

# WIEDERGUTMACHUNG AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Short Scientific Article

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*This paper presents and analyses critiques of the post-war West German discourse of Wiedergutmachung from an intellectual history perspective. Focused closely on suggestive remarks of Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, these critiques are mostly concerned with the insufficient care in intentionality, psychological inadequacies and improper self-serving or nature of the process as it emerged in Cold War West Germany. This essay then charts whether any elements of these critiques from the 1960s are echoed in the most recent wave of scholarly literature on reparations. Current critiques view Wiedergutmachung as a foundation for a “communicative history” that forges shared narratives between perpetrator and victim or as the starting point for a culture of victim competition. Contemporary discourse and historiography remains incomplete with the historical acknowledgment of these early intellectual critiques of the process of reparation. The primary elements taken from these earlier critiques include the importance of intentionality, intersubjective care and reconciliation through memory, especially in cultural discourses and institutions.*

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**Key words:** Wiedergutmachung, Jews, Holocaust, intersubjectivity, Anti-Semitism, Philo-Semitism

FINANCIAL RESTITUTION FOR THE HOLOCAUST is long recognized as belated and inadequate most of all, for European regions under post-war Soviet domination. Though observers recognized a welcome shift in the nineties in the discourse of *Wiedergutmachung* from the state interests of Germany to individual victims, new blind spots seem to recurrently emerge (Eckel and Moisel 2009, 151). Most notably, the realm of restoration of cultural and ar-

tistic capital has proved especially vexed with additional improbably discovery of disputed holdings in just the last years. Arguably this realm is both so wearily approached and so easily inflamed as it most closely impinges on deep notions of national self-worth and personal identity. Perhaps even more insidious are the long-lasting effects of Nazi propaganda and a certain fascination with fascism extending worldwide through globalized media. In what follows here, I will explore critiques of *Wiedergutmachung* based precisely in such areas of culture, subjectivity and psychology. Centered around the Central European context from which the Holocaust and its aftermath ensued, I argue that the reflections and speculations of thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt suggestively imagine an alternate version of *Wiedergutmachung* reformed as a quasi-utopian practice. Rather than focused upon an evaluation of the *de jure* practice of reparations, these critical remarks are drawn to the spirit behind *Wiedergutmachung* or what one might term as the question of intentionality.

The narrative that once claimed post-war German reparations as a unique historical achievement that successfully met and matched both the rights of the victims with the concessions possible for the perpetrators has long been cast askance (Pross 1998, x). Earlier and more virulent critiques from the right and left have reduced the entire process to a cynical ploy in a Realpolitik of financial manipulation (Frei, Brunner and Groschler 2009, 18).<sup>1</sup> Linked with the acclaimed Mitscherlich thesis regarding the “inability to mourn” in post-war West Germany, this perspective holds that reparations were a process parallel to and even united to that of the new consumerist ethic of a mass culture which formed the only unifying element that could bring Western society out of the morass of post-genocidal and post-colonial melancholia. As with consumerism generally, state-based reparations depoliticized populations producing apathy and indifference in their wake (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 81).

Alternatively if reparations allowed for any reinforcement of identity or enhancement of subjectivity it was to shore up the self-worth of the perpetrators while, wittingly or not, perpetuating the humiliation of their victims, as trenchantly argued by Christian Pross. *Wiedergutmachung* was an act of the German state, not of German culture, and it served, and was in fact administratively coupled with West German rearmament. Coincident with amnesty for Wehrmacht

1 It is interesting to note that the notion of post-war Germany voluntarily moved by a sense of moral obligation is most clearly enunciated in: (Sagi 1980, 3).

generals and former Nazi bureaucrats (who as a rule received better pensions than their victims) reparations were a necessary expedient for Germany to serve as a beneficiary of the Marshall Plan. The reparations payment outlined in the Luxembourg Agreement of 1951 gave rise to a personnel and administrative apparatus into which more was invested by the German government than the actual payouts to victims themselves (Pross 1998, 176). Such personnel took the role of plaintiff with the persecuted as that of defendant, often subjected to a damaging process of traumatic reexperiencing of their suffering to satisfy bureaucratic demands (Pross 1998, 177). The psychological beneficiaries of this set-up were the former persecutors themselves who could morally self-redeem by rigidly adhering to a benevolent complex of redress of which they themselves were author.<sup>2</sup>

For some critics the very narrative of “reconciliation” by monetary payment encompassed by the term *Wiedergutmachung* was arrived at not through an act of ethical imagination but rather as the only option that carried no threat of internal inconvenience. After all if Nazi remained loyal to their ideal to the very end (if not after) and if the German business and bureaucratic elite could be reconstituted with next to no purging, only a “reconciliation narrative” under the guise of financial reparation remained as a viable option for addressing past crimes. Though obvious, it is important to emphasize that simple cash payments were the preferred method because the restoration of business capital (whether of factories, capital or merchandise) were ruled out before the process ever began.

As a basis for post-war German national identity *Wiedergutmachung* provided for the continuity of an heroic narrative of self-interest which create a mental monopoly of the protagonist disinterested in the integration of the Other. Indeed, one of the most striking features of popular discourse and even scholarly narratives about the reparations is the lack of any central figure or protagonist from the victim side. In short, the Anne Frank of reparations, if there is ever to be one, has yet to be found. Without such a figure for general cultural identification, the emotional and psychological confrontation with loss and damage in the process of seeking redress by the victims remains murky for the outsider.

Though anecdotal and suggestive, a rare radio interview with Theodor Adorno provides a glimpse into what I will attempt to constitute as an alternative model

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2 For this argument and the idea that *Wiedergutmachung* actually constituted a continuation of persecution by other means, see: (Giordano 2005).

for the *Wiedergutmachung* process addressed thus far.<sup>3</sup> A viable metaphor in spirit for the method as it historically involved would have the persecuted as supplicants begging favors. In a symbolically resonant narrative that encapsulates two brief stories that evoke both childhood and elements of traditional fairy tales, Adorno reimagines it as the care for a famished, if intrepid traveler seeking refuge in the night. For Adorno, what was paramount in the confrontation with the past for the part of the aggrieved was to conjure up or at least approximate the physical feeling of coming home. (There is of course an overriding caveat with any invocation of Adorno as, unlike the vast majority of refugees – especially those from East Europe who had little choice in the matter – he actually decided to return to Europe after the war.)

Tellingly, in both anecdotes in which he himself constitutes the protagonist, involve gastronomy and hospitality. In the first, as a traveler upon a winter's night, he stumbles upon an inn as if out of a world gone by. The workers fall over him with kindness and politesse including a *Küchenjunge* whose translation “scullion,” denotes the lowest rank of servant who performs the most menial of tasks. Adorno is most taken by the presence of such a character, perhaps because it denotes a certain hope for the younger generation as leaders in matters reparation, but also because the fairy tale quality of this character emphasizes the irreality of the scene as a whole. He then relates another anecdote that supports much of the same momentum as the first. Invited to a *Rhebraten* (venison roast) by a colleague, Adorno experiences a Proustian moment of *Rausch* (a conceptual term in German for which there is little direct equivalent in English)<sup>4</sup> which takes him back to the sights and scents of childhood. Evocative of the Madeleine, a combination of food and memory that has come to stand in for a sense of universal lost childhood or even transcendental homeless of modernity, as once termed by Georg Lukacs. The idea of the inviting and the invitation also unites both anecdotes. Adorno feels not

3 All the citations to follow derive from a transcript made by the author of an audio track entitled “Titel 16: Erika Mann und Theodor W. Adorno Im Gespräch mit Adolf Frisé” from CD *Rückkehr in die Fremde? Remigranten und Rundfunk in Deutschland (1945-1955)*, DRA Akademie der Kunst.

4 July 25 1949, “Ansprache im Goethe-Jahr in der Paulskirche”: Der Rausch was für ein zwei deutig Deutsches Wort. Wie mischen sich darin Begeisterung und Entgeistung, das höchste mit dem niedrigsten, das Glück der Enthemmung, Das elend der vernunftlosigkeit. Andere sprachen haben dieses Zauberwort gar nicht. Sie setzen dafür ein sehr sachliches und nüchternes, sie sagen intoxication, vergiftung...

only that his presence is wanted but that the others around him, clearly understood as coming from the other side, as non-exile Germans, seek and are poised to fulfill his happiness. Taken together, the incidents do directly conjure up a utopian idea (“...als wenn man in der Utopie wäre”) where all inhabitants of a society with whom comes into contact with are actually interested in producing happiness.

Adorno was clearly overwhelmed here not by the actual re-finding or restoration of home but rather of its analogue in spiritual feeling. Having experienced only hospitality and gastronomy taken together, he expresses gratitude for what he feels to be “*der Wiederherstellung eines verlorenen Lebens.*” The summary sentence that continues from this phrase then provides that these anecdotes are meant as a serious critique of *Wiedergutmachung* and possibly also the suggestion of an alternative: “...die viel mehr *Wiedergutmachung in Wahrheit ist als alles was unter diesem Titel jemals geschieht.*”

I do not wish to infer that Adorno intends to offer a logistical or practical alternative to the system of monetary payments, but rather that he seizes upon an important blind spot. Invitation to dinner parties or tours of former hometowns (practices employed by several German municipalities) should not be construed in any way as sufficient in themselves. Rather it is important to emphasize that *Wiedergutmachung* had not been accompanied by an intentionality that seeks the happiness of the other and that rather than helping to recall a lost home it further severs the distance from the life once known by the victims before deportation, exile and despoliation. The central paradox, or one what could also term psychological truth Adorno attempts to recover, is that the closer one is brought in touch with what has been lost, i.e. the absence of the lost, the greater one can feel its absence, i.e. the direct confrontation with the presence of the lost actually deliver a release if not also a strange sort of happiness. Adorno reimagines the encounter of former perpetrators with former victims, not with the latter as supplicants begging favors, but rather as tired and weary travelers in need of and most worthy of care. Framed as such, some of the honor and dignity is restored to the victims entirely missing if they must approach with hands open in a subordinate pose.

Other important features in Adorno’s alternative *Wiedergutmachung* is the importance of the individual encounter so that the process is not made up exclusively of institutions representing a collectivity.<sup>5</sup> Also, despite the fact that Adorno

<sup>5</sup> One may imagine how different a process of reparation would appear if made up of millions of individual lawsuits.

himself may be perceived as an elite, the popular cultural character of the settings and encounters make clear that he in no way privileges the predominance of elites and their preferences. This implicit critique of *Wiedergutmachung* as dominated if not manipulated by elites who care for only for institutions representing collectives has been echoed throughout the years (Torpey 2001, 333–358).

Adorno's implicit and negative critique of *Wiedergutmachung* is part of a more generalized understanding of the deleterious effects of mass culture as references at the start of this essay. In fact, in the midst of the anecdotes related here, he does, somewhat unhelpfully refer that such positive experiences may hardly be possible in a fully "*versachlicht*" or objectified society. Writing around the same period, the psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich who famously diagnosed the "inability to mourn," for post-war West Germans, also wrote a text on the "*Unwirtlichkeit unsere Städte*." Bemoaning precisely the lack of hospitality and joyous shared gastronomy Adorno so cherished, Mitscherlich raised the negative spectre posed by inhospitable, restrictive and monotonous cities.

Hannah Arendt's rather disparate comments on matters of restitution and *Wiedergutmachung*, which I in no way intend to account for in their entirety, suggest a position with even loftier goals while reflecting an awareness of the inherent limitations of any post-war reckoning. After all, there is probably no greater expression of the unbridgeable cleft between Jews and Germans than that which she uttered during her well-known West German television interview with Günter Gaus in 1963.<sup>6</sup> Referring specifically to the industrialized mass murder of Auschwitz-Birkenau, "Das war wirklich, als ob der Abgrund sich öffnete...dies hätte nie geschehen dürfen."<sup>7</sup> The world after the genocide must confront the reality that this abyss can never be overcome and that any kind of reparation must invariably remain partial and incomplete. For the murdered themselves can never be reached and the survivors remain forever scared. As she succinctly maintained, "here is no political method for dealing with German mass crimes" (Arendt 2003, 126).

Despite such a stark proclamation, Arendt has improbably entered popular consciousness as a figure possibly tainted by her own attempts or even embrace of reconciliation. Still debated allegations of whitewashing or seduction by Heidegger

6 A video clip of precisely this excerpt runs on continuous loop at the Jüdisches Museum Berlin.

44 7 For a full English language transcript of the interview, see: (Baehr 2000, 3–24).

and Eichmann aside, this should not detract from the conceptuality centrality played by the notion of reconciliation in her thought.

As ever, important but subtle distinctions separate what Arendt actually wrote and thought when compared with distortions of her thought in popular rendition. Reconciliation is a master category in her thought, but not between perpetrator and victim but rather reconciliation with reality for each on their own. Derived from the Aristotelian notion of “catharsis,” reconciliation with reality, deemed the essence of tragedy by Aristotle and the ultimate purpose of history for Hegel comes about through “the tears of remembrance” (Baehr 2000, 281). Here we have presented in philosophical terms for what Adorno used Proustian literary notions, but the effect is the same recall of what came before allows for reconciliation with the tragic reality of the present. For without any pursuit of reconciliation, Arendt sees in modernity a downward spiral of increasing alienation (Villa 1996, 203).

Consonant with this idea of internal reconciliation based on memory from the past, Arendt suggests a critique of a *Wiedergutmachung* used to shore up the self-worth of the perpetrators. Such self-congratulatory pursuit would not aid what she termed the “sadly confused inner condition” of post-war Germany (Arendt 2006, 233). Rather “if there were more stories to tell” of German resistance, this would provide the catharsis she prized and even aid German prestige abroad. There was only one great account of such resistance which came up throughout the entirety of the Eichmann trial. Self-worth should derive not from any self-congratulatory behavior toward victims after the cessation of crimes but rather through the memory of incidents of intervention and obstruction while the crimes were being committed. Indeed, *Wiedergutmachung* derived from and was characterized by an overt focus on the victims that resembled a mere transformation of former anti-Semitic convictions. The anti-Semitism of “Jewish world conspiracy,” became the philo-Semitism of “Jewish diplomatic reach,” in both cases exaggerating any link between Jews and worldly power (Barkan 2001, 18). In any case the focus on the other allowed for a distraction or even avoidance for those Germans who resisted the regime and its crimes and remained marked as traitors. Indeed the lack of any internal accounting or change in cultural values is a wide field of which there are many examples. Numerous institutions and cultural figures have been investigated and reevaluated only quite recently and after decades of reluctance. Perhaps the greatest instance of the lack of cultural reconstruction is the continuity of the

Wagner-cult at Bayreuth once an incubator of racial anti-Semitism and platform for Nazi pageantry which continues to play host to the nation's elite every year, including the present Chancellor.

Some recent optimistic accounts see in post-war German *Wiedergutmachung* a new ethic of transitional justice and a new narrative of a "communicative history", that allows victims and perpetrators to share in the creation of a new shared story (Barkan 2001, 18). And a current negative critique holds *Wiedergutmachung* responsible for contemporary "culture of mourning" and the "competition of victimhood", and signals a surrender utopian possibility for progressive change. In confronting the question whether a different reparative program may have led to greater justice, it is worth revisiting critiques of post-war confrontation with the past as delivered by Adorno, Arendt and others (Goschler 2005, 477). The normative notion that reparation entails the transformation of guilt into debt and that the restoration of property invariably strengthens memory should not be seen as the entirety of this process (Goschler 2005, 487; Diner 2003, 36–44). It could well be that the any such discourse of reparation makes it nearly impossible to actually express the injustice (Frei, Brunner and Goschler 2009, 28). A worthy echo to the notes of critique sounded by Arendt and Adorno may be found in the calls for reparation to be ad hoc justic, accounting for local particularities accommodating the lowest common denominator (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 205). The work of later German critical theory, heirs to Adorno's Frankfurt School, especially that of Axel Honneth on intersubjectivity may be most suited to carry this much needed critique forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In summary, the shared elements of this alternative *Wiedergutmachung* may be termed as the provision of recognition and empathy, which does not occur as the result of coercion or self-interested obligation. A simpler heading under which this all may be grouped is as an ethic of healing that seeks a reduction of pain. Any process of reparation that forces any victim to endure a traumatic reexperiencing of the process of persecution threatens to continue the process of harm. Paradoxically, a small portion of dignity may be restored when the former live that once was known before persecution is made palpable and intimate through a caring path of memory.



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## Rezime:

### *Nezadovoljstvo kompenzacijom (Wiedergutmachung)*

Ovaj rad je analiza kritike u Zapadnoj Nemačkoj diskursa 'Wiedergutmachung' iz perspektive istorije ideja. Oslanjajući se na radove Teodora Adorna i Hane Arent, kritika u radu je upućena na nedovoljnu pažnju u intencionalnosti, psihološke neadekvatnosti i neprikladan egocentrični karakter ovog procesa u Hladnom ratu u Zapadnoj Nemačkoj. Kritike iz 60s godina prošlog veka su postale ponovo aktuelne u sadašnjem pogledu na kompenzaciju koja se bavi zajedničkim narativom žrtve i dželata. Savremena nauka i istorigrafija ostaje nepotpuna ako se uzmu u obzir ove rane kritike procesa kompenzacije. Naj-

**važniji elementi kritike koji su iskorišćeni u ovom radu se odnose na važnost namernog, subjektivnog odnosa prema procesu pomirenja preko sećanja.**

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***Ključne reči:*** kompenzacija, Jevreji, Holokaust, intersubjektivnost, antisemitizam, filosemitizam

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