

## The Zoological Threshold of Slavery

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### Abstract:

The essay anthology *Undienlichkeit*, written by Iris Därmann, assembles a history of violence and slavery. The book intersects European philosophies of subservience and forms of passive resistance, drawing special attention to spaces of violence by means of philosophical theories, historical, literary, and visual sources and a special focus on material cultures. It traverses a broad length of contexts, from slavery in ancient Greece to Auschwitz.

### Die Zoologische Schwelle der Sklaverei

#### German Abstract:

Iris Därmanns Anthologie *Undienlichkeit* stellt eine Geschichte der Gewalt und Sklaverei zusammen. Das Buch ‚überkreuzt‘ europäische Philosophien der Dienlichkeit mit Formen des passiven Widerstands, mit einem besonderen Schwerpunkt auf Gewalträumen. Das Buch illustriert diese Geschichte mittels philosophischer Theorien, historischer, literarischer und visueller Quellen und einem speziellen Augenmerk auf materiellen Kulturen. Es überquert dabei vielfältige Kontexte von Sklaverei in der griechischen Antike bis zu Auschwitz.

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## The Zoological Threshold of Slavery

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The essays compiled in Iris Därmann's *Undienlichkeit* (*Unsubservience*; all translations mine) question the use of legitimizing discourses of violence to exploit others. They do so by painstakingly illustrating the suffering and the resistance they have historically encountered. The book takes a humanist point of view to stress the political necessity of contextualizing historically the institutional perpetrators of slavery in English and German philosophy, such as T. Hobbes, J. Locke, C. Schmitt, and M. Heidegger. Moreover, it lays emphasis on the discursive implication in human subservience of other canonic Western philosophers, like K. Marx and H. Arendt. Därmann carries out this task by applying the concept of "unsubservience," which aims at counterbalancing and deconstructing these philosophies by making visible the forms of suffering and passive resistance of the exploited. These are analyzed in extreme situations of spaces of violence and their symbolic synthesis in visual and material cultures, such as slave ships, plantations, concentration camps, daguerreotypes, postcards, photographs, exhibitions, tattoos, and the whip.

Half of the chapters of the book focus on the aforementioned philosophers and give a differentiated outline of their roles, either as perpetrators or, to use Michael Rothberg's expression, "implicated subjects" of exploitation (see his *The Implicated Subject*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). The other half of the chapters emphasize material and visual cultures. This review will limit itself to the former and warn that its audience might be limited to philosophers or readers familiar with critical theory. This limitation is evident in her deconstructive style and her Deleuzean profusion of neologisms. From a methodological point of view, one of its strengths is how the book contextualizes historically the philosophical texts it analyzes, operating simultaneously at a historical and a theoretical level. It carefully compiles old and recent readings, and, in some cases, even archival research. Moreover, the essays go

beyond a victim-perpetrator paradigm, by intersecting and critically tensing the discourse of the passive-resisters with that of the oppressors.

The chapters dedicated to the well-known “Nazi philosopher[s]” (see p. 237, 262) recall not only their racist, colonial, xenophobic, and antisemitic political philosophies but their annihilating consequences. Därmann reconfirms the widely accepted opinion of Schmitt as the legal ““mastermind of extermination”” (p. 34) by studying his antisemitic “way of the masks” (p. 206). Similarly, but with an emphasis on the concepts of “work state” and “destructive work” —a work untouched by the vulnerability and mortality of the other— are her interpretations of Heidegger’s racist, colonial, xenophobic and antisemitic textual production during the Third Reich, strongly influenced by Ernst Jünger and other prominent Nazis. The meaning of these chapters goes beyond a philosophical *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, by being assembled besides the English slave “stockholders” (p. 34), filiated in the continuum of the political agenda of human exploitation.

Hobbes’ disrepute as “the founder [...] of state terror” (p. 80) is presented in an unexpected fashion. It not only points at his renowned philosophy of absolute sovereignty, but correlates it with its legitimizing function of his undivulged personal engagement with colonial and slave trade enterprises. Along these lines is Därmann’s reading of Locke, “the colonial philosophical founder of tricontinental capitalism” (p. 103). His liberal political philosophy is contextualized in relationship to his role as the manager of the colonial enterprises of Lord Ashley in South Carolina. In this light, the Enlightenment thinker appears as the architect of the triple capitalist exploitative constellation of transatlantic slave trade, plantation economy, and commodity production on the verge of industrialization (see p. 103).

A common thread through Därmann’s reading of these European philosophers is their “political zoology” (p. 58, 100, 248, 297) — the instrumental and exploitative distinction between humans and animals, and its specific use to animalize and exploit other human beings. The chapters dedicated to Marx and Arendt are possibly the most eye-opening from this perspective. This scope leads her to pinpoint how Marx’s and Engel’s critique of the US-American civil war and political economy operates within a racist humanism. It show how it rhetorically builds a hierarchy of suffering between “white” and “black slaves,” for the benefit of the former, dodging systematically the latter’s forms of political resistance (p. 164-5). This distinction is

ultimately based on the Marxist understanding of freedom as an intimate consent with human violence, as the capacity to abstain from its unnecessary use and as a freedom to deploy violence against other animals (p. 180). Därmann stresses this animal-human distinction in the chapter dedicated to Arendt's concept of the political in relation to her analyses of concentration camps. Arendt defines the political in terms of the Aristotelian-slaveholder distinction between *oikos* and *polis*, a division, Därmann argues, that runs the risk of iterating and doubling Nazi political zoology (see p. 297 and p. 302).

The book has two shortcomings. It does not reflect on its own position regarding an "interlocking" of "systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective: *Feminist Theory Reader. Local and Global Perspectives*. New York: Routledge 2013, p. 116). This is unfortunate, especially considering its prosecuting tone and its strategic pointing at many authors' self-reflexive blindness from the comfort of a historical distance, in varying degrees. This is a clear limitation compared, for instance, with G.C. Spivak's work, which also intersects resistance and violence, and shares a very similar poststructuralist filiation, while not looking away from the researcher's implication. (Despite the fact she is clearly aware of Spivak's work: see Iris Därmann "Widerstands- und Gewaltforschung, überkreuz," in *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* 1/2019, p. 7, FN. 5). From this angle, *Undienlichkeit* seems to pass over conveniently the implied procedures of access to discourse and the positionality of its enunciation. In other words, how images and words serve the qualified scholar as an implicated beneficiary, when speaking *for* and *representing* passive-resisters and active-perpetrators. This shortcoming of the essay anthology would be easier to overlook if the only clue for an answer were not a footnote in a book from 2020 that refers to a programmatic text to be published in 2021 (see note 135, p. 318, referring to Iris Därmann: *Widerstände. Geschichte und Theorie*. Berlin: Mattes & Seitz, 2021). This may appear as a marketing strategy of the author and the publishing house, to commodify and institutionalize this intersecting method of violence and resistance, an interpretation that makes her structural positionality conspicuous by its absence. Secondly, the methodological novelty it attributes itself, in terms of crosshatching resistance and violence studies, is limited to a German academic field (see p. 36). However, in a broader one, this intersection is not new; it can also be read in the volumes published during the last decade, in the midst of the ongoing Colombian conflict, by the National Center for Historical Memory.

But Därmann's essay anthology is a clear contribution to the historization of European philosophy, to the extent that if there is any hope for the dazzling ideals of its Enlightenment, it lies in the dark, suppressed, and marginalized minoritarian traditions it has not only neglected, but enslaved, commodified, and animalized. This is worth remarking, considering the fact that it is done *from the inside* of the 'land of ideas' and 'thinkers,' with a humanist discourse that focalizes its own limit on the threshold of mankind's animality. An in-betweenness *Undienlichkeit* cannot comprehend and which expresses unintentionally that, if there's still some hope to it in the reflection of its self-understanding, it lies in and can only be salvaged beyond its own tradition of anthropocentric intelligibility.