
Among historians of Namibia’s German colonial past, a lively, at times acrimonious controversy has been going on for the past few years. Its main point of contention is the categorisation of the German colonial army’s warfare against Herero and Nama in the war of 1904 to 1907. Roughly speaking, one can discern two levels in this exchange of arguments, albeit not separable from each other: on the one hand the debate is about whether this war can be explained in terms of a genocide and its descriptive categories, indeed whether the Germans committed a genocide. On the other hand, the conflict is about the relationship of colonialism and National Socialism with regard to their inherent annihilatory logic and potential.1

This controversy is omnipresent in the 2005 volume Genozid und Gedenken. Namibisch-deutsche Geschichte und Gegenwart, edited by Henning Melber. The book contains, in a stock-taking manner, a selection of articles occasioned by the 2004 centenary of the wars of Herero and Nama. Mostly centred on current memorialisations and the politics thereof in both Germany and Namibia, they are written from different perspectives: historical analysis of the course of the war itself, of its ideological monopolisation in the context of the more recent anti-colonial struggle and the attendant nation-building project; explorations of contemporary controversies regarding this war; the issue of reparations, and aspects of international law. Often the anecdotes cited in the articles make for the most interesting reading.2

All authors evaluate German tactics and strategy in the colonial wars from mid-1904 as being characterised by genocidal dynamics, developing into a “total war”, which then escalated into a genocide. (p. 14) For instance, Jürgen Zimmerer’s paper: he argues explicitly and clearly to prevent any attempt at watering down (he does not say, however, against whom this is directed), that the wars of 1904 to 1907 need to be approached from a genocide studies perspective, with its methodologies and paradigms; his mission is to draw connections between the developments in the colony and National Socialism and the Holocaust. In a similar vein, Janntje Böhlke-Itzen treats such historiographical attempts which try to relativise this chapter of German history as apologetic of German colonialism. She contrasts these by arguing the commonalities between colonial and

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2 For instance, Henning Melber’s introductory rendition of an attempt by the so-called Reiterinitiative, to add a counter-monument to the equestrian statue or Reiterdenkmal in Windhoek, still Namibia’s prominent colonial monument. Sadly, the author withholds the information why this was turned down by the National Monument Commission; a question that remains to be answered. Similarly, Reinhart Kössler’s remarks on an exhibition in Katutura of personal memory pieces documenting the history of the war and the attendant annihilation of the Herero; more attention to this kind of grass-roots initiative is required within the academic community.
National Socialist ideology, applying terms such as Rasse and Lebensraum, key terms in both colonialist and Nazi thinking.

However, this review aims at reflecting on the way this debate is being conducted, and not at critiquing the individual contributions nor at a (self-) positioning of the reviewer. This has been sparked by a text in the volume which is enigmatically introduced by Melber as one of its more substantial contributions: Christoph Marx’ highly polemical article, Entsorgen und Entseuchen. Zur Diskussionskultur in der derzeitigen namibischen Historiographie – eine Polemik, which claims to be a comment on the way in which this discussion plays out. I am therefore commenting on a comment and would also like to provide a footnote to the discussion more generally.

Marx himself called his contribution a polemic. Therefore one cannot attack him for the acerbic offensiveness of his argument. However, if one measured his contribution against the ancient art of polemicising, of disputing a paradigm, a way of thinking, then Marx’ attempt must be refuted as simplistic. His accusations are platitudinal, his treatment of post-colonial theory unacceptable. This is even more serious as he scolds his adversaries for insinuation and omission which he freely commits himself, sometimes grotesquely so when he insists on academic purity and methodological standards which he fails to comply with himself. To demonstrate this we need to first orient ourselves in Marx’ universe.

He begins with an overview of the historiography on German colonialism, arguing that this subject only came to the attention of professional historians in Germany as from the late 1990s. This occurred in the context of more recent cultural studies paradigms and theoretical perspectives, and with the attendant problems. His main critique is that this approach ignores the results of African studies-oriented work, that it perpetuates the invisibility of the African colonial subject as historical actor. He quips that colonial history is often only practised as an extrapolation of national history, and so can be said to be Germanocentric (p.142f.). This is a significant critique. Yet, one starts wondering, as this is haphazardly interlaced with insinuations. Let us follow his argument a little more. Namibia is special, he argues worryingly, in that here one finds tendencies which aim at relativising colonialism to pursue a conservative historiographical agenda which at the same time is geared to cull other approaches. He also finds fault with the way historiography is being utilised by nationalism (p. 144). Hence his observation that in the Namibian context one finds the lamentable situation where exponents of the latest postmodern fashion are bedfellows of right-wing authors.

This is thickly laid on as one, indeed, is astounded to see how Marx mixes together some kind of indefinable dough without being overly worried about any

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3 “Kolonialgeschichte häufig als eine Art von externer Fortsetzung der Nationalgeschichte” [sic!] (p. 142) betrieben und somit einen “germanozentrischen Blick” (p. 143).
lumps. For this he uses three ingredients: professional historians, both Namibian and German (among which the authors of this journal figure prominently, as well as Birthe Kundrus), all of them avowed practitioners of social history (one must emphasise); authors, predominantly based in Namibia, whose crude and at times unbearably conservative-reactionary positions are the mainstay of letters to the editor of the Windhoek-based Allgemeine Zeitung, finally so-called postmodern theory. The latter comes in handy as he applies it as the background foil on which he demonstrates the validity of his assumption: that academic Namibianist historians and right-wing apologists of German colonialism are comradely united. Let us look at this postmodernist ghost that drives Christoph Marx to discard, summarily, what has been widely discussed over the last decades in a lively debate and over a wide discursive spectrum.

To follow C. Marx: in his all-out attack against post-colonial approaches (indeed, he uncritically lumps the two, postmodernism and post-colonial theory together) he initially demonstrates generosity. In an aside he concedes that some postmodern/post-colonial work did serve a useful goal, as it provided for some innovative thought and understanding. This is nothing more than short-lived appeasement, however. He quickly resumes his critical stance, arguing against a repeatedly implored ignoring of violence as the main element of colonial rule, and the relativising effect of pointing to the many different groups of victims, as this would assist in the final closure of this matter: German colonial rule. He adds, enigmatically and unconnectedly, this sentence: “Following this logic, there could not have been committed a genocide against Herero and Nama, because a deconstruction of ethnic categories can claim that there were survivors, in addition to substantial numbers of profiteurs on the side of the subjected.”

Add to this Marx’ invectives against hybridity, a concept he accuses menacingly as being wellness-treatment for people unable to bear controversy (quite funny though), and one starts to comprehend his argument. For this reason let us try again and, in a simplified manner: according to Marx, it is the anti-essential (deconstructivist) approach of post-colonial theory which leads to the dissolution of clear-cut distinctions according to which it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish between perpetrators and victims of colonialism. As a result colonialism’s inherent structural violence is in danger of being negated and the attendant questions about guilt and responsibility (and reparations?) can therefore be ignored. Lastly, this allows for the denial of colonialism’s inherent destructive potential (racism) and its

5 “Labsaal [...] für harmoniesüchtige Seelchen” (p. 149).
concrete emanation in turn-of-the-century Namibia.\textsuperscript{6} Marx has a point, even points, here. For instance, the concept of agency which is popular in post-colonial theory needs to be examined anew with particular reference to its limits in the colonial context, first and foremost defined by asymmetrical power relations. His insistence is probably necessary, although one wonders why he overstresses this point to the extent he does, as this reflection is frequently present in contemporary post-theory discourses. It would have been helpful had he substantiated his claims and argument. What we are left with in this case is merely platitudinal, which waters down his critique. Two examples should amply demonstrate this. Marx expresses his dislike of the term post-colonial in a footnote. Arguing that he has no idea what the term denotes, he surmises that its prefix simply serves to provide more appeal to academic fashions. This accusation is not new, it is as old as ‘post’-theory itself and to have reservations is legitimate, as the term has been criticised for being nebulous and of blurring power relations and continuities. Others have stressed the usefulness of the term as it allows new and more vigorous questions regarding the meaning of colonialism and its heritage to be posed. To just toss out the term as intellectually indigestible, relegating all of this to a footnote, is simply not doing justice to the importance of these debates in current social science discourse.\textsuperscript{7}

In another footnote, Marx attempts to deconstruct the concept of hybridity, a deconstructive concept in itself, alleging it to be essentialist, as it posits what it wants to deconstruct and so does away with the idea of pure culture in and of itself. Hybridity, however, does not suggest the mixing of such assumed pure cultures, as surmised by Marx. Homi Bhabha, one of the creators of this concept, has repeatedly pointed to this misconception.\textsuperscript{8} He defines hybridity — at least this is how I read Bhabha — as a space in which the colonised subject’s options to resist, potentially and practically, are being re-defined. The already-mentioned issue, whether this approach is not, in fact, relativising the impact of violence in colonial relations is still to be raised, however.

Yet, Marx has, cavalierly, not taken note of the existence of a considerable literature on the subject.\textsuperscript{9} He should have realised this in his quest to be presiding inquisitor. In any case, others have been much more original in their arguments against the concept of

\textsuperscript{6}“Indem man die Herero bis zur Unkenntlichkeit unter Hybridität verschüttet, kann man den Völkermord bequem mitentsorgen.” (p. 160)


hybridity. One is left with the impression that one is witnessing the resurrection of an old controversy between various post-theories and Marxism, a controversy that had lost its urgency in the context of globalisation and its challenge.

Why have I hammered the footnotes to this degree? Sometimes footnotes reflect more clearly what the author has said in the main text. In our case, they demonstrate how Marx has lumped together, without any definitional clarity, ‘post’-theory and reactionary positions. This definitional unclarity is the main problem as one wonders how Marx envisions the interfaces between the two. If right-wing authors apply post-theory they usually do so piecemeal and haphazardly — such theory lends itself to this, the Nazis claimed socialism after all — but one cannot throw out the whole theory as problematic, as this problem is intrinsic to such theory. The question remains, but must read: where do the two overlap? This overlapping cannot be just taken as the reason for crushing postmodernism per se (who is she anyway?), to complain about historiographical tendencies and to toss out a whole theory. Maybe this is what is most lamentable about Marx’ piece: that where he has valid points they are hidden by layers of the discursive manner described and rejected: unspecified and simplistically argued, insinuative and denouncingly. Less would have been more, maybe. And one could have argued more to the point, about tendencies and developments in German and Namibian colonial historiography: the real concerns of Marx (and the volume). Further, about one’s positioning in this field, about the different places from which one argues, about the pros and cons of reconciliation in Namibia. Polemising only makes sense if substantial arguments are presented in a non-denouncing manner.

It is probably not fair to stop commenting at this point as I am not dealing with other, equally important issues raised by C. Marx. For instance, his critique of Wolfram Hartmann’s interpretation of the so-called marriage ban of 1905. He alleges that Hartmann downplays racism as a driving force of colonial rule. Further, his critique of the 2004 conference organised by Hartmann (and colleagues) in the History Department of the University of Namibia with the title 1904 — 2004 Decontaminating the Namibian Past — a Commemorative Conference — he was irked by the title of the event, as well as by a contribution of Andreas Eckl. The latter allegedly tried to relativise German colonialism’s brutal reality in his contribution, following the agenda of what Marx scoffingly terms Versöhnungsnationalismus, reconciliation nationalism. Lastly he alleges that Birthe Kundrus instrumentalises the singularity of the Holocaust. By separating it from German history, he says, she attempts to ‘normalise’ it (and German colonial history as well).\(^\text{11}\)


\(^{11}\) It is interesting that neither Marx nor any of the other authors who contributed to the volume have touched on the substantial differences between racism and anti-Semitism. This is even more remarkable as the majority of the authors
One could actually start anew and reflect where Marx — maybe — touches on something relevant. For instance when he thinks about racism: is racism not really a social practice that serves to preserve power in insecure and challenging times rather than just a mental structure? Or on the terminology we chose to indicate the direction of our politics: should one really decontaminate the colonial past? What does that imply? And who has the legitimacy to initiate this kind of project? And who can legitimately ask such a question? The coloniser’s offspring, the colonised’s offspring? However, asking and questioning in this mode lands one right at the beginning again, as Marx’ angering insinuations serve the sole aim of disrespecting his colleagues. One is left with the idea that Marx deliberately took on the role of bull in a china shop. In this quest he was successful.

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