

Legitimizing Colonial Rule in the Twenty-First Century

Discursive Strategies of the AfD's Politics of Remembrance

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This chapter¹ sets out to analyze how the German right-wing party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) attempts to legitimize colonial rule and resemanticize colonialism as an endeavor which cannot be seen as entirely criminal and negative. The first section will deal with the social and historical context of this attempt, which is characterized by the rise of postcolonial (and more recently decolonial) studies, an increasing political awareness of colonialism and racism through political campaigns reaching a wider public, and a revisionist backlash against this process from the political right. The second section will outline the method employed, which can briefly be characterized as a poststructuralist discourse analysis. The third section will then focus on the motion to the German Bundestag entitled “A nuanced cultural-political engagement with the German colonial period” (“Die deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten”)² submitted by the AfD, which will be taken as a case in point to be analyzed. Covering

1 Many thanks to the editors for numerous helpful comments. A short and very early draft of the argument was presented in German in the Frankfurter Rundschau. <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/unter-kolonialen-haerten-versteht-13548449.html>.

2 All translations are by the author.

issues from the genocide in Southwest Africa to the debate on museums and restitution, it claims to strive for a scientific and non-ideological view of German colonialism in the politics of remembrance and a more nuanced view on its merits and flaws, in contrast to an allegedly hegemonic and biased perspective dominated by cultural Marxism and postcolonial studies which has managed to portray colonial rule as simply criminal.

The article will reconstruct the argument and analyze it from the perspective of discourse analysis, taking into account the wider academic and public debate which can be shown to be either ignored or distorted in the AfD paper. It will trace its attempts to resignify and instrumentalize existing academic and political concepts, establish conceptual links and construct a new narrative which has the effect of legitimizing racist colonial rule in the twenty-first century and aims at commemorating German colonialism for its achievements.

1. Context

The AfD's attempt to resemanticize colonialism has to be seen as part of a broader wave of revisionist policies of knowledge which are a reaction to the increasing recognition of postcolonial and decolonial studies in academia and, connected to this, political campaigns targeting colonialism and racism. These three aspects of the context will be discussed in this section.

Postcolonial approaches investigate the aftermath of colonial rule after formal decolonization, the "legacies of colonialism" (Loomba 1998, 12) and the "continuing cultural and political ramifications of colonialism in both colonizing and colonized societies" (Young 2016, 6). They focus on the "production of knowledge about the Other" (Williams and Chrisman 1994, 8). Yet postcolonial theory usually perceives itself as critical theory which aims at progressive social change, such as when Loomba describes the "contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism" as the program of postcolonial studies (Loomba 1998, 12). It can thus be argued that postcolonial theory clearly takes an anticolonial and

anti-imperial political position, which means it is not confined to the critique of discourse but is also concerned with economic exploitation (Young 2016, 58; see also Conrad and Randeria 2002, 24; Castro Varela and Dhawan 2005, 8; Kerner 2012, 11; Ziai 2012, 293). At the same time most theorists of postcolonial studies would agree to Stuart Hall when he differentiates postcolonial studies from a “clear-cut politics of binary oppositions” between good and bad which renders the complex situations of colonialism intelligible (Hall 1996, 244).

Since the early iconic works of postcolonial theory (Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Hall 1992; Bhabha 1994; McClintock 1995; Chakrabarty 2000), it has become increasingly recognized – first in literary and cultural studies, but increasingly also in the social sciences – exemplified in the work of Bhabra (2007, 2013) and Shilliam (2011). In development studies, the postcolonial critique of the Post-Development school has had a marked influence on the discipline (Ziai 2017).

Yet the rising influence of the critique of colonialism and colonial racism was not confined to academia: it had repercussions in the public sphere. The presence of a history of slavery and racism was highlighted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which began after the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of the perpetrator in 2012, but has since been regularly rekindled by ongoing lethal police violence against Blacks in the U.S., such as the killing of George Floyd in 2020. The movement has inspired mass protests not only in the U.S., but in a number of other countries as well (in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and Japan). In addition, BLM protests also seem to have an effect on media attention: in the two months after the killing of George Floyd, our postcolonial activist group in Kassel received many more requests for interviews than in the whole previous year (and usually the reference to these current political events was made by the journalists themselves).

Since 2015, the Rhodes Must Fall movement has similarly contributed to a public debate on racism, and specifically on colonialism and the question whether and how colonizers should be remembered in the twenty-first century. The removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the campus of the University of Cape Town had repercussions in other universities in and beyond South Africa, be it in removing colonial

monuments in Great Britain and Belgium, such as the statue of slave trader Edward Colston which was thrown into the harbor of Bristol, or in decolonizing the curriculum. The ensuing Fees Must Fall movement claimed that colonialism and Apartheid lived on in present-day South Africa through racialized social inequality.

So a critical perspective on colonialism has gained prominence in the twenty-first century, not only in academic postcolonial and decolonial studies, but also in the wider public debate. Against this backdrop, there has been a backlash against this critical view on colonialism in the past years. On the international stage, probably the most prominent vindication of colonialism came from political scientist Bruce Gilley (2017) and was published in *Third World Quarterly* (of all journals), which had hitherto been seen as critical and anticolonial. Although the majority of members of the editorial board stepped down because of this publication (Richey et al. 2019), and although numerous determined rebuttals of the Gilley article have been written (e.g., Hira 2017; Klein 2018; Rodriguez 2018), *TWQ* had given a platform to the “original” hypothesis that colonialism was beneficial for people under European rule.

In the German context, the argument about the benefits of colonialism for the colonized had been made in 2015 by journalists in renowned liberal and conservative newspapers. They argued that decolonization had proven to worsen the situation in formerly colonized countries, suggesting (just like Gilley) a contemporary form of European colonialism as a solution (Martenstein 2015; Stein 2015). While this did not produce any public outcry, an interview with the commissioner for Africa of the German government, Günter Nooke, did so in 2018 when it was published by a Berlin newspaper. In the interview, the conservative politician claimed that the Cold War had been “more detrimental to Africa” than colonialism and that the latter had “contributed to separate the continent from archaic structures.” He envisioned special economic zones in Africa in which African migrants heading for Europe could be resettled, governed by the World Bank or the EU or European states (Nooke 2018). In the following year, the AfD invited Gilley to give a talk in the German parliament entitled “The Case for German Colonialism” in which he reiterated

his argument from the TWQ article with special reference to the German colonies (Gilley 2019).

2. Method

The research question how the AfD legitimizes colonialism will be investigated using as an object of analysis the motion submitted by the AfD party in the German parliament entitled “A nuanced cultural-political engagement with the German colonial period” (“Die deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten”) from December 2019. The text has been chosen because it covers a wide range of aspects concerning a politics of remembrance regarding colonialism and can (with officially 31 AfD delegates being the authors) be seen as representative of the party’s view of the topic (AfD 2019). It forms a centerpiece in the AfD’s strategy in the battle over the meaning of colonialism in Germany, which is accompanied by events such as the publication of a paper on the renaming of streets (AfD 2020), the invitation of Gilley and a resolution on the alleged instrumentalization of the German colonial period by “leftist ideologues”.³ What sets it apart from these other attempts is that it directly tries to influence German cultural policy in the parliament. Recently, it has been followed up by another motion in the Bundestag which used the accusations of antisemitism against the art exhibition Documenta to demand a complete stop to any public funding for post-colonial studies (AfD 2022).

The text will be submitted to an analysis of its arguments which examines (following Foucault 1980) the interconnections between power and knowledge and the discursive construction of German colonialism,

3 AfD-Fraktion im Landtag Schleswig-Holstein: “Schluss mit Schuld und Sühne – für eine differenzierte Betrachtung der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte!” 10.06.2021. Web: <https://www.openpr.de/news/1212091/Schluss-mit-Schuld-und-Suehne-fuer-eine-differenzierte-Betrachtung-der-deutschen-Kolonialgeschichte.html>.

bearing in mind the social and political context of the publication. Additionally, the statements in the text will be compared to the academic debate on the topic, pointing out certain misrepresentations and misconceptions. Based on the poststructuralist analytical method of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), the essay will look at these texts' strategies of resemanticization, the volatility between signifiers and signifieds, and the construction and disruption of chains of equivalence.

3. Analysis

“Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” comprises twelve pages and covers different aspects related to the question how to deal with the colonial past in Germany: the renaming of streets; the restitution of cultural artifacts from museums; the handling of the colonial war in German South-West Africa (today's Namibia); present-day cultural politics and in general the political evaluation of the period of German colonialism. The text starts with a diagnosis of facts (AfD 2019, 1–2) followed by political demands (AfD 2019, 2–3) and a more detailed justification of them (AfD 2019, 4–12). The motion proposes that the parliament demands from the government, a) to ensure that in German curricula, culture and politics a “nuanced” view on German colonialism will be promoted which emphasizes the beneficial aspects of this period for those subjected; b) to reject any demands for reparation by descendants of the Herero and Nama; c) to reject any demands for restitution of cultural artifacts from colonial contexts (based on a categorization of these contexts as criminal); and d) to call on municipalities to keep and if need be contextualize colonial street names (AfD 2019, 2–3). The different aspects of the text will be examined in the following sub-sections.

3.1. The Colonial War Against the Herero and Nama: No Genocide

The longest part of the text is dedicated to disproving that the colonial war against the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa was a genocide (AfD 2019, 4–9). This can be explained because the text links the predominant negative judgement on German colonialism to Germany’s violent colonial wars. The text readily admits that there were “hardships and cruelties” (AfD 2019, 2) and “without a doubt a disproportionate use of violence” on the side of the Germans (AfD 2019, 4), but it then claims that it was “out of the question that this amounted to genocide or that there was a continuity between this war and the crimes of National Socialism” (AfD 2019, 1). German colonial policy, the text contends, had learned from these “serious mistakes” and initiated reforms which led to an improvement in living standards of the colonized people (AfD 2019, 4). The central claim that there was no genocide in German South-West Africa rests on several arguments, some of which are, according to the text, backed up by respected German historians. I will look at them in chronological order.

Argument 1: No Continuity Between Colonialism and National Socialism

Based on the research of an expert on German colonial wars, Susanne Kuß from the University of Bern, who is quoted at length, the text argues that the hypothesis of a direct continuity between German colonial wars and National Socialist policies of extermination was based on speculation and did not rest on solid evidence (AfD 2019, 5). However, the text suggests that the controversy about this continuity (which in fact exists among historians) indicates that there is a controversy about the question of genocide (which does not exist, at least not in the contemporary academic debate). Kuß, who is indeed skeptical about the continuity hypothesis, is very clear about the colonial war against the Herero and Nama: “The colonial war in German South-West Africa is special in so far as it culminated in genocide” (Kuß 2014, 333, see also her detailed reflection on the categorization of this colonial war as genocide in Kuß 2018).

To use her as a principal witness that there was no genocide is disingenuous. This move is made possible through the unacceptable conflation of the question of continuity and the question of genocide, as if there was an equation between genocide and the Holocaust. Allegedly disproving the continuity thesis, the authors pretend that this now also disproves the genocidal quality of the German wars in Africa. (The genocidal quality of the Holocaust is readily accepted, which can be interpreted as part of the AfD's discursive strategy as will be discussed in the conclusion.) This conflation – or rather intentional confusion – gives rise to the impression that the AfD position was indeed shared by a number of respectable historians, which is not the case.

Argument 2: The Policy of Extermination was Criticized by German Authorities

The text is quoting German critics of Generalleutnant von Trotha, the governor of German South-West Africa and chief commander of the German troops, who was responsible for the policy of extermination against the Herero and Nama. The governor of German East Africa criticized the “ruthless manner” in which von Trotha conducted the war and Chancellor von Bülow claimed that his intentions “contradicted the principles of Christianity and humanity” (AfD 2019, 5). Yet the German government today ignored this and criticizes the “terrible injustice committed by our ancestors” (AfD 2019, 5). The criticism indicates that the policy of extermination did not find unanimous support within the German government (see also AfD 2019, 8–9). But again, it is difficult to see in what way this could constitute an argument against the categorization of the violent deeds as genocide. The last quote suggests that the point might be an inappropriate generalization: some of “our ancestors” could have been critics of the colonial policies. This is certainly correct, but irrelevant for the question of whether there was a genocide. Von Trotha may not have acted in accordance with every member of the German government, but he was the representative of the German state in charge of the military operation. And it seems that the German army general staff shared his intent when it writes in the war report:

This bold undertaking shows the ruthless energy of the German leadership in the pursuit of the defeated enemy in brilliant light. No effort, no privation was spared to rob the enemy of the last vestige of his power of resistance; like a deer hunted half to death, he was chased from waterhole to waterhole until he finally became a victim of the nature of his own country. The waterless Omaheke was to complete what the German weapons had begun: The annihilation of the Herero people (cited in Kößler and Melber 2018, 226–27).

It is interesting to note how the responsibility for the genocide is transferred from the German perpetrators to the “nature” of Africa.

Argument 3: The Claim to Genocide was Promoted by GDR Historiography

The text again relies on a respected historian, Christiane Bürger, author of an award-winning PhD thesis on the topic, who is quoted extensively (twenty-seven times) to make the point that GDR historiography a) defined the colonial war in German South-West Africa as genocide; b) saw a causal connection between the colonial and the National Socialist genocide; and c) was influenced and instrumentalized by political anti-bourgeois guidelines of the authoritarian socialist state (AfD, 2019, 5–8). The text quotes Bürger’s statement that “The genocide against the Herero and the continuity between colonialism and National Socialism became a normative interpretation of history which resonated especially with the political left in the Federal Republic who supported the Anti-Apartheid movement and the independence of Namibia” (quoted in AfD 2019, 8). While the text implies that c) is an argument which devalues a) and b), and while the quote is taken to mean that this “normative” (is there a non-normative one?) interpretation is patently wrong, this is not what Bürger is saying. Indeed, she unambiguously talks about the “first German genocide in the year 1904” (Bürger 2013, 3). So Bürger does say: GDR historiography called the violence against the Herero and Nama genocide and there was a political influence on GDR historiography, but she does not say: only because there was a political influence it was called a genocide. Additionally, the discursive strategy of a conflation of

the continuity hypothesis and categorization of genocide is employed once more, while the two positions are in fact separate: one can readily deny a direct continuity between colonialism and Nationalist Socialism without denying that each of them was a genocide. Again, the text uses a respected historian as a witness for a claim she has never made. Further, the text seeks to discredit the genocide claim because it allegedly originated in GDR historiography.

Argument 4: The German Policy of Extermination was Ineffective

A journalist from the news magazine *Der Spiegel* and a third female historian, Brigitte Lau, are cited to argue that the German troops had been unable to effectively imprison the remaining Herero in the Omaheke desert. Further, many of the soldiers had been suffering from diseases and exhaustion (AfD 2019, 9). Again, this may or may not be the case, but these questions are irrelevant for the categorization of the military action as genocide. According to the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the crime is constituted by

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; . . . (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part. (Chalk and Jonassohn 1988, 44)

There is no doubt that Generalleutnant von Trotha voiced his intention to destroy the Herero people: “I believe that the nation as such has to be destroyed,” he wrote to the chief of staff (Gewald 2004, 116). After the military victory in the battle of Waterberg he issued orders to his soldiers to pursue the losers and to shoot at armed or unarmed Herero to drive them into the Omaheke desert where many thousands of them died (Zimmerer 2004, 50–52). The precise number of survivors (between 17,000 and 40,000 of a people of 70,000–100.000; Zimmerer 2004, 243n16) and thus the effectiveness of the extermination policy is irrelevant for the identification of the crime. That the “extermination order” was retracted six weeks later (AfD 2019, 9) (which could be read as an

addendum to argument 2) is a fact which does neither alter the intent nor the deed.

The four arguments brought forward by the AfD document are partly valid (2 and 3), partly contested (1 and 4), but none of them does in any way constitute an argument against the categorization of the colonial warfare in German South-West Africa as a genocide, although the text suggests that this was the case. This effect is produced by the discursive strategies of equation, appropriating and discrediting. The first strategy (argument 1) works by constructing a chain of equivalence between categorizing German colonial policy as genocidal and claiming direct links between colonial genocide and National Socialist genocide. The second strategy (argument 1 and 3) works through deceptively appropriating some historians' skepticism about the historical continuity thesis as evidence that the colonial policy did not amount to genocide. The third strategy (argument 3) works through discrediting the argument on the grounds of its origin: if the ideologically driven historiography of the GDR proclaimed it was a genocide, then it probably was not. Arguments 2 and 4 seem to simply rely on readers' ignorance of the UN genocide convention.

All in all, the strategy of "Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten" is to suggest that the categorization of the war crimes as genocide is contested among historians and a product of ideological GDR historiography. Both claims are spurious. In analogy to Herman and Chomsky (1988), these strategies could be described as "manufacturing dissent" where there is none, at least not among contemporary academic historians. The objective seems to be to delegitimize the characterization of German colonialism as criminal by casting doubt on the consensual genocide thesis. This interpretation is suggested by the AfD itself:

The period of German colonial rule, which ended 100 years ago, is evaluated as negative today, or even as entirely criminal. This evaluation is based above all on the manner in which the German Empire waged war in some African colonies in the first phase of its colonial rule. (AfD 2019, 4).

3.2. The Benefits for the Colonized

That the objective of the text even goes beyond downplaying the crimes of German colonial rule becomes clearly visible in those sections where it attempts to legitimize it by pointing out its alleged benefits for the colonized. Interestingly, already in the first paragraph the text refers to the statement of the Commissioner for Africa, Günter Nooke, and his statement that colonialism had “contributed to disengage Africa from archaic structures” (AfD 2019, 1). Nooke, the text says, merely articulated the view of “prominent historians” like Prof. Egon Flaig (AfD 2019, 10). Flaig in turn claims that European colonialism had put an end to slavery in Africa and made possible new paths for the continent after “a thousand-year history of most bloody violence and genocides” (Flaig, quoted in AfD 2019, 11). In particular imperial Germany’s reforms in colonial rule introduced by secretary of state Bernhard Dernburg between 1907 and 1910, the text claims, had led to a “significant improvement of living conditions” (AfD 2019, 4) and an expansion of infrastructure, especially the railways (AfD 2019, 4, 11).

The reference to Nooke, a member of the respected conservative party (CDU), is again an appropriating move, but this time one which is justified. However, his statement knowingly or unknowingly reproduces the stereotype of a backward and barbarian Africa in need of “civilization” and “development” – which was (and is until today) the most significant myth legitimizing European colonial rule around the world. While the appropriation of the historian Flaig is also justified, it seems to add academic expertise to the position emphasizing the benefits of colonialism. Yet Flaig is actually no expert of European colonialism or modern history in general. His PhD thesis and second book dealt with ancient history, with Greek cultural history and Roman emperors.⁴ His book on the global history of slavery, which the text quotes, is an apology of European colonial slavery which resemanticizes European slavery in Africa as liberation – and has received disastrous scholarly

4 Wikipedia: Egon Flaig. Web: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egon_Flaig.

reviews.⁵ In her review, Felicitas Schmieder writes that Flaig's book was "not meeting elementary requirements of academic texts." She claims that it ignores historical facts, reproduces "the ideological justification of European wars of conquest by the European colonial powers," and indeed makes the reviewer wonder why an academic publisher had accepted the manuscript (Schmieder 2010).

What about the archaic structures that colonialism allegedly had pushed back in Africa? While it is correct that, after having profited from the slave trade for centuries, European powers (including Germany) outlawed slavery in many regions especially in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was often replaced by other forms of forced labor. One example for German colonial rule is Cameroon, where the deputy governor Heinrich Leist ordered freed African slaves to work for him. When they dared to demand wages, he had their women whipped (Speitkamp 2005, 68, 138). While the AfD's claim concerning the eventual outlawing of the slave trade is not factually incorrect, its not mentioning other forms of forced labor by colonial and imperial powers skews the representation of colonialism to serve an apologetic desire.

The AfD text's claim about the improvement of living conditions under German colonial rule as a consequence of the colonial "reform policy" under secretary of state Dernburg is postulated, but nowhere supported by evidence. Historical research does not endorse the view. Dernburg did in fact abolish the tax on huts and limited corporal punishment, but during his office mixed-race marriages remained forbidden, forced labor and land theft went on as before, and German colonial policy was still geared to maximize the exploitation of indigenous labor power (Speitkamp 2005, 140–41; van Laak 2005, 8; Utermark 2011, 343–46). In his PhD thesis on the Dernburg reforms in German colonial policy, the historian Sören Utermark concludes: "There has definitely been no fundamental improvement of the living conditions of Africans in the German colonies in the Dernburg era. On the contrary, Dernburg's policy

5 perlentaucher. Das Kulturmagazin: Egon Flaig. Weltgeschichte der Sklaverei. Web: <https://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/egon-flaig/weltgeschichte-der-sklaverei.html>

of reform has accelerated the process of impoverishment of the indigenous population” (Utermark 2011, 344). Regarding the expansion of infrastructure and especially the railways, historical research points out a) that the actual work of building the infrastructure was performed by African forced laborers; b) that its objective was to allow for a more effective exploitation of natural resources exported from the colonies; and c) that it also served the transport of soldiers to the front and the transport of prisoners of war into concentration camps (Zimmerer 2004, 27; Zeller 2004, 72; Rodney 2018, 251–52; Grewe 2018, 501). All three points render it quite difficult to argue that the expansion of infrastructure benefited the colonized or even entailed “significant improvements of living conditions.” Again, the text exhibits an extremely partial reading of history which systematically leaves out significant facts that do not fit the premeditated conclusion: that the Europeans did the Africans a great service by conquering their countries and establishing an undemocratic system of racialized rule. This discursive strategy could be called a selective reading. As David Campbell (1998) has pointed out, this strategy is a standard technique wherever political struggles require the construction of narratives on the basis of some facts while ignoring other facts inconvenient to the cause. However, rarely has the contortion of historical facts been as blatant as here.

The alleged benefits of German colonial rule pointed out in “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” serve to discredit what is described as the “undifferentiated and untenable categorization of the entire colonial period as ‘criminal’” (AfD 2019, 3). As similar points are made on pages 1, 2, 4, and 10, this can be identified as the central thesis of the text. The AfD criticizes that the politics of remembrance of the German government mentions German colonialism next to the dictatorships of National Socialism and State Socialism in the GDR (AfD 2019, 4). In their view, this does not do justice to the benign foreign rule of the German Empire. So, their central discursive objective seems to be to disrupt the chain of equivalence between these three regimes and to achieve a status for German colonial rule as not entirely negative or criminal, based on their own “nuanced” view on the period. This has repercussions for present debates on restitution, reparations and further issues

connected to North-South relations like migration and development cooperation.

3.3. Postcolonial Studies and Cultural Marxism

If German colonial rule is not guilty of genocide and partly led to improvements for the living conditions of the colonized, as “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” claims, this begs the question why it is viewed so negatively in the German public and recently even by the German government. The AfD’s answer is that since the 1990s there was an ideologically driven anti-Western “postcolonial turn” leading to a “discourse of guilt,” although a closer look reveals that behind the “fancy labels” of postcolonial or decolonial studies we find “nothing more than a restaging of anti-imperialist theories inspired by cultural Marxism” (AfD 2019, 9). The recent focus on culture, identities and the deconstruction of knowledge had led to a shift from the history of the real to that of discourse. “Post- or decolonial studies do not care about the facts any longer” and in their “most extreme variants deny that there is a connection between the history located in the world of language and the world of real history” (AfD 2019, 10). The text quotes a statement accusing the approach to use “intellectual terror” in their discrediting of critics like Nooke or Gilley as racists and in attacking the Enlightenment principles of universality and freedom of speech while ignoring basic academic standards (AfD 2019, 10).

Part of this diagnosis is certainly correct. As mentioned in section 1, the postcolonial turn – first in literary and cultural studies, later in history and finally in the social sciences – did shift the perspective on colonialism. That this was driven by ideology is of course true if by ideology we understand a political world view. In this case it was driven by a political world view which decidedly rejects asymmetries based on colonial assumptions of some people being less rational and capable of self-government than others. If ideology is understood in opposition to science, then the text fails to provide evidence showing where the postcolonial approach is less scientific than other percep-

tions of North-South relations. The characterization as “anti-Western” is certainly wrong regarding postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha (1994), who insists on deconstructing the dichotomies between powerful colonizers and helpless colonized, or Stuart Hall who points out that postcolonial studies depart from a “clear-cut politics of binary oppositions” (Hall 1996, 244). The attribution of all crimes of colonialism to the West is certainly avoided here. Yet there may be a grain of truth in the characterization of “anti-Western” of some of the more radical proponents of decolonial studies such as Hamid Dabashi (2015) or Walter Mignolo (2015). And the same might hold true for some accusations of racism launched by followers of this school, although the point of contention probably is how wide or narrow a definition of the term racism is appropriate. The relationship between postcolonialism and Marxism proclaimed in “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” seems to have been assumed on political grounds while remaining ignorant of the criticism that the latter camp articulated towards the former (and partly vice versa). However, to deduce from a poststructuralist epistemology that some (!) of the postcolonial and decolonial authors share that they would not care about facts, is simply a gross misrepresentation which can only be explained by the intent to discredit this school of thought. As for the attacks on Enlightenment principles and universality, for most of the post- and decolonial scholars their criticism is primarily that these principles were applied only to the White (and male and propertied) part of the population – as shown by France’s execution of women’s rights proponent Olympe de Gouge and of the warfare conducted against rebellious slaves in Saint Domingue (today’s Haiti). Both had merely demanded equal rights.

Finally, the AfD’s claim about the impingement of the freedom of speech in today’s academia is hardly representative of postcolonial studies scholars in general. The paranoid focus on occasional cases of anti-racist “cancel culture” obscures the view on the much more massive attack on academic freedoms conducted by right-wing regimes muzzling universities in Hungary, Turkey, Russia and Iran, but also reactionary at-

tempts to link anti-racism to Islamist terrorism and Stalinist censorship in some European states.⁶

We can see that the discursive strategy of discrediting is applied again on the grounds of an association with Marxism, but also through labelling postcolonial studies as “anti-Western” – as if such characterizations would suffice to rob any argument of its plausibility. Obviously the AfD seeks to establish discursive limits in the public space which function as if this was the case, based on a binary logic. In the chains of equivalence constructed in the text, the critique of colonialism (in the name of equal rights) is associated with “ideological” Marxism, anti-Westernism, anti-Enlightenment thinking, authoritarianism and intellectual terrorism, while on the other side of the discursive fence we find those who defend freedom of speech, the Enlightenment, the West – and beneficial colonial rule over cultural inferiors outside of Europe. Even beyond the question in how far it makes sense to associate only the critique of colonialism with ideology, but not the defense of the West: The construction of these chains of equivalence suggests that sympathy for one element of the chain by implication leads to favoring the others as well; it serves the overarching aim of legitimizing colonial rule and resemanticizing it as liberating and benign.

3.4. Current Debates on Restitution, Reparations and Street Names

This positive resemanticization of colonialism has major consequences for current debates about restitution of cultural artifacts from German museums, the naming of streets after colonial officers and politicians, and the question of reparations for former colonies. These public initiatives are attributed to the influence of postcolonial studies and cultural Marxism.

6 Decolonising Development. Coast Action CA19129: Statement in the threat of academic authoritarianism. Web: <https://decolonise.eu/statement-on-the-threat-of-academic-authoritarianism/>

Regarding the debate about restitution of cultural artifacts in European museums, the AfD argues in “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” that colonialism could not be reduced to the “original sin” of colonial violence but that the work of many decades for the “collective memory of humanity” had to be taken into account (AfD 2019, 11). Quoting media theory professor Erhard Schüttpeitz, they claim that the European museums had contributed to preserve “history and soul of the African peoples” (AfD 2019, 11). This and the concept of inalienable property should be turned against the “inquisitorial logic” of the “propagandists of restitution” who would assume the owners of such artifacts to be guilty of robbery (AfD 2019, 12). Restitution, the text claims, would transform this inalienable property to “profane,” “commercial property” which would lead to historical and anthropological amnesia (AfD 2019, 12). The “sale of indulgences” (“Ablasshandel”) with which the promoters of restitution would assume to get rid of the “contaminations” and the “multi-dimensionality” of the colonial period should be countered determinedly (AfD 2019, 12).

Interestingly, this argument reverses the roles: those who insist on remembering the crimes of colonialism are made responsible for amnesia and commercializing the cultural artifacts of the colonized. Again, the motive of a more differentiated view on the complex situation of colonialism is invoked. And again, different arguments have to be disentangled. Obvious polemics about inquisition and propaganda aside, the AfD says the following: The first argument claims that the artifacts belonged to the collective memory of humanity and not simply to those who had originally crafted them: Europeans define that African artifacts do not belong to them, but to the whole of humanity – and the defenders of nationalism suddenly become the pioneers of cosmopolitanism. The second argument claims that by keeping them in their museums, the keepers had preserved not only the artifacts, but the history and soul of the African peoples: Europeans have done both humanity and Africans a great service in appropriating and preserving these artifacts, because, and this is a necessary implication, Africans themselves would not have been capable of preserving them (and thus, the text adds, their history and their soul). A (more implicit) third argument seems to be that the

museums themselves, through their decade-long care for the artifacts, had become the rightful owners: if one manages to keep stolen goods long enough, they are magically transformed from stolen goods into rightful property. The fourth argument is that by returning the artifacts to their rightful owners, the artifacts would lose their non-profane (sacred?) quality and become commodities: A clear case of subversive semantics: Suddenly having second thoughts about their own rules of property, the robbers become the preservers, the profaners become the defenders of the sanctity of the artifacts in the name of a common heritage of humanity. The fifth and last argument assumes that those who demand restitutions would do so in an illusionary attempt to leave behind the complexities of colonialism for a morally pure, uncontaminated image of it, using the analogy of medieval Christians paying money for their sins so that they could still go to heaven. Serious attempts to alleviate colonial debt are cynically reinterpreted as attempts at historical amnesia and purification. This amounts to saying: colonialism was a complex and dirty business and you cannot change that by simply giving back stolen goods – and therefore we should keep the goods. Here, all sorts of ascriptions to and characterizations of artifacts of non-European origin, but also to (seemingly history-less) African people are being invoked to represent the matter as complicated and obscure the simple solution that stolen goods should be given back.⁷ In the AfD view, robbery can still be legitimate if the robbed goods are defined as common human heritage, transforming them into a higher, “inalienable” (AfD 2019, 12) kind of property. If the rightful owners are defined as unable to preserve their own history and identity, returning their possessions would amount to their imminent destruction – apart from giving in to historically amnesiac propaganda. The notorious right-nationalist “Schlussstrichmentalität” – the desire to erase the unsavory parts of the national past and let it be forgotten – is here subversively projected on those who initiated the collective memory of German colonialism in the first place.

7 For a more detailed discussion of these questions see Sarr and Savoy 2018.

Regarding the question of reparations, “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” demands that there should be no reparations for the victims of colonial warfare. Curiously, as a justification the authors do not emphasize the alleged benefits of colonial rule mentioned throughout the text (see section 3.2) but point to the financial transfers to Namibia in the context of development cooperation (870 million Euros, or 348 Euros per person; AfD 2019, 1). This, the authors propose, would prove that Germany has faced its historical responsibility. Therefore, demands for reparation should be emphatically rejected (AfD 2019, 3). While it may be controversial whether forced labor and genocide can be financially compensated in the first place, the sum seems massively inadequate in the light of the crimes committed under German colonial rule. Would the AfD parliamentarians see this as an adequate compensation if Germany had been occupied and plundered for decades and ravaged by war and a part of its people worked to death in concentration camps? The double standards are obvious.

Concerning the streets named after colonial “pioneers” or “travelers,” “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” rejects the “undifferentiated perspective” of renaming them (AfD 2019, 2). Personalities whose actions needed to be understood in the historical context of “claims for civilization” but partly could be seen as “honorable” even according to present-day standards (e.g., against slavery), so the argument goes, should not be indiscriminately named “colonial criminals” (AfD 2019, 2). Also, this renaming would “erase history” from public spaces (AfD 2019, 2). Therefore, controversial names should be kept and where appropriate put into historical context (AfD 2019, 3). However, if all names of streets name after colonial officers and politicians should be kept, it is difficult to see in what way this would be a more differentiated perspective than replacing them. Likewise, the threat of amnesia or erasing history is invoked, despite the obvious facts that the postcolonial and decolonial initiatives are precisely oriented toward remembering history, but from a different perspective. Neither would new street names (e.g., remembering people involved in anti-colonial struggles) erase history, but they would recenter official historical memory. German history certainly has not been erased by renaming the countless

Adolf-Hitler-streets after the end of the Third Reich. Just as in the context of restitution, a new and more critical way of dealing with history is rhetorically subverted into a threat of collective amnesia.

4. Conclusion

“Deutsche Kolonialzeit” employs numerous discursive strategies to legitimize colonial rule. The most remarkable ones are, first, that the AfD claims to occupy a strictly scientific perspective based on facts, using seventy-four footnotes and quoting numerous professors to invoke academic authority, denouncing normative interpretations and ideologically driven arguments from the critics of colonialism, while at the same time either ignoring or distorting facts and academic research which does not fit into their argument about imperial Germany’s benign colonialism. One of the most blatant moves is to suggest that prominent historians questioned the fact that the colonial war against the Herero and Nama was a genocide while in fact they say the opposite. Secondly, the text discursively constructs a chain of equivalences between on the one hand the Enlightenment, universal values, the West and an affirmative view of colonialism and, on the other, between postcolonial and decolonial studies, Marxism, the GDR, a world of discourse unrelated to facts, anti-Western sentiments, unfounded accusations of racism and intellectual terror. The objective of these discursive strategies is to legitimize German colonial rule.

The narrative about the benefits of German colonial rule has been shown to be misguided and based on an extremely selective reading of history. Replacing slavery with another kind of forced labor and forcing the indigenous population to build infrastructure under deadly conditions can hardly be regarded as beneficial for the colonized. Just as Walter Rodney had envisioned (Rodney 2018, 246): “It would be an act of the most brazen fraud to weigh the paltry social amenities provided during the colonial epoch against the exploitation, and to arrive at the conclusion that the good outweighed the bad.” However, I would argue that even if the weighing is obviously unfavorable for the sympathizers of

colonialism, the act of weighing itself should be interrogated. Because even if the colonizers had in fact established health systems which benefitted the colonized, would this legitimize the subjugation and destruction of pre-colonial societies? In the context of Germany, none but the most die-hard right-wing extremists would dare to publicly defend National Socialism because of its successes in reducing unemployment and building motorways. The respect towards the victims (acquired in long decades of fighting for a self-critical politics of remembrance) has led to certain discursive red lines in the public debate. As shown by “Pros and Cons debates” in textbooks in German secondary schools (Marmer and Ziai 2015), such boundaries do not yet exist in the treatment of colonialism in Germany. It seems that so far, some victims are more equal than others.

We can conclude that the legitimization of German colonial rule in “Deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten” has the objective of breaking the chain of equivalence between National Socialism, Socialist dictatorship and Empire in German history. While the former two are almost unequivocally denounced as “unjust regimes,” the AfD desperately attempts to rehabilitate the third. It seriously argues that a political system based on racist superiority of White Europeans should not be seen as criminal in principle and deserves a more nuanced evaluation. This can be understood in the context of the German public debate and the discursive boundaries mentioned above: after the battle for a positive image of National Socialism has been lost in the past decades (the Historikerstreit and the controversy about the Wehrmachtsausstellung probably have been the last nails in the coffin), for the new right in Germany the Empire has become the sole object for retaining a positive image of German nationalism, militarism, masculinism and superiority. And here they feel that they are losing the battle for hegemony to postcolonial studies and “cultural Marxism”. In this context, they are conceding the criminal character of National Socialism and the hegemonic view on the Holocaust only to claim that colonialism has to be seen in a more positive light and that postcolonial critics engage in Stalinist and antisemitic practices (see also AfD 2022). The analyzed text should thus be read as an attempt to turn the tide in this losing battle. This ar-

ticle can be seen academically as an analysis of the discursive strategies and factual flaws in this attempt – and politically as an opposing contribution in this battle.

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