

Censorship and Memory: Thinking Outside the Box with Facebook, Goebbels, and Xi Jinping

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I

In September 2021 Facebook cancelled 150 accounts linked to the *Querdenker*-movement, a German anti-vaxxer group peddling right-wing conspiracy theories about the Covid-pandemic.¹ Facebook took the step because the movement had repeatedly incited violence and spread false health care information, thus causing ‘coordinated social harm’ in violation of company policy.² Facebook’s move was unprecedented. Proud of its track record as a defender of free speech, the company had never before launched a similarly comprehensive and coordinated effort seeking to silence a particular political movement. A few days later, YouTube followed suit by banning the accounts of prominent anti-vaccine activists including Robert Kennedy Jr.³ The censorship decisions of Facebook and YouTube have significantly reduced the digital reach of important anti-vaxxers, although they can still publish their fact-free propaganda on other, less popular platforms.

Facebook’s initiative reflects a turning point in the discussions about the regulation of public speech. During the pandemic, scientists, journalists, and politicians advised restricting the circulation of Covid untruth to save lives. They assumed that pushing Covid extremists into digital ghettos would increase vaccination rates because fewer people are exposed to anti-vaccination propaganda.⁴ Following this logic,

- 1 The verb *querdenken*, now associated with the *Querdenker* movement as a result of a successful exercise in self-branding, used to be a positively connoted term meaning thinking unconventionally, against the grain, or outside the box.
- 2 ‘Corona-Leugner. Facebook löscht knapp 150 “Querdenken“-Kanäle als “schädliches Netzwerk,”’ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 September 2021, <<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/facebook-querdenken-ballweg-1.5413041>> [accessed 10 September 2021].
- 3 Davey Alba, ‘YouTube Bans All Anti-vaccine Misinformation,’ *New York Times*, 29 September 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/technology/youtube-anti-vaxx-ban.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=Technology>> [accessed 18 October 2021].
- 4 Toby Helm, ‘Social Media Firms Must Face Sanction for ‘Anti-Vax’ Content, Demands Labour,’ *The Guardian*, 15 November 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/15/social-media-firms-must-face-sanction-for-anti-vax-content-demands-labour>> [accessed 23 October 2021]. See also Neil Johnson and others, ‘The Online Competition Between Pro- and Anti-Vaccination Views,’ *Nature*, 582 (2020), 230–233.

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many observers welcomed Facebook's decision even if they were suspicious about its timing right before federal elections in Germany.⁵

Conceptualizing anti-vaxxing propaganda as vehicles of social memory, and the censorship of said propaganda as social forgetting expands the conceptual and empirical scope of memory studies scholarship. But these limits deserve to be tested because Covid is only the tip of the digital iceberg. The Me-Too, the Black Lives Matter, and the new environmental movement have all raised fundamental questions about the role of media and memory in the perpetuation of discrimination and political disfunction. Frustrated about the persistence of prejudice and the rapidly diminishing chances of climate equilibrium, some activists call into question the principles that have governed public speech in the analogue media landscape crafted by war and postwar generations. Their demands have met with support from liberal institutions like the *New York Times* and prompted social media companies to intensify their content moderation efforts. A confluence of critical voices and practices seeks to redefine the limits of free speech, explore the political potential of media content management, and harness the power of collective forgetting. The expectations informing these initiatives are straight-forward and attractive. A digital mainstream no longer exposed to extremely deceitful and toxic content translates into a more peaceful and successful society.

The Me-Too movement has for instance raised pressing questions about the problem of sexual harm and its relation to sexualized media content. Activists and journalists revisit the sex war debates of the 1980s and 1990s about censorship and pornography with a new agreement emerging between feminist and conservative voices arguing that it is high time to intervene more decisively in the circulation of digital porn.⁶ British authorities have responded to these demands, first by passing a law limiting access to online pornography to adults. When that initiative failed due to technical problems and privacy concerns, parliament drafted new legislation making digital service providers

5 Lisa Hegemann, 'Warum jetzt, Facebook?,' *Die Zeit*, 17 September 2021, <<https://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2021-09/querdenker-facebook-gruppen-sperrung-soziale-medien-kritik>> [accessed 9 October 2021]; Adam Satariano, 'An Experiment to Stop Online Abuse Falls Short in Germany,' *New York Times*, 23 September 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/23/technology/online-hate-speech-germany.html>> [accessed 9 October 2021].

6 Brenda Crossman, *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the Me-Too Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2021); Ross Douthat, 'Let's Ban Porn,' *New York Times*, 10 February 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/opinion/sunday/lets-ban-porn.html>> [accessed 23 October 2021].

responsible for user generated content including abiding by all rules governing pornography and prohibiting sexual harassment.⁷

The concern over sexual harm caused by digital media extends to sexualized and gendered social media feed directed at juvenile consumers. Critics would like to see media content shaped proactively by applying existing censorship laws swiftly and consistently and by crafting new rules specifically geared towards eliminating harmful online content and conduct.⁸ The exasperation with the status quo makes perfect sense. In many countries authorities have been hesitant or unable to apply the full extent of the law to prevent the production and circulation of child and revenge pornography, sanction the publication of explicit content uploaded without consent, and punish online stalking and hate speech directed at women and minorities.⁹

Me-too feminists thus re-write the self-celebratory story of sexual liberation crafted by erstwhile flower power children. They encourage society to rethink the dialectic between violence and the representation of violence, between action and speech, and legislate accordingly. Inbuilt into their demands are important assumptions about the power of collective memory and collective forgetting. The call to recalibrate the algorithms governing Instagram is for example based on the hypothesis that society can be made to forget the implausible body images harming teenage girls.¹⁰ In the same vein, suggestions to reframe the circulation of porn, by way of sex education and censorship, is designed to help society unlearn and disremember destructive male desires informed by porn culture.

Me-too advocates are not alone in their hope to attain social progress through coordinated forgetting. Black Lives Matter activists are similarly convinced that the fight against racism requires important gestures of mnemonic erasure. Across the US, BLM activists have begun to dismantle a memory culture honoring racists and slave holders,

7 Natasha Lomas, 'UK Publishes Draft Online Safety Bill,' *TechCrunch*, 10 May 2021, <<https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/12/uk-publishes-draft-online-safety-bill/>> [accessed 23 October 2021].

8 Kara Swisher, 'Brazen is the Order of the Day,' *New York Times*, 5 October 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/opinion/facebook-blackout-2021.html>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

9 Yaman Akdeniz, *Internet Child Pornography and the Law: National and International Responses* (London: Routledge, 2016); Andy Phippen and Maggie Brennan, *Sexting and Revenge Pornography* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Hanna Kozłowska, 'The World Has Not Figured out How to Stop "Revenge Porn,"' *The Fuller Project*, 28 June 2021, <<https://fullerproject.org/story/the-world-hasnt-figured-out-how-to-stop-revenge-porn/>> [accessed 23 October 2021].

10 Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, 'Facebook Knows Instagram is Toxic for Teenage Girls, Company Documents Show,' *Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739?mod=article_inline> [accessed 22 November 2021].

with Christopher Columbus and the generals of the Confederacy as prominent targets.¹¹ The activists argue compellingly that racists past and present hardly deserve to be celebrated and that their continued veneration constitutes a severe insult to US citizens suffering from racial prejudice. Moreover, by relegating the hero worship of past perpetrators to oblivion and thus interrupting vicious communicative cycles perpetuating racism, they hope to help construct a society that is not built on white privilege. As a result, as Michael Rothberg has pointed out, 'memory work has played a prominent role in the wide-scale demonstrations of 2020' turning 2020 into 'a transformational year in the politics of race and memory.'¹² Obviously, BLM activists do not advocate for forgetting as a matter of principle. They seek to promote self-critical memories of slavery and systemic racism, and positive memories of the civil rights movement. But they are also intent on removing from public spaces the many thoughtless or reckless stories, images, and names that insert into contemporary culture the perpetrators' point of view, rendering their life choices plausible in the past *and* the present. Following this logic would for instance require the Audubon Naturalist Society to change its name because honoring the nineteenth century gifted artist and racist John James Audubon inadvertently sets a mnemonic norm that present-day members should not condone.¹³ As a rule of thumb, an anti-racist society should avoid gestures of memory that would have made unrepentant racists happy, regardless of how unrealistic it would have been to expect repentance from these racists during their lifetime.

Finally, the idea of controlling social recall might also appeal to climate activists since epidemiologists are not the only constituency frustrated by fact-free online propaganda. Environmentalists face similar

11 Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Marouf Hasian and Nicholas Paliewicz, *Memory and Monument Wars in American Cities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Such mnemonic iconoclasm is hardly a new phenomenon. It has for instance occurred on a large scale after the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe as post-communist governments were dismantling the many monuments celebrating Communist leaders and the Red Army, see Aleksandra Kuczynska-Zonik, 'Dissonant Heritage: Soviet Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe,' in *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism*, ed. by Agnieszka Mrozik and Stanislav Holubec (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 101-121.

12 Michael Rothberg, 'Preface: For a Memory Culture Beyond Victims and Perpetrators,' in Valenti-na Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right* (New York: CPL Editions, 2020), pp. 7-19 (p. 18).

13 Melissa Block, 'The National Reckoning over Race and History is Playing Out in the World of Birds,' *NPR*, 15 November 2021, <<https://www.npr.org/2021/11/15/1055749092/the-national-reckoning-over-race-and-history-is-playing-out-in-the-world-of-bird>> [accessed 22 November 2021].

problems as they try to stem the tide of climate change denial. Also in this case, algorithmically induced forgetting seems like a responsible choice because democratic societies are more likely to generate solid majorities in favor of letting go of carbon when voters are not incessantly confused by climate change deniers whose posts have no basis in fact. Time is of the essence; the planet might not have enough time to wait for the truth to prevail in the free-wheeling competition for attention unfolding in cyberspace. And internet service providers like Google and YouTube have already started to de-incentivize the distribution of climate denial content although they are ‘responding to concerns from advertisers’ rather than their CEOs’ conscience.¹⁴

Anti-vaccination and anti-climate change propaganda, racist slurs traded online, and misogynist porn – these are not sites of memory reflecting the research traditions of memory studies. For obvious methodological reasons, memory studies experts have favored dealing with sites of memory with clear material and institutional boundaries and containing explicit references to the historical past such as memorials, museums, film, and television. As a result, more ephemeral sites of memory, for example popular music, have received little scholarly attention despite the fact that pop culture supplies important sites of memory, for instance by providing anchoring points of collective identity and political activism.¹⁵ Moreover, it lies in the nature of digital media platforms that they accelerate rhythms of cultural and mnemonic exchange and blur, and at times eliminate, the boundaries between past and present.¹⁶ The assemblages of sound, images, and language that tumble through social media streams may contain few clearly recognizable references to the historical past, but they nevertheless provide a basic grid of conscious and unconscious memory for its users. Consequently, setting limits on media content will indeed influence the evolution of future memories. Alone the question remains if that kind of manipulation yields predictable results. One might think that removing Audubon’s name can only have a didactic effect on people who remember

14 Marianne Spring, ‘Google, YouTube Ban Ads on Climate Misinformation,’ *BBC.com*, 8 October 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-58831379>> [accessed 23 October 2021].

15 Ann Rigney, ‘Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic,’ *Memory Studies*, 11.3 (2018), 368–380; Wulf Kansteiner and Andreas Steen, ‘Music, Death, and Memory: Love Songs of World War II in Comparative Perspective,’ *History & Memory*, forthcoming 2022.

16 Martin Pogacar, *Media Archaeologies, Micro-Archives and Story-Telling: Re-presencing the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Andrew Hoskins, ‘The Restless Past. An Introduction to Digital Memory and Media,’ in *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*, ed. by Hoskins (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–24.

the removal decision. But then again perhaps forgetting Audubon is relevant for an altogether different reason. We do not want people of color to find themselves in the unpleasant situation that the naturalist society that they consider a positive force in society, perhaps because they are a member of it, is named after a person holding indefensible opinions about them. We want to be able to assume that individuals we honor in public deserve to be honored according to our values not theirs. Apparently, responsible forgetting is an exciting but also tricky new resource in the tool box of memory politics.

II

The desire to control media streams in sophisticated ways and give them a decisive ethical twist is caused by a sense of failure. Late twentieth century institutions of cultural memory have not provided the moral guidance they were supposed to supply. The cosmopolitan strategy of inculcating humanity against collective violence by remembering past carnage has simply not worked as planned. Cosmopolitan memory has established the Holocaust as an absolute, transnationally shared moral reference point¹⁷ but the well-funded and professionally curated mnemonic infrastructure recalling the world wars in graphic, self-reflexive detail could not prevent the rise of hate speech, hate crimes, and right-wing radicalization across the West. And academia has taken note of the failure. Consequently, the activists' exasperation with media coverage promoting lies and intolerance corresponds to academic frustration about the inability of existing memory culture to safeguard human rights.

Unfortunately, the institutionalization of cosmopolitan memory since the 1990s appears to have been based on faulty assumptions including the notion that public authorities can mete out moral values to govern people's lives. But human behavior is situationally shaped through adaptation to complex power configurations. In addition, humans make sense of their lives by following distinctive logics separating ingroups from outgroups. As a result, people might in one situation wholeheartedly

17 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple, 2006).

agree with the cosmopolitan message and, in a different setting, be easily coaxed into committing atrocities against perceived others.¹⁸

The misconception of the relation between values and behavior explains why the cosmopolitan memory standards, which have been adopted by the UN and a wide range of supranational institutions and NGOs, often achieve the opposite of what they are designed to accomplish. The standards stipulate for example a duty to implement a victim-centered memory agenda for the purpose of alleviating ethnic tensions.¹⁹ But, as Lea David has argued, the idea of measuring and materially compensating historical suffering creates social inequalities pushing different ethnic groups into a 'gladiator arena to fight each other' as part of a 'zero sum game' of competitive victimhood.²⁰ Moreover, in a world primarily imagined as an assemblage of sovereign national communities, feelings of belonging thrive at or below the level of national identity. Consequently, all human rights memorial initiatives need to be filtered through the institution of the nation state, with dire consequences for the universal ideal of human rights: 'The human rights memorialisation agenda does not transform people into human rights believers, but rather reinforces the importance of their national, ethnic, or religious belonging.'²¹

In light of the parallel development of Holocaust memory and right-wing ideologies, critics like Valentina Pisanty call into question the fundamental axiom of cosmopolitan memory, i.e., that memory of the Holocaust is an effective cure for racism and intolerance. She would like to see empirical proof for the claim that 'emotional identification with the victims' past automatically brings with it a burst of ethical maturity and political awareness' and does not risk 'retraumatizing new generations.'²² In addition, the legal framework erected to establish and protect Holocaust memory appears to have inadvertently caused the very rise of the right that Holocaust memory was allegedly designed to prevent in the first place. Between 1990 and 2016 all countries of the EU have adopted laws against Holocaust denial, efforts that were coordinated and codified in a European framework

18 Sarah Gensburger and Sadrine LeFranc, *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillian, 2020).

19 Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 4, 210.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 203.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 212–213.

22 Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right* (New York: CPL Editions, 2020), pp. 83, 208.

law of 2008.²³ However, rather than curtailing Holocaust denial, the battery of laws provided a fabulous political platform for right-wing activists 'since negationism has always used censorship as the main driver of its proselytizing efforts.'²⁴ At the same time, the laws have undermined freedom of expression, especially in Eastern Europe, and thus constitute an assault on 'the fundamental principle that makes the very existence of a democracy possible.'²⁵

Clearly, there are good reasons for politicians, journalists, academics, and many citizens to be concerned about structural violence and our memory culture's inability to curb its reproduction.²⁶ Feeling pinned to the wall by wave after wave of digitally enhanced hate speech, political and cultural elites that used to have a sense of control over print and electronic media seek to regain the upper hand and get a handle on the questionable media fare inundating their smart phones. Isn't it plausible that hours of immersive enjoyment of violent gaming contributes to social violence? That freely trading racial slurs online enhances present day racism? And that societies inundated with misogynistic online porn are likely to breed sexual predators? Ostensibly, the digital message is the deed causing cycles of self-radicalization, unfettered verbal, and possibly also physical aggression, and a rapid disenchantment with traditional rules of social and political conduct. In an act of desperation, we are entering a new era of collective memory management hoping that our digital tools might be able to induce processes of purposeful social forgetting. As a result, long-standing truisms are up for grabs. Forget for instance the cynical advice doled out to generations of bullied children that 'sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me.' After having learned that sticks and stones *and* words can hurt us because words frame the experience of psychological trauma, we are now realizing that words are also setting into motion the very sticks and stones we have been afraid of in the first place.

If the critics are right, cosmopolitan memory registers somewhere between dysfunctional and downright harmful. It has apparently

23 Maria Elosequi, 'Denial or Justification of Genocide as a Criminal Offense in European Law,' in *Racial Justice, Policies, and Courts' Legal Reasoning in Europe*, ed. by Elosequi and Christina Hermida (Cham: Springer, 2017), pp. 49–90.

24 Pisanty, p. 291.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 268. See also Eric Heinze, *Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

26 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

always served partisan interests and started to undermine the principles of democracy. Plus, since Holocaust memory has been heavily invested in censorship we are facing an intriguing dilemma. Do we need more intelligent and more efficient censorship to craft the right memories for the future or are sexism, racism, and carbon dependency most effectively and speedily overcome in a classical liberal setting that renders the publication of some content illegal, for example military secrets, but refrains from censoring any specific opinion however factually untruthful it may be or however ethically disagreeable it may be to other members of society?²⁷ Perhaps a historical excursion can shed light on our dilemma.

III

In the fall of 1942 Goebbels had a problem. One of the superstars of Nazi entertainment culture, Lale Andersen, who generally collaborated enthusiastically with her Nazi superiors, displayed a troublesome degree of independence, for instance by maintaining close ties to Jewish emigres in Switzerland. With his tight control over cultural production and distribution, Goebbels pulled Anderson from public circulation – with one important exception illustrating the limits of his powers. Andersen's hit *Lili Marlene* continued to dominate the airwaves in Europe.²⁸ The song had gone 'viral' within a few weeks in the summer of 1941 thanks to the propaganda unit of the Nazi military in Belgrade. The German propaganda experts in Serbia and the German troops across Europe had crafted a sacred ritual: every evening at 9:57pm soldiers and civilians would huddle around the wireless listening to Andersen's soulful voice.²⁹ Even Goebbels did not dare mess with the military's independent propaganda units and the troops' music entertainment.

In fact, Goebbels' censorship efforts backfired severely. Andersen's disappearance from the public scene caused false rumors about her incarceration at the hands of the Nazis, rumors eagerly fanned by Allied propaganda. As a result, Andersen and her hit song *Lili Marlene* were effectively and unjustly de-nazified. A song aestheticizing soldierly death and fitting perfectly with Nazi propaganda goals allowed the

27 Pisanty, p. 222.

28 Katja Protte, 'Mythos Lili Marleen,' *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 63 (2004), 355–400 (pp. 377–78).

29 Heike Frey, *Lili Marleen hatt' einen Kameraden. Musik in der Wehrmacht Truppenbetreuung* (Münster: Waxmann, 2020), pp. 38–39.

perpetrators of the Third Reich to have their cake and eat it.³⁰ If they so chose, they could embrace vaguely anti-Nazi sentiments while they dutifully continued to go about their murderous business with *Lili Marlene* playing in the background.³¹ Plus, the song's denazification helped it cross enemy lines and become a great success with Allied troops in properly Americanized and Anglicized versions. To this day, the Nazi hit is considered a NATO classic fostering international understanding and reconciliation. Since the 1990s, the official radio station of the German military, Radio Andernach, has broadcast Lili Marlene every evening at 22.57pm.³² The German peace-keeping troops stationed in the Balkans can party a little longer than their Nazi predecessors.

Equipped with a sizeable budget, considerable professional know-how, an enthusiastic staff, and close ties to the SS, the Nazi propaganda ministry waged a herculean effort to shape German society in a Nazi image and keep up morale. But Goebbels' ministry did not launch the most effective censorship regime in modern history. That dubious distinction goes to the Communist party of China.³³ After a war on two fronts against the Japanese and the Nationalists and after having chased the latter all the way to the island of Taiwan, the Communists faced the challenge of safeguarding power in a vast, war-torn country. They sought to attain that goal through an increasingly ruthless campaign of political repression and cultural genocide. In a campaign of violence and censorship reaching its climax during the years of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the red guards tried to eradicate all cultural content deemed bourgeois, capitalist, decadent, immoral, and foreign which included all music with the exception of explicit Socialist propaganda.³⁴ Often troops went house to house destroying private music collections and punishing their owners. However, many pieces of music survived because under conditions of extreme censorship even innocuous pop songs assumed an aura of resistance becoming sites of memory of pre-war China and

30 Heike Frey, 'Und jeden Abend Lili Marleen: Zur Truppenbetreuung im zweiten Weltkrieg,' in *Paradestück Militärmusik: Beiträge zum Wandel staatlicher Repräsentation durch Musik*, ed. by Peter Moormann, Albrecht Rietzmüller, and Rebecca Wolf (Bielefeld: transkript, 2014), pp. 125–150 (p. 127).

31 Rosa Sala Rose, *The Biography of a Song* (Barcelona: Seebook, 2014).

32 Protte, pp. 393–98.

33 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,' *American Political Science Review*, 107.2 (2013), 1–18.

34 Andreas Steen, 'Propaganda on Shellac, Vinyl and Plastic: The Politics of Record Production during the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–76),' *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 4.2/3 (2017), 221–241; Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

political activism.³⁵ Today, the songs are officially tolerated, also because the party, as powerful as ever, has given up on the fantasy of total control. It permits the 'revival' and circulation of the songs in semi-private settings, effectively de-politicizing them and returning them to their status as mere entertainment products. Many, however, are still locked away in an inaccessible sonic archive, most likely already forgotten by the non-expert.³⁶ China has become a normal dictatorship targeting only clearly designated minorities for cultural extinction.

The censorship experts in Nazi Germany and Communist China have attained mixed memory results. Goebbels kept a warring nation entertained with seemingly apolitical kitsch, maintained a steady flow of anti-Semitic background noise, and destroyed the lives and careers of Jewish and liberal artists condemning many of them to oblivion. But the example of *Lili Marlene* indicates how easily memory management gets off track even for people who are not hampered by any appreciation of free speech and democratic debate. Perhaps the Nazis did not have enough time to lay a solid mnemonic foundation for their worldview or their decisive military defeat destroyed a great deal of their mnemonic credibility. Nationalism and anti-Semitism persisted but not in the specific narrative design favored by Nazi propaganda.

China's radical attempt to replace a whole nation's memory culture also ended in temporary failure. Over the decades, the party leadership recognized that effective political control is best combined with economic liberties. In that spirit, the party has more recently erected an efficient digital memory regime.³⁷ Chinese social media feature lively, even confrontational discussions of China's diverse yet party-friendly cultural scene. At the same time, due to efficient social media censorship, pop culture events and pop icons can quickly disappear from public view as happened in the fall of 2021 to Zhao Wei, one of China's most popular actresses.³⁸ The pro-active content management explains that large segments of Chinese society have no working memory of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and other compromising disasters in

35 Kansteiner and Steen.

36 Andreas Steen, 'Remembering Shanghai Nights: On Jazz, War and the Challenges of a Sonic Archive,' in *East-Asian Music and Musical Instruments in Museum Collections*, ed. by Yu Filipiak and Dorothee Schaab-Hanke (Gössenberg: Ostasien Verlag, 2019), pp. 171-191.

37 Eileen Le Han, *Micro-Blogging Memories: Weibo and Collective Remembering in Contemporary China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Shaohua Guo, *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet: Creative Visibility in the Digital Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

38 Mark Savage, 'Chinese Social Media Site Weibo Suspends 22 K-Pop Accounts,' *BBC.com*, 7 September 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-58479375>> [accessed 21 November 2021].

modern Chinese history.³⁹ However, underneath the surface of a well-maintained facade of collective forgetting, frustrations and memory of these frustrations abound. Many Chinese citizens are exasperated with the serious risks involved in speaking truth to power.

IV

Right around the time the German military revived the *Lili Marlene*-ritual, almost five decades after World War II and three decades before the anti-vaxxers fell victim to Facebook's reluctant censorship efforts, Christopher Browning published his pathbreaking study *Ordinary Men* that almost single-handedly changed the perception of Nazi perpetrators in Western academia and spawned a new wave of perpetrator research.⁴⁰ Browning, applying historical empathy as an analytical tool, wrote in his introduction that 'I must recognize that in the same situation, I could have been either a killer or an evader – both were human.'⁴¹ With these words he issued a timely provocation, arguing that the members of police battalion 101 were normal men living under abnormal circumstances and that these circumstances would transform the vast majority of humans into capable executioners of unarmed civilians including women and children. Browning conceded that the police officers had been prepared for their task in the sense that they 'were immersed in a deluge of racist and anti-Semitic propaganda' like all members of the Nazi society and that the negative stereotypes were exacerbated under the conditions of war.⁴² But the police officers had not received any special ideological or practical training for the mass murder of civilians. In fact, Browning argues that the presence of pervasive racism and a state of war does not turn the Third Reich into an historical exception because there 'are many societies afflicted by traditions of racism and caught in the siege mentality of war.'⁴³ Moreover and more important, Browning highlights a range of ordinary situational and psychological factors that caused the members of the police battalion to become effective killers, including

39 Regina Wai-man Chung and King-wa Fu, 'Tweets and Memories. Chinese Censors Come After Me: Forbidden Voices of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre on Sina Weibo, 2012-2018,' *Journal of Contemporary China* (2021), 1-16.

40 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

41 *Ibid.*, p. xx.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

peer pressure, conformity to group expectations, career concerns, and a desire to comply with authority. Consequently, he concludes that almost all groups of men 'could become killers under such circumstances.'⁴⁴

Browning's arguments are well known to the readers of this journal and they are also somewhat dated because 'recent studies of perpetrators tend to eschew the ordinary/pathological dichotomy to emphasize the multidimensionality of perpetrators and perpetration.'⁴⁵ But Browning's words remind us of the high stakes involved in the discussion of memory politics and censorship. Post-cosmopolitan memory politics and algorithms of forgetting will have to prove their usefulness by keeping humans from turning, yet again, into racist, sexual, and climate perpetrators. In addition, Browning's insights suggest that the discussions about the efficacy of cosmopolitan memory features an important category mistake. The critics of cosmopolitan memory cited above assume that cosmopolitan memory was supposed to prevent the rise of right-wing political parties and right-wing terrorism. But that is an anachronistic view of post-war memory politics. I would suggest that the self-critical mnemonic efforts launched in the West in the six decades after World War II primarily served the purpose of preventing Western societies from again slaughtering each other (and themselves) as they had done during the world wars. Viewed from this perspective, the Holocaust memory codified in the Stockholm Declaration in 2000 is closely related to the Nuremberg memory of Nazism and World War II crafted during the Nuremberg trials of 1945–46. The Nuremberg-Holocaust memory paradigm gave voice to the message of universal human rights but was mostly concerned with preventing the all-out, state-sponsored use of weapons of mass destruction among the industrialized powers that had fought the world wars. Nuremberg-Holocaust memory was firmly focused on preventing large scale collective violence as it had occurred in the trenches of World War I, the gas chambers of the death camps, and as a result of air raids and the use of nuclear weapons in World War II. Nuremberg-Holocaust memory was never designed to prevent individual acts of terrorism, not even individual acts of terrorism of pandemic proportions as they have been occurring in the US. Plus, Holocaust memory has often had an ugly racist underbelly; in its stories and visual presence as they developed since

44 Browning, p. 189.

45 Ugur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson, 'From Perpetrators to Perpetration: Definitions, Typologies, and Processes,' in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Kittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 7–22 (p. 9).

the late 1970s Holocaust memory displayed particular concern for the death of white people.⁴⁶ Judging by this modest yardstick, Nuremberg-Holocaust memory has actually been a success – until now. The West has not destroyed itself yet, although it is on the best way to do so. Therefore, as the political activists and the critics of cosmopolitan memory remind us, the memory cultures of the future have to work much better at preventing violence on a collective *and* an individual scale.

V

Using Browning's study to triangulate above empirical examples from Facebook, Nazi Germany, and China raises pertinent questions about memory and censorship: Do gaming, social media, and digital memory set into motion psychological dynamics that turn people into perpetrators? And if these are realistic concerns can the risks be attributed to specific forms of online behavior and online content that should be censored? Do these worries justify further limiting the right to freedom of expression, a fundamental building block of democratic societies? Or would it make more sense to refrain from such censorship efforts and to take off the books some far-reaching censorship laws that restrict free speech but do not seem to serve any real preventive purpose as, for example, the laws targeting Holocaust denial?

There are no reasons to assume that social media cannot constitute a key factor for setting into motion the situational and psychological dynamics facilitating genocide. Cleverly deployed, Facebook would have been an asset not an impediment to the work of the officers of police battalion 101 since Facebook can be a fabulous tool for exerting peer

46 In May 2021, in an important and timely intervention, Dirk Moses criticized the belief that the Holocaust constitutes a unique genocide and argued in favor of interpreting the Final Solution as a crime of colonialism. In his reflections about Holocaust history and Holocaust memory developed from a post-colonial perspective Moses expresses sympathy for descendants of victims of German colonialism who consider German Holocaust memory racist. But he does not tell his readers if he also considers Holocaust memory racist and what concrete practices of Holocaust memory might channel racist ideologies. Plus, it would be very important to learn how a Holocaust memory developed in a post-colonial narrative framework could avoid the risk of perpetuating racism. Or, to phrase the question in the terms suggested here, how we can learn to forget the racist implications of Holocaust memory with the help of post-colonial theory. Dirk Moses, 'Der Katechismus der Deutschen,' *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 23 May 2021, <<https://geschichtedergewenart.ch/der-katechismus-der-deutschen>> [accessed 30 November 2021].

pressure. At the same time, analogue and electronic media have also played an important role in the preparation and justification of genocidal crimes.⁴⁷

Research about the relationship between violent crimes and social media arrives at similar results. On the one hand, twenty-first century digital media settings, in and of themselves, do not appear to constitute the kind of situational factors that turn people routinely into perpetrators. Until the onset of the Corona-crisis, violent crime rates have been trending downward in many countries saturated with digital entertainment and social media.⁴⁸ On the other hand, perpetrators of hate crimes tend to be heavy users of right-wing media platforms and social media use for instance significantly increases the likelihood of anti-refugee violence caused by a range of underlying factors including psychological-biographical circumstances.⁴⁹

However, even if we shift focus from violent actions to violent speech there is reason for concern. In particular women and minorities are regularly assaulted on social media platforms causing significant trauma and prompting many of them to withdraw from public fora with serious negative repercussions for the quality of democratic deliberation online. A first step to deal with unwanted supercharged digital media-memory loops seems obvious: 'It is up to lawmakers to act, and act hard' because only governments are capable of reigning in social media platforms like Facebook.⁵⁰ In the US, Congress could for example change section 230 of the 1996 communications decency act that provides immunity for digital platform providers with respect to third party content. Faced with liability for illegal posts would prompt platforms to gear up editorial and censorship efforts and possibly drop the fateful strategy of engagement-based ranking altogether. By undoing the combination of content personalization and algorithmic amplification the platforms would no longer massively privilege the most titillating and inflammatory content with the effect that 'fringe content would again be banished to the fringe.'⁵¹ Alternatively, legislators could decide

47 Allan Thompson, *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

48 John Gramlich, 'What the Data Says (and Does Not Say) about Crime in the United States,' *Pew Research Center*, 20 November 2021, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/20/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/>> [accessed 23 November 2021].

49 Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz, 'Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime,' *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 19.4 (2021), 2131–2167.

50 Swisher.

51 Roddy Lindsay, '1 Designed Algorithms at Facebook: Here's How to Regulate Them,' *New York Times*, 6 October 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/06/opinion/facebook-whistleblower-section-230.html>> [accessed 18 October 2021].

to end internet anonymity altogether and require online users to abide by the rules of discursive conduct traditionally reserved for journalists – and thus move yet a step closer to Chinese patterns of censorship.

At first sight, Facebook’s experiment in Covid censorship appears nevertheless problematic. It comes too late, covers only a fraction of relevant posts, and probably won’t make a difference in vaccination rates. Hence, the likely yield does not stand in any reasonable relation to the interference with the right to self-expression, especially since the right is being curbed by a private entity lacking democratic legitimacy. But if we consider the Facebook initiative a trial balloon for pressing future memory management tasks, we might come to a different conclusion. Preventing a climate catastrophe also requires immediate and decisive action by the population of this planet not known for its ability to act peacefully and in unison on a global scale. Cutting democratic corners appears very tempting in this strategic situation. If we think we cannot afford to lose time trying to convince climate change deniers of the error of their beliefs, a frightful yet alluring vision presents itself: Western social media platforms and China ganging up to develop a sophisticated digital black hole into which climate change denial disappears, rendering significantly less memorable and thinkable the idea that the planet is not heating up and not in need of immediate help. Viewed from this alarming perspective, democratic memory is part of the problem and not part of the solution.

Judging by the track record of Nazi Germany and Communist China, such memory management efforts, helped along by dictatorial policies, might be able to save the planet, but subsequent forgetting will hardly be complete. In the margins of the heroic story of having pulled back humanity from the brink of extinction there will always exist a countermemory of the price that had to be paid to attain that goal. There will always be somebody whistling *Lili Marlene* in the background conjuring up, for those in the know, the images of Bergen-Belsen.

VI

We had hoped that the world could be turned into a better place if humankind dutifully remembered its darkest moments and thereby prevented their reoccurrence. For that purpose, the countries in the

West have crafted an extensive infrastructure of dark memory focusing on warfare, genocide, and slavery. But these cosmopolitan memories, deeply disturbing and strangely attractive as they are, do not seem to have delivered on our hopes. Developing empathy for victims of large-scale violence and trying to understand the motivations of perpetrators has spawned a wealth of intriguing research and a fascinating memory landscape but not effectively undercut the reproduction of warfare and genocide on a global scale. Cosmopolitan memory excels at memorializing genocide but appears to be incapable of preventing it.⁵² Therefore, we are trying to retool the cosmopolitan repertoire for example by giving the screw of self-reflexive memory one more twist in an attempt to understand how non-victims and non-perpetrators, i.e., the vast majority of humankind, are implicated in collective human rights violations;⁵³ or by reducing the moralistic excess of cosmopolitan memory and seeking to capture the complexity of the history of mass crimes on the level of the memory of mass crimes.⁵⁴ In essence, we are hoping yet again that we can become better human beings and craft better societies by understanding our implicatedness in past and present crimes and reveling in our failures.

But perhaps we are asking the wrong questions and pursuing the wrong strategies. Negative memory appears problematic for two reasons, i.e., its negativity and its focus on remembrance. Let's address the negativity first. Maybe our concentration on crimes and dark memories constitutes a fundamental category mistake. Self-reflexive negative memory, of which Holocaust memory is the most prominent example, might itself be involved in the reproduction of violence. What if cosmopolitan memory, through persistent negative exposure reminiscent of a photo negative, renders past crimes ever more present, strangely attractive, and likely to re-occur?⁵⁵ What if the Rumsfelds, Milosevices, and al-Bashirs of this world, and the many people

52 Wulf Kansteiner, 'The Holocaust in the 21st Century: Digital Anxiety, Transnational Cosmopolitanism, and Never Again Genocide Without Memory,' in *Digital Memory Studies*, ed. by Hoskins (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 110-140; Kansteiner, 'Migration, Racism, and Memory,' *Memory Studies*, 12.6 (2019), 611-616.

53 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.

54 Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner, eds, *Agonistic Memory and the Legacy of 20th Century Wars in Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

55 The term negative exposure is borrowed from Margaret Hillenbrand (2020) but used here with a different emphasis. Hillenbrand suggests that censorship conveys knowledge about what not to know in public settings thereby inadvertently encouraging remembrance of the same phenomena in private contexts. See Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020). Cosmopolitan

who follow and tolerate them, commit their crimes and accept their implicatedness not despite but because of the violence, moralization, and taboos ingrained in negative memory? The dynamics of negative exposure also apply to academic research. Our writings channel a deep-seated fascination with the events from which we morally distance ourselves. In that sense we are involved, dare I say implicated, in the process of negative exposure and might have inadvertently strengthened the very forces we seek to contain.

The second problem with negative memory pertains to the memory part. All individual and collective memory facilitates forgetting. In fact, forgetting is memory's primary purpose because humans are better at forgetting than remembering. Consequently, in our commitment to negative remembrance, we have taken on a truly Sisyphean task trying to stem the tide of forgetting. What if we screw down on the commitment to memory and instead seek to deploy the powerful and perhaps more successfully marshaled forces of forgetting to attain a more peaceful society? Can we design communicative strategies which weaken and deflect the trajectories of memory currently sustaining patterns of prejudices without constantly invoking said prejudices? Can this be done without violating the rights and feelings of victims or falling into the trap of facile hero worship? What would it mean to forget responsibly the Holocaust, or slavery, or the Uyghur genocide, or the abuse scandal in the Catholic Church?

What is at stake is a paradigm shift in memory politics from negative memory to responsible forgetting, and it is important to differentiate between individual and collective forgetting in this context. Individuals have a tough time forgetting intentionally, especially events they would like to forget, as for instance past humiliations. For an individual, intentional forgetting 'is an impossibility because any allusion represents a presence, even when it refers to an absence.'⁵⁶ But that does not apply to societies. On a collective scale forgetting is a realistic option because, as Umberto Eco has reminded us, 'culture does not make individuals forget *what they know*, but it keeps them from finding out *what they do not know yet*.'⁵⁷ The highly centralized

memory might teach what one should profess to despise in public while opening up venues of private and not so private appreciation.

56 Judith Schalansky, *An Inventory of Losses* (New York: New Directions, 2020), p. 25.

57 Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Random House, 2014), p. 84 (emphasis in the original).

administration of digital media allows for a premeditated generation of collective ignorance on a scale hitherto unimaginable.

Despite the awesome scale of digitally induced silence, one should not equate that silence with forgetting. As above examples indicate, communities find creative ways of circumventing taboos and rules of censorship, often in unpredictable ways. The cat and mouse game between central agencies of content moderation and private desires of remembrance will time and again set into motion a phenomenon that Guy Beiner has defined as an ambivalent and multi-layered process of social forgetting consisting of a 'façade of silence behind which recollections can be retained.'⁵⁸ Collective remembrance and collective forgetting are not opposites but dialectically intertwined strategies of appropriating and manipulating the past, strategies whose co-dependency and dynamic interactions have not yet been studied with empirical and conceptual precision.⁵⁹

The shift from negative remembrance to responsible forgetting should be more accurately described as a recalibration of the balance between memory and forgetting. It is not memory *or* forgetting but the right mixture of the two that makes for a good society. Similarly, it is not a question of the presence or absence of censorship – all societies engage in censorship⁶⁰ – but a question of intelligent censorship that might make a difference. The recalibration most likely requires putting more thought into forgetting and censorship and less emphasis on memory because, as David Rieff has suggested, 'a decent measure of forgetting is actually the sine qua non of a peaceful and decent society.'⁶¹ If he is correct, societies dominated by Holocaust memory are not mnemonically well-balanced societies. Memorializing past victimization in excruciating detail is not likely to lead to reconciliation and might even increase the likelihood of further acts of collective violence. To use the terms of Paul Connerton, Holocaust memory suffers from a deficit of prescriptive forgetting.⁶² Redirecting the focus from memory to forgetting, shifts the burden of proof from the critics to the advocates of cosmopolitan

58 Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 605. See also Hillenbrand.

59 Bill Niven, 'Remembering and Forgetting' in *A Cultural History of Forgetting in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stefan Berger and Bill Niven (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 155–173 (p. 158).

60 Eric Berkowitz, *Dangerous Ideas: A Brief History of Censorship in the West, from the Ancients to Fake News* (Boston: Beacon, 2021).

61 David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 57.

62 Paul Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting,' *Memory Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 59–71 (pp. 61–2).

memory culture. The latter better come up with plausible scenarios explaining how canonizing violence prevents its reoccurrence or retool cosmopolitan memory accordingly. The world will certainly continue to be in dire need of the values cosmopolitan memory has championed but perhaps that goal can be attained more successfully through a process of cosmopolitan forgetting.

The Museum of the American Indian that opened on the mall in Washington DC in 2004 acknowledges the facts of genocide but its indigenously curated exhibits focus on stories of indigenous agency and ingenuity and provide an anchoring point for a utopian indigenous identity.⁶³ The museum's resounding rejection of classificatory standards of Western museology and its similarly unambiguous dismissal of the cosmopolitan victimhood narrative have angered many non-indigenous critics.⁶⁴ There is a lot of purposeful and thoughtful forgetting happening in that museum that deserves attention.

63 Amanda Cobb, 'The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty,' *American Quarterly*, 57.2 (2005), 485-506.

64 Claire Smith, 'Decolonising the Museum: The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C,' *Antiquity*, 79 (2005), 424-439.

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