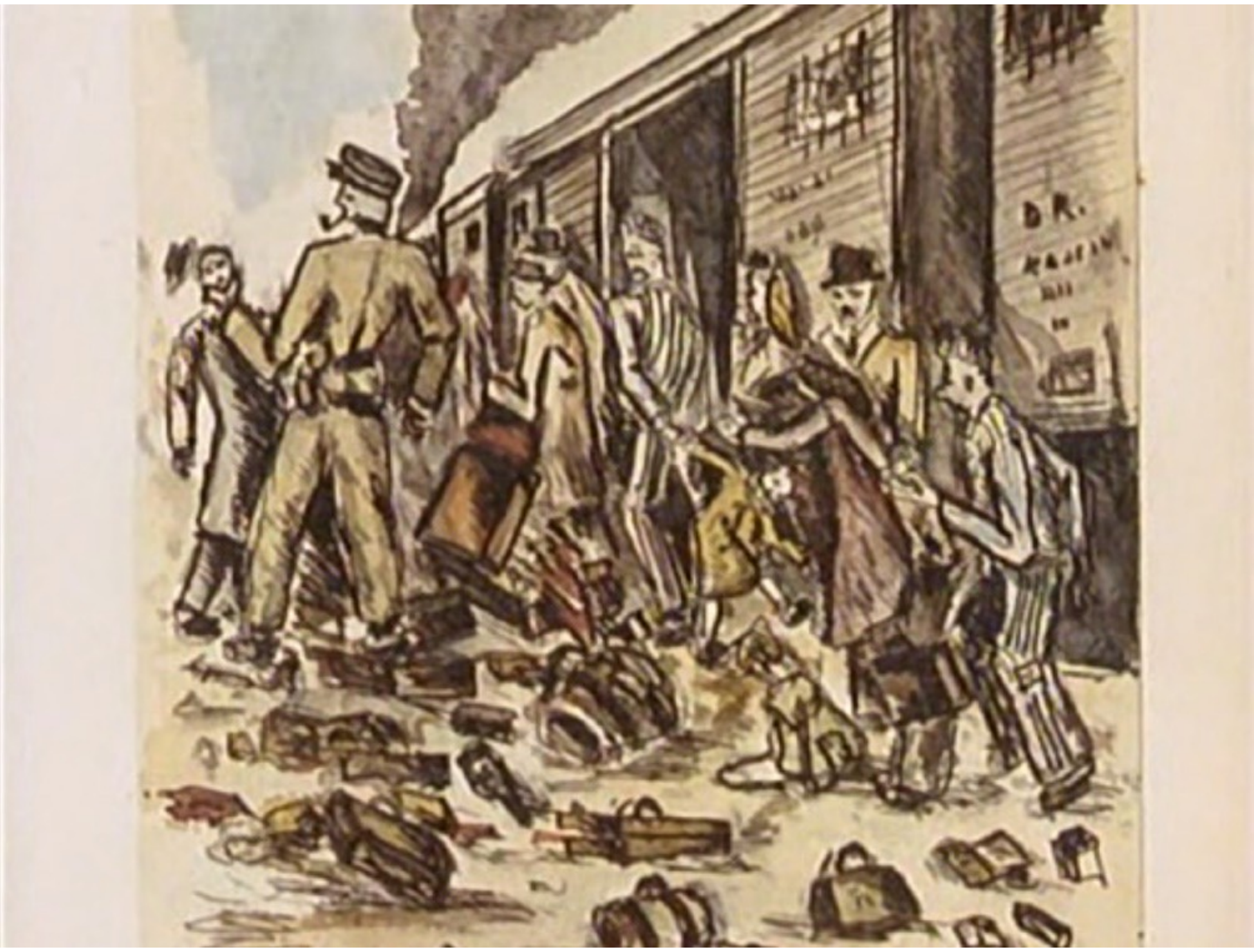
The concept of history apparent in Human Rights Discourse and the German memory culture is an ambivalent one. It can be broken down even more precisely with the help of the film *Bilder der Welt und Inschriften des Krieges* (1988). In this work, director Harun Farocki deals in an essayistic form with the subject of capturing images. A key passage is a sequence of photographs of

Auschwitz taken by American reconnaissance planes in 1944. In theory, there was evidence for the existence of the concentration camp, and also sufficient information to make it a military target. However, the evaluators did not recognize what was to be seen in the pictures. The Allies did not bomb the camps or their access routes until the end of the war. Here, the link to *After Evil* is obvious. According to Meister, the narrative of Human Rights Discourse states that today's defenders of human rights would have acted (differently) if they had faced past evil with their current knowledge. Underlying it is the belief that a change in values has occurred in Western democracies. It specifically revolves around the idea of human rights, as Assmann writes.[27] Even those who would have been classified as beneficiaries of historical injustices under different circumstances have undergone a moral transformation in this logic. They are now witnesses to past evil and its return today, which is proved by their remembrance and their compassion for the victims.[28]

Meister criticizes this assumption in various ways. For him, it is an argument that is directed at the beneficiaries and not the victims of injustice. He even describes it as a continuation of the counter-revolutionary project by other means. According to Meister's definition, counter-revolutionaries benefit from unjust conditions. Traditionally, they would have oppressed the victims of these conditions for fear that they could reverse the situation as potential revolutionaries.

The twist in Human Rights Discourse is that the past suffering experienced by the oppressed is now condemned. Victims are now the recipients of sympathy. This represents a moral victory.[29] Therefore, in this line of thought, they no longer have a reason to strive for revolutionary upheaval. To summarize: "The underlying hope of today's Human Rights Discourse is that victims of past evil will not struggle against its ongoing beneficiaries after the evildoers are gone."[30] This way, the political-economic conditions remain fundamentally the same. Simultaneously, the beneficiaries—now reborn as witnesses—lose their counter-revolutionary fear. They feel bad because they recognize and condemn the suffering of the victims. At the same time, these feelings are to a certain extent comforting for the witnesses, because they are proof of their own moral transformation—which in turn alleviates the perceived threat of the victims. Meister sums it up as follows: "In effect, we cope with our fantasies of eliminating or controlling the victim we fear by internalizing a 'good' victim who has recognized and coped with his (justifiable) hatred of us."[31]

For this logic to work, historical injustice must be limited to the subjective view on violence. This makes it possible to condemn violent acts while at the same time ignoring the structural interrelations of history.[32] Farocki takes the opposite route in *Images of the World*. He writes that his film refuses to “visualize the suffering and the dying”,[33] which in his opinion often adds an element of *kitsch.* The people mentioned and depicted are of interest to the director “as subjects of history”.[34] This is why the film does not reduce them to their physical suffering but also works out other aspects of their existence. That includes their historically contingent motivations and their agency. One example is the artist Alfred Kantor, who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. His sketches are portrayed as a form of resistance against the Nazis’ plan not to allow any pictures from the concentration camp to reach the public. Another ‘subject of history’ portrayed in the film is a group of inmates who burned down a crematorium during a riot.



An act of resistance: Alfred Kantor’s sketches of Auschwitz. Source: Bilder der Welt und Inschriften des Krieges.

In Human Rights Discourse, on the other hand, victims are confined to their role as passive, suffering objects, it says in *After Evil*.[35] One of the consequences of such a fixed attribution of identity is obvious: it often ignores the lived reality of those affected. Furthermore, according to Meister, only those who fit the image of the depoliticized, passive victim are suitable as projective screens for compassion.[36] With crimes categorized as genocide, the situation is obvious. However, it gets more complicated when looking at assymetrical (civil) wars or uprisings. There is no duty of unrestricted moral solidarity towards those affected by such forms of violence, writes Moses. After all, they are seen as an active part of a conflict, he adds.[37] The constellation is similar for people who suffer from the structural consequences of historical injustice. These include, for example, people from formerly colonized countries who no longer live in a colony, but whose poverty is at least partly caused by exploitation from the colonial era.[38]They are also hardly suitable as objects for compassion, as the logic of the human rights discourse separates the past from the present; rather—befitting the usual neoliberal arguments—they are deemed to be at least partly responsible for their plight themselves.[39]

To explain the chronological sequence of this concept of history, Meister compares Human Rights Discourse with what he calls Revolutionary Theory. The latter assumes an unjust time T1 and a just time T2. In between is TR, the time of revolution, in which the previously unjust conditions are overturned. In contrast, Human Rights Discourse assumes
that we are living in a time that is no longer T1 (evil past) and neither T2 (historical justice) nor TR (upheaval), but a time of transition, of transitional justice.[40] In this logic, the moral transformation of the witnesses proves that the evil past is indeed over. Working towards a more just future brought about by a societal upheaval, on the other hand, entails the risk of a relapse into earlier violent times. The aim should therefore be to defend the change in values under the sign of human rights and, with them, the current political and economic conditions. That is the lesson of history in Human Rights Discourse. Meister describes it as the “depoliticizing impetus”[41]of transitional justice. In this worldview, he writes, ethics have primacy over politics.[42]

The concept of history that Farocki hints at in *Bilder der Welt* is different. One of his comments on his films is as follows: “It seems to me that human consciousness refuses to recognize the reality of Auschwitz. Perhaps this is still the case today, and that is why Auschwitz must always be repeated, worked through.”[43] In Human Rights Discourse and German memory culture, the Holocaust stands for the absolute evil of the past that has been overcome. Farocki’s statement implies however, that the significance of the Holocaust for the present is not fixed, but must be constantly questioned. Through essayistic reflection on various images of Auschwitz (among others), he gradually moves towards a possible political message. The film can be interpreted as a plea for working on fundamental social change. It is portrayed as the only way to prevent past atrocities from happening in the first place, instead of only condemning them afterwards. That requires resistance from civil society, as the film makes apparent. For example, Farocki interweaves the destruction of the crematorium by concentration camp inmates with the stationing of American nuclear missiles on German soil. In the voice-over, the philosopher Günther Anders is quoted: “Reality has to begin.”[44] The commentary then goes on: “Let’s destroy the possibility of getting hold of these devices, the nuclear missiles.”[45] These statements are diametrically opposed to the idea of a time of transition.

Die Fahrt geht Los
DEN ZUGANG BLOCKIEREN!
...rney begins
Erkundigungversuche nach dem Ziel der Fahrt
"Ihr erfahrt es schon zur Zeit"

What once didn’t happen at Auschwitz, Farocki demands in his film for the nuclear missiles in Germany: blocking access.

History as Labour

History teacher Gabi Teichert’s approach is similar to Farocki’s. In Kluge’s film *Die Patriotin,* she and her students read an excerpt from a book on the bombing of the town Halberstadt in April 1945, which was written by the director himself. The passage is about Gerda Baethe, a resident of Halberstadt, who holds out on the ground with her children during the attack. The text says:

> In order to open up a strategic perspective, such as Gerda Baethe wished for in her cover on April 8 […], seventy thousand determined teachers, all like her, would have to have taught hard since 1918, twenty years each, in each of the countries involved in the war; but also supra-regionally: pressure on the press, the government; then the new generation thus educated could have seized the sceptre or the reins […].[46]

From her observations, Teichert derives the need not only to condemn the horrors of the past but to lay the foundations for such a strategic perspective in the here and now. She attempts to translate Benjamin’s demand to ‘brush history against the grain’[47] into concrete, active work.

The teacher believes that this is the only way to find suitable material for her lessons. A central line from the film is: "If it weren't for this history, [...] there would certainly be another one."[48]

According to Human Rights Discourse, however, the current political-economic and geopolitical conditions appear to be the "only moral consequence of the violent history of the past",[49] writes philosopher Sami Khatib. This idea of a lack of moral alternatives limits our political horizons, adds philosopher Alberto Toscano.[50] That is particularly concerning considering the growth of openly right-wing movements around the world. The values that Human Rights Discourse emphasizes are often explicitly rejected by reactionary autocrats and their followers. One possible reaction is to defend the liberal-humanitarian world view all the more strongly. This means excluding any criticism of it—from whatever direction—as a potential relativization of evil to at least preserve what has been 'achieved'. The opposite approach is to take the so-called 'crisis of Western democracies' as an opportunity to address their inherent structural problems.

The latter also means to take serious ideological criticism of the concept of history that underlies Human Rights Discourse and the post-war German memory culture. The main issue here is that the separation between an evil past and a better present can certainly stand in the way of aiming towards historical justice. However, the conclusion is not to completely abandon the values associated with Human Rights Discourse. For example, it would be absurd to portray compassion for the victims of violence as something bad per se. However, speaking with Meister, it would also be short-sighted to ignore possible structural causes of suffering by simply referring to this compassion. The objective should be to look at concepts and values such as human rights or justice in their historical context, to question them and, if necessary, to redefine them. The prerequisite for this would be an analysis of history and its consequences that is not predetermined. Ideally, working repeatedly through the horrors of the past would sharpen the focus for developing political projects for the present.

To point towards concrete examples: when the topic of colonialism is discussed in the German public sphere, the debate usually revolves around how exactly the crimes of that time (e.g. the genocide against the Herero and Nama) should be categorized or which art objects should be returned to their countries of origin. With the recognition of one's own guilt and compensation payments or the return of the works, these chapters then seemingly have been dealt with. That is entirely in line with the concept of history that Meister criticizes in After Evil. An alternative approach would be to take these historic interrelations as an opportunity to work against, let's say, today's political and economic imbalance between Germany and Namibia. Or, to return to the Israel-Palestine issue: German discourse alone cannot substantially alter the situation on the ground. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to break up its entrenched structures, which often make it appear as a form of self-talk. An exchange between diverse voices, in which the despair and lack of prospects of Palestinians could be expressed in the same way as justified fears of anti-Semitic violence and in which political and historical contextualizations are incorporated, would be a necessary prerequisite for sustainable political improvements. Otherwise, important aspects remain forgotten. This becomes clear not least when looking at the German Autumn and its similarly hardened discourse structures. Fundamental social changes for the better are only conceivable with a different concept of history. This could clear the fog of the evil past that otherwise obscures the political horizon.

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[1] For the latter they were supported by members of a subgroup of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP).

[2] Edgar Wolfrum, *Die geglückte Demokratie: Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Bonn: BPB, 2007. German quotes were translated into English by the author.

[3] The term covers various social movements from the left-wing spectrum of the late 1960s and 1970s.

[4] Walter Benjamin, *Abhandlungen: Gesammelte Schriften Band 1.2*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, pp. 695–703.

[5] A. Dirk Moses, “Der Katechismus der Deutschen,” (2021), online geschichtedergegenwart.ch/der-katechismus-der-deutschen/, accessed February 23, 2024.

[6] Justin Kempf, “Robert Meister Believes Justice is an Option,” *Democracy Paradox* (2021), online democracyparadox.com/2021/10/12/robert-meister-believes-justice-is-an-option/, accessed February 23, 2024.

[7] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, New York: Picador, 2008, pp. 9–14.

[8] Ibid., p. 10.

[9] Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, New York: Columbia UP, 2011, p. 3.

[10] Aleida Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016, p. 57.

[11] Meister, *After Evil*, p. 14.

[12] In his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama predicted that liberal democracy and a free market economy would finally prevail everywhere after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Referring to Alexandre Kojéve's interpretation of Hegel, he wrote that this would end the struggle for recognition described by the philosopher and thus ultimately history.

[13] The term refers to the actions with which the USA claims to have fought international terrorism. This also includes the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

[14] Meister, *After Evil*, p. 122.

[15] Ibid., pp. 14–15.

[16] Ibid., pp. 179–80.

[17] Ana Teixeira Pinto, “This is why we can’t have nice things,” *Journal of Visual Culture* (2022), online www.academia.edu/90639931/This_is_Why_We_Cant_Have_Nice_Things_, accessed March 6, 2024.

[18] Sultan Doughan und Hanan Toukan, “How Germany’s Memory Culture Censors Palestinians,” *Jacobin* (2022), online jacobin.com/2022/07/germany-israel-palestine-antisemitism-art-documenta, accessed February 23, 2024.

[19] The term refers to the flight of around 700,000 people from Palestine in the wake of the war between the new state of Israel and several Arab nations in the years 1947–49.

[20] Michael März, Linker Protest nach dem Deutschen Herbst: Eine Geschichte des linken Spektrums im Schatten des ‘starken Staates’, 1977–1979, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012, p. 13.

[21] A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 1.

[22] Ibid., p. 42.

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[23] Meister, *After Evil*, p. 122.

[24] However, the fact that ambivalences in the concept of human rights can be identified when looking at it in a global context is not a new development, as the connections between the Enlightenment and colonialism show.

[25] Teixeira Pinto, “This is why we can’t have nice things.”

[26] Wolfrum, *Die geglückte Demokratie*, p. 268.

[27] Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*, p. 57.

[28] Meister, *After Evil*, p. 82.

[29] Ibid., p. 69.

[30] Ibid., p. 8.

[31] Ibid., p. 61.

[32] Ibid., S. 64.

[33] Harun Farocki, *Unregelmäßig, nicht regellos: Texte 1986–2000*, ed. Marius Babias et al., Berlin: NBK, 2017, p. 134.

[34] Tilman Baumgärtel, *Vom Guerillakino zum Essayfilm: Harun Farocki: Werkmonographie eines deutschen Autorenfilmers*, Berlin: B-books, 1998, p. 172.

[35] Meister, *After Evil*, p. 64.

[36] Ibid., p. 226.

[37] Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, p. 19.

[38] This is a simplifying illustration. Poverty is of course just one example and by no means the only structural consequence of colonialism.

[39] Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, pp. 492–93.

[40] Meister, *After Evil*, pp. 84–85.

[41] Alberto Toscano, “The Tactics and Ethics of Humanitarianism,” *Humanity*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014): p. 131.

[42] Meister, *After Evil*, p. 47.

[43] Quoted in Baumgärtel, *Vom Guerillakino zum Essayfilm*, p. 172.

[44] *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, directed by Harun Farocki, Germany, 1989, timecode: 01:09:59–01:10:01.

[45] Ibid., timecode: 01:10:03–01:10:20.

[46] Alexander Kluge, *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014, p. 38.

[47] Benjamin, *Abhandlungen*, p. 697.

[48] *Die Patriotin*, directed by Alexander Kluge, Germany, 1979, timecode: 01:52:49–01:52:56.

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[49] Sami Khatib, “Singularitätseffekte,” in *Historiker streiten. Gewalt und Holocaust – die Debatte*, ed. Susan Neiman and Michael Wildt, Berlin: Ullstein, 2022, p. 72. Khatib also writes about the concept of singularity and Walter Benjamin’s theses on history in his text “No Future: The Space of Capital and the Time of Dying” in the second issue of *Umbau* (Sami Khatib, "No Future: The Space of Capital and the Time of Dying", *Umbau* (2023), online umbau.hfg-karlsruhe.de/posts/no-future-the-space-of-capital-and-the-time-of-dying, accessed March 12, 2024).

[50] Toscano, “The Tactics and Ethics of Humanitarianism,” pp. 123–24.