

A Response to Horst Bredekamp

In an op-ed entitled “**Fanatics of Purity**”, published on March 8 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), the prominent art historian Horst Bredekamp — a founding director of the Humboldt Forum, and a director of the international research group of which I am a member — declares “postcolonialism” and “political correctness” to be nothing less than a prelude to fascism. Notice that I place “postcolonialism” in quotes here, since Bredekamp nowhere defines or fleshes out this invisible adversary which, if one were to follow his word, is everywhere and nowhere: corroding, like an acid, the genuine “anti-colonial” stance of which the Humboldt Forum is supposed to be a shimmering example. I will return to the reasons for these claims, which are connected with the main question at issue in this blog post: Bredekamp’s attempt to link this nebulous “postcolonialism” with the most infamous factor in German history, antisemitism. Yet precisely against the backdrop of this weighty accusation — which he does not even attempt to ground in fact — his own rhetorical maneuvers appear dubious if not downright dangerous.

His article is a byproduct of a contemporary debate in the German media about “identity politics” instigated by his “comrade-in-arms”, the Social Democratic politician Wolfgang Thierse. In a February 22 article in the FAZ, “**How Much Identity Can Society Tolerate?**”, Thierse vents his frustration at a heterogeneous group of phenomena which he associates with leftist identity politics, from gender pronouns to the removal of statues and renaming of streets. Although he appears virtually oblivious to the obstacles and inequalities which many minorities face in Germany today, Thierse motivates his comments to plead for a ‘rational’ democratic society in which all parties participate equally and are represented equally. Bredekamp, by contrast, hitches his wagon to the “identity politics” debate only in order to retrench already fierce oppositions and lash out at his (real and imaginary) opponents. Although much can be said concerning his construction of a threat from the left that

is “more dangerous” than the far right, I will focus here only on one aspect of his article that should concern readers of this blog. I am speaking of Bredekamp’s rhetorical ploy to exonerate the embattled Humboldt Forum of involvement in any history of colonial collecting by reference to “two great Jewish scholars”: Aby Warburg and Franz Boas.

According to Bredekamp, the Humboldt Forum is the institutional inheritor of a universalist, worldly and “liberal” tradition of German ethnology that preceded not only the nation’s acquisition of official colonies, but also German nationhood itself: “the tradition of the revolutionary Georg Forster, the brothers Humboldt and Jewish scholars like Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal.” In a related [text](#) published last year, I discuss another name often invoked in this litany, Adolf Bastian, and the relevance of his nineteenth-century vision to the project of the Humboldt Forum as its founding directors have formulated it. Far from being neglected, as he suggests, the anti-hierarchical spirit of such naturalists, ethnologists and *Völkerpsychologen* has been the subject of extensive scholarship (in a forthcoming article I also explore the work of the remarkable ethnologist Karl von den Steinen, who is singled out in the FAZ piece). Bredekamp is right to suggest that there is much from this liberal and pluralist tradition that deserves be saved – in much the same spirit, I would add, as salvage anthropology itself sought to “save” the cultures of Indigenous peoples and so to “preserve in a microcosm what modernity was destroying,” as the article puts it. Never mind that ‘modernity’ in this context functions merely as a euphemism for Europeans with guns, a state of affairs about which nineteenth-century ethnologists like Bastian and Theodor Waitz at least had a split consciousness.

Not so Bredekamp: his insistence upon this neat legend of German liberal ethnology presupposes a pristine post-Enlightenment lineage, a history of ideas without any messy entanglements on the ground in sites of imperial or colonial expansion and plunder – something for which he has nevertheless been all too happy to blame Britain, France, Spain and other European powers. To be sure, Germany’s colonial

empire was modest by British standards (a dubious honor). But if both he and former Humboldt Forum founding director Neil MacGregor have made reference to this highly selective genealogy of the distinctly German tradition of ethnology, which sometimes includes Herder and even Leibniz, that is precisely in order to deny the embeddedness of the Berlin collections within a densely networked and transnational colonial context that existed well before Bismarck convened the Berlin Conference. The museum directors' strategy for deflecting postcolonial critique consists, simply put, in a flight to an idealized pre-coloniality.

But this is not all. Bredekamp's essay in the FAZ is further motivated by his belief that this liberal tradition of German ethnology is under threat: "Anyone who recalls this achievement today is denounced as an exculpatory witness to right-wing radical thought." This can hardly be said of the historians upon whom he has so long relied to bolster the legacies of a liberal ethnology: H. Glenn Penny, Han Vermeulen and Matti Bunzl. But then again, neither are those scholars invested in constructing a creation myth for a national institution that, down to its very architecture, glorifies the German imperial past. Bredekamp, on the contrary, has spent years deploying a triumphalist narrative of the "radically tolerant" German ethnological tradition to insulate the Humboldt Forum against any form of criticism. Hence the irony when he writes in the FAZ that "the rhetorical erasure of this tradition, as a consequence of a totalitarian presentism, pursues the same reactionary policy that was instigated by the *Herrenreiter* of the *Kaiserreich* and the culture-destroyers of the National Socialists and which consigned the writings of Boas to the flames." No postcolonial theorist, to my knowledge, has expressed any inclination to extinguish the memory of Franz Boas or Aby Warburg, much less to orchestrate mass book burnings. It is rather Bredekamp's own resolute denial of German ethnology's manifold and contradictory pasts – its intertwined histories of pluralism *and* intolerance – which seems closest to a whitewashing of the past.

The reader of the op-ed is soon informed that the "postcolonial" rejection of this

sanitized narrative of German universalism has still more sinister roots. “The most chilling feature of postcolonialism,” Bredekamp alleges, “lies in its structurally anti-Jewish consequence.” In lieu of a genuine argument, he makes a throwaway reference to the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, who last year was smeared with “antisemitism” by the German press based on an allusion he made to parallels between Israeli settlement policy and apartheid South Africa. In the farcical media scandal that ensued, Mbembe’s own words were quickly drowned out by a chorus of (invariably) white German men, for whom one assumes the mere whiff of “antisemitism” provided welcome vindication of their own longstanding discomfort with that amorphous and far more threatening word, “postcolonialism”. It is at best misguided, and at worst a treacherous dog-whistle, for Bredekamp to exploit a philosopher from a former German colony as his sole marked target in a diatribe against postcolonial theory in general (by which he really means critics of the Humboldt Forum).

This self-appointed champion of radical tolerance, who does not even pretend to take seriously Mbembe’s widely-received books on the history of race and racism, is *much* more perturbed by “the omission of the impulse of Jewish anthropologists, which is highly sensitive to all questions of racism.” This tradition is not only “never addressed” (by postcolonialists, one can only assume), but according to Bredekamp it is even being actively *repressed*. “This strategy is in line with the goal of backdrop shift from Auschwitz to Namibia,” he writes in reference to the 1904–7 genocide of the Herero and Nama in what was then German Southwest Africa. For Bredekamp, it would seem that to even allude to this event amounts to that most mortal sin, “denying the incomparability of the Holocaust.” For just as he never tires of reminding us of the “Jewish” origins of Boas and Warburg, so too does he painstakingly reiterate the inviolable sanctity of the Holocaust, whose “incomparability” it is evidently his task and duty, as a German, to protect and preserve. Yet while the Shoah is certainly unique, it is by no means incomparable – were that the case, words like “genocide” would probably be unnecessary. Rather,

the Holocaust here lives up to its etymology as a kind of sacrifice by fire, which in a Christian context both sacralizes the Jew as victim and self-servingly fabricates a higher moral purpose out of mass murder.

Thus whereas Mbembe merely serves Bredekamp as a stand-in scapegoat, Boas and Warburg by contrast get wantonly instrumentalized in the service of the art historian's fairy-tale version of Germany's egalitarian and liberal past – of which the Humboldt Forum is once again presented as a predestined return and recuperation. The FAZ article's nagging insistence upon the Jewish identities of Warburg and Boas goes beyond the usual guilt-absolving nostalgia for a "German-Jewish dialogue" before 1933. Indeed, it also fails to acknowledge the ways in which the pressures of Jewish assimilation in early twentieth-century Germany might relate to the very different pressures of globalized assimilation today (pressures of which Wolfgang Thierse's "majoritarian" outbursts are symptomatic).

To speak of "identity" here, as Bredekamp does, ironically lays bare the ways in which identity per se is produced, and by whom. It is by now well known that Jewish identity was not something which the emphatically assimilated Jews Boas or Warburg actively embraced, so much as a racialized outsider status which was imposed upon them by a profoundly antisemitic society. It is curious indeed that Bredekamp fails to mention Boas's fateful emigration to America at 29 – due, in part, to growing antisemitism in Germany; that was in 1887. Warburg for his part never felt comfortable with his hereditary Jewishness, a factor he largely sought to hide (e.g., preferring to print his given name with a simple "A." instead of the tell-tale "Aby" or "Abraham"). At the same time, he was never allowed to ignore it; some have even argued that his remarkably prescient fears of anti-Jewish persecution contributed to his protracted mental illness. In neither case does the predicate "Jewish" seem entirely adequate to the complicated identities of these "great scholars", who indeed in their time would have much rather been accepted simply as Germans.

On the other hand, this imposed predicate, and its reflexive associations within

contemporary German cultural politics (or dare I say identity politics), are perfectly attuned to ongoing conservative efforts to obscure the darker sides of German anthropology and ethnology. That, however, is an issue which cannot be evaded by talismanic reference to a few “safe” figures. One wonders what Boas and Warburg would have thought about having their names emblazoned beneath the golden cross of the Berliner Schloss. One also wonders why Bredekamp should insist upon treating the Forum as some sort of messianic restoration of eighteenth and nineteenth-century scholarly values – utterly divorced from their real-world commitments and compromises – rather than admitting alternative models for anti-colonial partnership and dialogue in the present century. (I have already expressed my own hopes and doubts about these possibilities in the aforementioned [text](#).)

While he professes to project a sober voice of reason, Bredekamp’s assertions in the FAZ sadly reflect a particularly contorted form of German chauvinism, one which has absorbed all the tactics of white identity politics yet does not shy from enlisting the victims of German antisemitism and mass murder in its name. In the end, his words work to the detriment of the very institution he purports to defend, and which for better or worse now stands as an open question in the heart of Berlin. For by refusing to recognize the deep tensions between liberal ideals and imperial realities, between ethnological universalism and racial injustice, Bredekamp has demonstrated a fatal deficit of critical self-awareness, cultural relativism, and genuine goodwill – virtues which one imagines would be essential prerequisites to realizing the kind of humanistic and “non-hierarchical” museum he describes.

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