

Die Aufklärung und Europa zwischen Versprechen und Verhängnis

Ein Interview mit Nikita Dhawan

*Christian Marks**

Das Interview wurde in weiten Teilen auf Englisch geführt, der Text wurde der besseren Lesbarkeit halber entsprechend einheitlich angepasst. Die deutschen Gesprächsteile wurden von dem Autor in Absprache mit der Interviewten übersetzt. Das Gespräch fand am 17. Januar 2025 kurz nach der Veröffentlichung von Dhawans letztem Buch statt. Es handelt unter anderem von den intellektuellen Prozessen und konkreten Ereignissen, die die Autorin entlang ihrer Forschung zu diesen unterschiedlichen Themen angetrieben haben. Auch greift das Interview die Spezifität eines postkolonialen Denkens in Deutschland auf, nimmt Bezug auf gegenwärtige politische Entwicklungen der globalen Rechten, wie auch auf innertheoretische und -politische Differenzen innerhalb progressiv-kritischer Denkschulen und Protestbewegungen.

Christian Marks: *Your book is, by and large, a defense of queer-feminist and postcolonial approaches in political thought and public discourse. In doing so, you tie your arguments to historical events and developments, such as Documenta 15, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, or specific past UN resolutions. That means your book is deeply theoretical but also in many ways grounded in the present. This raises the question about historical continuities and differences between today's debates surrounding postcolonial or queer-feminist approaches and their original contexts in the 1970s and 1980s – especially since those were also shaped by ecological, technological, political, and economic crises, and these critical approaches already appeared to be contested then, just as they are today. How has your thinking developed across these contexts, and what do you think it means to think postcolonial-queer-feminist in the 21st century?*

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Nikita Dhawan: It's a very important question to ask about the historical and social context in which any book, any writing emerges. I've now been in Germany for 25 years, and when I first came to Germany, my experience was that there was a lot of hostility, but also somehow an indifference to postcolonial and queer-feminist perspectives.

On the one hand, the argument was that postcolonial studies are not particularly relevant for the German speaking context because neither Austria nor Switzerland nor Germany were powerful colonial powers like France, Spain or England, and, that if one wanted to focus on historical violence, then it was the responsibility in Germany to engage with the Holocaust in relation to the often referenced 'Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung'.

There was also the sense of concern that focus on colonialism – and especially on colonial genocides – would lead to the relativization of the singularity of the holocaust. The other response was that this approach was more committed to antiracist, antisexist, antidiscriminatory politics, and that this entailed activism rather than being scientific and scholarly. Back in 2000, I very often quoted Salman Rushdie: "The problem with the British is that their history happened elsewhere, which is why they don't know its significance." My impression was that there was a certain 'Geschichtsvergessenheit', a colonial amnesia vis-à-vis their own history even in the German speaking context.

That was one of the motivations to write the "Einführung in die Postkoloniale Theorie" in 2005. And soon afterwards, I got the position as Junior Professor in Frankfurt am Main. It was an interesting situation, as on the one hand, there *was* a certain curiosity about postcolonial-queer-feminist perspectives. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten the job. On the other hand, there was also an unease about postcolonial-queer-feminist perspectives.

To give you a concrete example: If one listens to my former colleague, Jürgen Habermas, one gets the impression that the most important German export product, is not the BMW and Mercedes, but European enlightenment, or in particular German enlightenment, and the idea of 'public use of reason', of 'autonomy', ideas of 'Weltbürgerrecht'.

Drawing on Kant, Habermas talks about coffee houses and salons as the birthplace of modernity. My question to my Frankfurt colleagues was: If the coffee houses provided the infrastructure for the emergence of deliberative democracy in Europe, where did the coffee come from? Where did the sugar in the coffee come from? Who financed the enlightenment? There was a disheartening unwillingness to understand the material conditions and the entanglements between European Enlightenment and colonialism.

The second argument that I often highlight in this context is inspired by Arendt, who in her book "The Origins of Totalitarianism" talks about imperialism's boomerang effect. She analyzes how the loss of German colonies after the First World War was linked to what she calls the 'inner colonization' in Europe and how several practices and strategies that were used by the National Socialist regime initially emerged in the German colonies. So, for example, there were already labor and concentration camps in the Shark Island, which is now Namibia.

And when Lothar von Trotha gave the Vernichtungsbefehl against the Herero and Nama people, which is considered to be the first genocide of the 20th century, already