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Recognition, postcolonialism and social (in)justice. On the asymmetrical transnational memory politics of the Herero-Nama-genocide

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Abstract:
In his new and timely book Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past the sociologist Reinhart Kößler offers a comprehensive and insightful study on transnational memory politics and subaltern commemorative practices related to the Herero-Nama-genocide, focusing on the specific asymmetrical character of the present debate and the challenges of "postcolonial reconciliation" in such a setting. The main aim is to contribute to an understanding of "actor constellations" within the complex field of transnational memory politics. In doing so, the book critically reflects on the postcolonial situation, raising some urgent questions: where is the space of the affected communities in this transnational memory politics? Do the descendants of the genocide victims actually have a voice in these bilateral talks? The book thus successfully brings together several sites and motives of this postcolonial (memory) conflict in an account of the difficulties and continuing injustices in "transnational communication over a dire past" (p. 10).

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Recognition, postcolonialism and social (in)justice. On the asymmetrical transnational memory politics of the Herero-Nama-genocide

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Kößler, Reinhart: Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past. Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2015. 392 pages, paperback, 39,90 Euro, ISBN 978-3-89691-857-4

In his latest book, Reinhart Kößler presents a comprehensive study of the German-Namibian memory politics related to the colonial wars fought against the indigenous population in former South West Africa, focusing on ongoing struggles for recognition of the Herero-Nama-genocide (1904 to 1908). Kößler covers both the German and Namibian perspective as he understands the negotiation of the shared past as a genuine postcolonial and thus transnational process. Given the striking asymmetry in current debates of dealing with a "dire past" (p. 2), the challenges of "postcolonial reconciliation" are at the heart of this study. Kößler successfully unfolds his argument "that such reconciliation – at least in the particular postcolonial setting – is predicated on reaching a modicum of agreement about a dire past that has to be addressed openly, at least as long as one of the parties concerned sees a need for such articulation" (p.2). Noting the general "colonial amnesia" on the side of the perpetrators and the persistent trauma on the side of the genocide victims, much of the book concerns "ways closure might be achieved and also will explore the reasons why, so far, it remains forestalled" (p. 2).

In view of the fragmented commemorative practices, the main objective is to shed light on the specific actor constellations within the complex field of transnational memory politics (see p.6). Kößler argues that one should focus on "how groups, individuals and also institutions such as governments and states relate to events that overall are well-known – or, indeed, how they refuse to do so" (pp. 5-6).

Within this broad scope, the study gives an overview of the "dimensions or modes of public memory as a postcolonial practice" (p. 5), drawing on divergent memory cultures related to the genocide that each claim space in this struggle that has marked the multifaceted postcolonial conflict.

The book is organized in three broad parts: Part I: The Burden of History explores the "conceptual registers available to and employed by various groups of actors" (p.7) while emphasizing the conflict lines of "a fragmented past in an unequal society" (pp. 13ff.). Here, Kößler

briefly outlines "Namibia's Century of Colonialism" (Chapter 1, pp. 13-48), invoking "transnational implications of settler colonialism" (pp. 99ff.) with regard to the influential community of German descent. In this context, he draws on a "Namibian Connection in Denialism" (pp. 117ff.), pointing towards the colonial apologetic discourse, especially "denialist views regarding the genocide" (pp. 117) that have become popular among parts of the German-speaking population in Namibia.

In addition, the book embraces the metropolitan vantage point, retracing Germany's trajectory "From Late Coloniser to First Postcolonial Nation to Postcolonial Amnesia" (Chapter 2, pp.49ff.). The author turns to the relationship of the Herero-Nama-genocide and the Holocaust, drawing on "Structural Parallels and Discursive Continuities" (pp. 79ff.) – arguments that have provoked heated debates.

Part II: Community, Commemoration and Performance takes a closer look at the commemorative practices amongst traditional communities in Namibia, in particular related to the genocide, exploring resistance and resilience in oral history and subaltern speaking positions, based on personal observation of four annual commemorations by Herero and Nama communities in central and southern Namibia (pp. 179ff.).

Part III: Apology, Restitution & Reparation: The Challenge of Postcolonial Reconciliation brings together precedent issues and addresses current transnational memory politics that has evolved since Namibia's independence in 1990. In this chapter Kößler draws on decisive events such as the apology issued by Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul in Namibia in 2004, or the Namibian-German éclat around the return of human skulls in 2011 and the internal Namibian controversy on the occasion of the second repatriation of human remains from Germany in 2014. He goes beyond identifying some of the present challenges of the conflict and critiquing the official "unilateral and non-participatory" (p. 321) German approach pursued; his study reaches the point of opening up "perspectives in the long aftermath of Genocide" (pp. 317ff.), pointing to ways in which recognition might eventually be achieved. With regard to the affected communities that have long been excluded from the talks, he demands "an open dialogue on an equal footing" (p. 321). As Kößler underlines there are in fact "different opportunities and means available in Namibia for groups to make their voices heard in context of gross social inequality" (p.7). Furthermore, as Kößler argues, the particular underprivileged and subordinate position of traditional indigenous groups with regard to various resources such as alphabetization, internet access, education, and transportation has a direct impact on memory processes and initiatives by actors of civil society (cf. pp. 43-44). Presenting some informative maps and figures that depict unequal distribution of land and wealth according to groups of different descent in postcolonial Namibia, Kößler demonstrates just how deeply the consequences of the genocide lie at the heart of present-day conflicts in central and southern Namibia (cf. pp.117-118). According to Kößler, whereas gaining independence certainly opened up a new stage for negotiating the colonial past in Namibia, the legacies of the country's colonial past – which experienced extremely harsh colonial rule under two preceding colonizing

powers, Wilhelminian Germany and Apartheid South Africa – remain evident in the reminiscent of settler colonialism based on a society of (white) privilege.

As a well-informed scholar, Kößler offers a particularly insightful study that sheds light on various dimensions of this complex postcolonial (memory) conflict, providing detailed accounts of the corresponding political and socio-cultural landscapes. The author delivers a timely contribution that enables further critical understanding of the transnational negation process and the ongoing struggles for recognition, in view of postcolonialism and social (in)justice in the realm of memory politics.

Therefore, the book addresses not only academics in the field of memory, genocide, and postcolonial studies; it also speaks to a general audience, as the study offers fundamental background information to its readers and also invites them to engage with single chapters that address individual sites of this multifaceted, transnational conflict. Ultimately, Kößler's book calls for an active involvement of civil society as "the issues of reconciliation and repairing the consequences of state sponsored atrocities do not lend themselves readily to state action. Where the state displays in-built inability to act in the right way, it is all the more incumbent on citizens on both sides to raise their voices and, limited as their means may be, take action" (p. 329).