

The Myth of Responsibility: Colonial Cruelties and Silence in German Political Discourse

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Germany is considered a role model for dealing with past mass atrocities. In particular, the social reappraisal of the Holocaust is emblematic of this. However, when considering the genocide on the Herero and Nama in present-day Namibia, it is puzzling that an official recognition was only pronounced after almost 120 years, in May 2021. For a long time, silence surrounded this colonial cruelty in German political discourse. Although the discourse on German responsibility toward Namibia emerged after the end of World War II, it initially appeared detached from the genocide. That silence on colonial atrocities is to be considered a cruelty itself. Studies on silence have been expanding and becoming richer. Building on these works, the paper sets two goals: First, it advances the theorization of silence by producing a new typology, which is then integrated into discourse-bound identity theory. Second, it applies this theory to the analysis of the silencing and later acknowledging of the genocide on the Herero and Nama by German political elites. To this end, Bundestag debates, official documents, and statements by relevant political actors are analyzed in the period from 1980 to 2021. The results reveal the dynamics between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discursive formations, how those are shifting in a period of 40 years, and what role silence plays in it. Beyond our emphasis on the genocide on the Herero and Nama, our findings might benefit future studies as the approach proposed in this paper can make silence a tangible research object for global studies.

Se considera que Alemania es un modelo a seguir por lidiar con las atrocidades masivas del pasado. Un claro ejemplo de esto es la reevaluación social del Holocausto. Sin embargo, al considerar el genocidio de los herero y nama en la actual Namibia, resulta desconcertante que se haya reconocido de manera oficial después de casi 120 años, en mayo de 2021. Durante mucho tiempo, el discurso político alemán silenció esta crueldad colonial. Aunque el discurso sobre la responsabilidad alemana hacia Namibia surgió tras el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, al principio parecía desvinculada del genocidio. Este silencio sobre las atrocidades coloniales debe considerarse una crueldad en sí misma. Los estudios sobre el silencio se desarrollaron y enriquecieron con el tiempo. A partir de estos trabajos, el documento establece dos objetivos: En primer lugar, avanza en la teorización del silencio al desarrollar una nueva tipología, que se integra en la teoría de la identidad vinculada al discurso. En segundo lugar, aplica esta teoría al análisis del silenciamiento y posterior reconocimiento del genocidio de los herero y nama por parte de las élites políticas alemanas. A tal fin, se analizan los debates del Bundestag, los documentos oficiales y las declaraciones de los participantes políticos pertinentes en el periodo comprendido entre 1980 y 2021. Los resultados revelan la dinámica entre las formaciones discursivas hegemónicas y contrahegemónicas, el proceso de cambio en un periodo de 40 años y la función que desempeña el silencio en ellas. Más allá de nuestro énfasis en el genocidio de los herero y nama, nuestras conclusiones pueden ser beneficiosas para futuros estudios, ya que el enfoque propuesto en este trabajo puede hacer del silencio un objeto de investigación tangible para estudios globales.

L'Allemagne est considérée comme un modèle de rôle pour sa gestion des atrocités de masse du passé. La remise en question sociale de l'holocauste en est en particulier emblématique. Toutefois, lorsque nous prenons en considération le génocide des Héréros et des Namas de l'actuelle Namibie, il est surprenant de constater que sa reconnaissance officielle n'ait été prononcée qu'après presque 120 ans, en mai 2021. Un silence a longtemps entouré cette cruauté coloniale dans le discours politique allemand. Bien que le discours sur la responsabilité allemande à l'égard de la Namibie ait émergé après la fin de la seconde guerre mondiale, il semblait initialement détaché du génocide. Ce silence sur les atrocités coloniales doit être considéré comme une cruauté en soi. Les études sur le silence se sont développées et enrichies. Cet article s'appuie sur ces travaux et définit deux objectifs : D'une part, il avance une théorisation du silence en produisant une nouvelle typologie qui est ensuite intégrée à la théorie de l'identité associée au discours. Et d'autre part, il applique cette théorie à l'analyse du maintien sous silence puis de la reconnaissance ultérieure par les élites politiques allemandes du génocide des Héréros et des Namas. Des débats du Bundestag, des documents officiels et des déclarations d'acteurs politiques concernés ont été analysés à cette fin sur la période 1980–2021. Les résultats révèlent les dynamiques entre les formations de discours hégémoniques et contre-hégémoniques, la manière dont elles ont évolué sur une période de 40 ans et le rôle que le silence y a joué. En plus de mettre l'accent sur le génocide des Héréros et des Namas, nos conclusions pourraient s'avérer bénéfiques pour de futures études car l'approche proposée dans cet article peut faire du silence un objet de recherche tangible pour les études internationales.

Introduction

“In light of Germany’s historical and moral responsibility, we will ask Namibia and the descendants of the victims for forgiveness.”

—German Foreign Office (2021)¹

With these words, former German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas officially recognized the colonial atrocities

against the Herero and Nama (1904–1908) in present-day Namibia as genocide on May 28, 2021. In the almost 30 years of formal colonial rule, the German Empire fought three colonial wars: in China, in Tanzania, and in Namibia (Conrad 2021, 27). In the case of Namibia, the violent suppression of the anti-colonial resistance² as well as the systematic persecution, poisoning of wells, slaughter of farm

¹ Direct primary quotations from German, including statements or speeches by politicians, are translated by the authors.

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²The use of the term “insurgency” in this context is contested because, from the colonial power perspective, it implies a legitimate political system against which the uprising was directed (Hoffmann 2021, 78).

animals, forced labor, and internment in concentration camps claimed tens of thousands of Nama and Herero lives (Hoffmann 2021, 79). Although the German government continues to resist legal claims (German Foreign Office 2021), the official recognition as genocide dispels the myth of Germany's colonial past—the glorified image as a benign colonial power. While the myth of colonialism started to fade over time, the German political discourse on responsibility in relation to Namibia was consolidated. We refer to the latter as responsibility discourse, which became widely observable during Namibia's independence aspirations from the 1970s onwards. Although Germany's responsibility in relation to Namibia was strongly articulated in discourse, silence surrounded the mass atrocities against the Herero and Nama. It is puzzling that only recently these mass atrocities have been discursively connected to Germany's historical and moral responsibility in political discourse. Hence, the meaning of responsibility seems to have changed over time. We understand "responsibility" as a German identity element. Its meaning is open to contestation in discourse and therefore requires (re)articulation to reach temporal stabilization. However, this approach pushes the research agenda toward speech, excluding silence which played a crucial role in Germany's responsibility discourse on Namibia (Zimmerer 2011, 19). This case, consequently, serves as a baseline study analyzing the discursive dynamics of silence. We argue that silence can both enable and delay discursive change. In the empirical case, the delaying dimension of silence seems to predominate as the genocide on the Herero and Nama has only recently been widely articulated in German responsibility discourse. In this context, silence promotes discursive disengagement and indifference toward these colonial cruelties.

For an adequate assessment, it is crucial to briefly discuss what is meant by cruelty. There is a variety of authors that address "cruelty" (e.g., Rorty 1989; Chamberlain 1992; Baier 1993; Barrozo 2007). Judith Shklar's definition of the term serves as the underlying basis for the vast majority of those studies. She defines "cruelty" as "the willingful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear" (Shklar 1984, 8) and thus as the *primary evil*. Consequently, genocide as primary evil can clearly be described as cruelty (Ashenden and Hess 2019, 19). Kekes (1996, 838) further specifies that "cruelty is the disposition of a human agent to take delight in or be indifferent to the serious and unjustified suffering their actions cause to their victims." Although a necessary articulation of primary evils can be derived from Shklar's (1989, 157) "principle of political morality," they are often covered by a wall of silence by and within perpetrator states. It is this expectation that renders silence relevant and identifies it as cruelty itself.

The link between silence and cruelty opens up a variety of possible research perspectives and cases. Germany's silence on the colonial atrocities against the Herero and Nama stands out in two ways. First, the case deals with a mass atrocity that Germany committed itself. Second, the German culture of remembrance regarding the Holocaust is being described as extensive and exemplary (Assmann 1999, 44–46). Against this backdrop, it is all the more relevant to address the following research questions: How did silence enable Germany's long-term denial of its genocide on the Herero and Nama? How was the official recognition of those cruelties possible? To answer these research questions, the paper follows a three-step approach. First, silence is conceptualized and integrated into discourse-bound identity theory. This serves as a starting point for the following discourse analysis of German political discourse. The data

basis is provided by Bundestag debates, official governmental and parliamentary documents, and statements by relevant political actors in a period from 1980 to 2021. Finally, the results are discussed and the role of silence in political discourse is elucidated. The study aims, first, to advance the theorization of silence by providing a new typology and integrating it into discourse-bound identity theory. Second, by focusing analytically on silence, it helps to understand the discursive shifts among the German political elite that have led to the official recognition of the genocide.

Conceptualizing Silence

In political science, after Brummett's (1980) study on silence, a renewed engagement with the topic only began in the 2000s (e.g., Hansen 2000; Ferguson 2003; Bhambra and Shilliam 2009; Jungkunz 2012; Freedon 2015). Yet, Dingli's (2015) wake-up call "We need to talk about silence" can be seen as a tipping point. Since then, advancement in conceptualization and theorization of silence has set in (e.g., Schweiger 2015; Guillaume 2018; Brito Vieira 2019; Dingli and Cooke 2019; Gray 2019; Jung 2019; Rollo 2019). Thus, the focus on silence opens up a relatively new field of research in political science.

Hence, political scholars often employ a cross-disciplinary perspective to grasp silence ontologically and epistemologically, including for instance communication studies (e.g., Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985; Jaworski 1993; Bilmes 1994, 1997; Kurzon 1998; Thiesmeyer 2003; Ephratt 2008; Schröter 2013; Schröter and Taylor 2018), memory studies (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, Winter, and Ginio 2010; Assmann and Assmann 2013; Choi 2014; Dessingué and Winter 2016; Fowler 2018; Russell 2018), philosophy (e.g., Wittgenstein 1969; Heidegger 1972; Nietzsche 1999; Picard 2009; Kierkegaard 2013), and sociology (e.g., Dauenhauer 1980; Luhmann and Fuchs 1989; Bellebaum 1992; Zerubavel 2006; Hahn 2014). Still, conceptual and theoretical differences remain.

In silence studies, there is disagreement on three main issues: nature, emergence, and effects. The nature of silence is presented in the research literature as either absence or action. The understanding of silence as absence places the interpretation and attribution of meaning at the center of analysis (Schröter 2013, 19 f.). The perspective of silence as action, on the other hand, refers to the substance of the action itself. Scholars following this perspective focus on the temporal or spatial dimension of its occurrence and emphasize its perlocutionary effect (Jaworski 1993, 79–80). Regarding the direction from which silence emerges, the question of whether silence is imposed, e.g., as a consequence of violence or an institutionalized regime of silence, or whether silence is purposive remains controversial among scholars (Cooke and Dingli 2019, 4–7). This distinction also affects the assessment of agency (Dingli and Khalfey 2019, 62) and intentionality (Kurzon 1998, 33–37). The effects of silence, instead, raise the question of normativity. Does silence per se have negative connotations such as repression, exclusion, secrecy, and concealment, or can positive effects also arise, since silence as a yielding opens up new windows of opportunity and carries seeds of change (Cooke and Dingli 2019, 3)? Thus, the general conceptualization of silence requires both a differentiation that allows for a distinction between the different perspectives and a certain permeability that includes their "fuzzy ends" (Verschueren 1985, 97).

We provide a typology (figure 1), which draws on the findings of previous silence studies, summarizes them, and can therefore define the multitude of silence (sub)types.

	Articulated	Non-articulated
External to communication	Sound	Stillness
Internal to communication	Speech	Silence
	Muteness	
	Silencing	

Own illustration

Figure 1. *Concept.*

Note: Own illustration.

It distinguishes between types internal and external to the communication process (Saville-Troike 1985, 4). Communication is seen here as conversational interaction, which relies on the participation of at least two subjects (Sifanou 1997, 63–64). Further differentiation is made between “articulated” and “non-articulated,” where articulation is understood in both the vocal and verbal sense. This gives rise to the following four types: sound, stillness, speech, and silence. Stillness is absolute and exists without any point of reference (Le Breton 1997, 25–26). Silence, on the other hand, is communicative non-articulation, and consequently, refers to other subjects and/or objects (Bilmes 1994, 73). The connecting subcategories of muteness and silencing illustrate the permeable boundary of the “articulation” category. They correspond to the possibility of articulated silence.

Muteness, on the one hand, describes the inability to utter (non-articulated) or to utter a specific issue (articulated). Silencing, on the other hand, means the (un)conscious refraining from uttering (non-articulated) or from uttering a specific issue (articulated). While silencing might occur in a non-articulated form, “[s]ometimes many words are required to keep a secret” (Bellebaum 1992, 88). This articulated silencing involves modes to avoid or evade a certain issue (Schröter 2013, 18), for instance, framing, counterweighting, subordination, trivialization, normalization, or discursive displacement. Framing here refers to the establishment of an interpretative frame to the exclusion of alternative meanings (Hansen 2006, 33). Counterweighting describes the focusing on alternative issues with the aim of dropping others (Clair 1998, 80). Subordination means the relegation of an issue under a superordinate theme. Edkins (2000, xvii) chooses as an example the subordination of “hunger” under the umbrella issue of “military conflict.” This suggests that overcoming a specific hunger crisis can only be mastered by resolving the military conflict. Thus, the issue of “hunger” can be silenced. Trivialization denies the existence or validity of an issue, whereas normalization points to its lack of alternative (Clair 1998, 81–82). Finally, discursive displacement is understood as the attempt to shift an issue and its treatment into other discursive spaces, e.g., from the state level to the European Union (EU) level (Clair 1998, 83–84).

By applying this typology to discourse-bound identity theory, the focus lays on silencing, both non-articulated and articulated. Many scholars rightfully criticize the one-dimensional view of silence as oppression, exclusion, and violence and strive to broaden the horizon of analysis for the phenomenon, e.g., democratic silence (Brito Vieira 2019; Rollo 2019). However, they also emphasize the relevance of context and expectation for the study of silence (Jung 2019, 428). Consequently, silence does not have an “ultimate pol-

itics” (Cooke and Dingli 2019, 9) but is ambiguous. Regarding our study, a brief contextual clarification of the case is needed. The Federal Republic of Germany is considered a role model for dealing with past mass atrocities. In particular, the social reappraisal of the Holocaust is emblematic of this. German *Erinnerungspolitik* (politics of memory) includes extensive political debates, commemorations, educational measures, and a large number of memorial sites, which illustrates the willingness to come to terms with the past (Neiman 2019, 9). This German context now renders the silence about colonial mass atrocities meaningful. At this point, the uniqueness of the Holocaust is by no means to be questioned, rather the expectation about Germany’s handling of other committed mass atrocities is to be revealed.

Silence in Discourse-Bound Identity Theory

In this chapter, the subtypes of non-articulated and articulated silencing are now introduced into discourse-bound identity theory. Discourse-bound identity theory can be used to examine the effect of historical collective self-understandings on foreign policy behavior (Stahl and Harnisch 2009, 34). National identity forms a discursively mediated framework within which state action is accepted as appropriate by all members of society (Stahl 2012, 578). The domestic debate on how to deal with Germany’s colonial past includes both remembrance and foreign policy aspects. Discourse-bound identity theory is applied in order to link those dimensions and understands the emergence of identity as the result of social interaction (Boekle and Nadoll 2003, 159). The identification of individuals with larger social groups leads to the formation of collective identities (Boekle, Nadoll, and Stahl 2000, 13), whereby both the focus on commonalities of the collective (in-group) and the demarcations from other social groups (out-group) play an essential role (Stets and Burke 2000, 225–26). According to Boekle and Nadoll (2003, 160), national identity is a specific form of collective identity. It (re)constructs a shared understanding of national history, conveys national belonging, shapes state institutions, which in turn (re)produce national identity, and emphasizes the singularity of a nation (Stahl 2006, 49–50). National identity comprises several active and inactive elements (Nadoll 2003, 168), which predefine a framework of possibility within which state action is accepted as appropriate by all members of a democratic society (Stahl and Harnisch 2009, 42). Identity consequently frames a state’s action and, conversely, the latter (re)produces national identity (Nadoll 2003, 170). This interaction takes place indirectly through discourse.

The concept of discourse in this theoretical approach is based on a poststructuralist ontology and conceives

of discourse as a system of meaning in which ideas about social reality are constructed (Larsen 2014, 369–70). In discourse, national identity elements are (re)produced, interpreted, and argumentatively linked with recommendations for action (Stahl and Harnisch 2009, 42). Thus, they build the ultimate foundation of argumentation chains (Nadoll 2003, 177). The German identity elements³ were uncovered by historical discourse analyses in previous studies (Katsioui and Nadoll 2003; Nadoll 2003; Swoboda 2009; Stahl 2012, 2017). In our paper, we concentrate on the identity element “responsibility” (Nadoll 2003, 350), which allows for a focus on speech and silence surrounding the German responsibility discourse.

Discourse is contingent; therefore, the fixation of meaning is only temporary (Nonhoff and Stengel 2014, 50). This contingency already implies discursive differences, which in Foucault’s understanding are expressed in discursive formations:

“[I]n the case in which one could define a regularity (an order, correlation, positions and sequences, transformations) in the objects, the types of utterance, the concepts, the thematic decisions, one will agree that one is dealing with a discursive formation” (Foucault 1981, 58; translated by the authors).

Discursive formations are part of a struggle for interpretive power in discourse by offering different identity grounding with regard to their argumentation chains and recommendations for action. The goal is to establish a common sense that is supported by large parts of the population (Stahl 2012, 578f.). Restrictions in this context are the respective formation rules. They determine necessary discursive exclusions of specific terms or topics that are incompatible with a formation (Foucault 1981, 58). Discursive formations are represented by “privileged storyteller[s]” (Milliken 1999, 236) who act as relevant articulators in public and political discourse due to a particular discursive structure. This structure (constitutionality, institutions, political culture) determines access to political discourse (Krüger and Stahl 2016, 4).

In Germany, discourses on foreign and remembrance policy are predominantly carried by the political ruling elite. While the chancellor and foreign minister stand out as relevant discourse carriers in foreign policy, in terms of remembrance policy, a delegation of tasks to the president can be observed (Swoboda 2009, 139f.). The Bundestag, in particular the plenary debates, must be considered as a central discussion forum in German (foreign) political discourse. The general public and the media can also participate in the political debate. In this study, however, we will focus on the elite discourse.

External factors such as reality shocks can have a catalytic effect if they are included in the discourse. Inherent in the theoretical approach is a non-essentialist ontology, which, however, does not entirely reject the existence of a material reality (Herschinger and Renner 2014, 14–15). Rather, following the Essex School, it assumes that material reality exists but is only given meaning through discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1991, 158). Consequently, it is only through their entry into the discourse that external factors become discursive factors and can exert their influence (Nadoll 2003, 179).

Discourse-bound identity theory has so far fixated on speech, neglecting the role of silence. The integration of (non-)articulated silencing, allows for a more holistic analysis of the struggle for discourse hegemony. We argue that

silencing is a result of identity selection (see figure 2) that prevents or impedes the inclusion of external factors by discursive formations. While silencing thus is purposive, the question of intentionality does not arise in this theoretical framework, since privileged storytellers are not to be understood as freely acting participants in discourse. Rather, they are subjects who are themselves produced by discourse and therefore only capable of strategic discursive actions (including silencing) within the limits of their belonging to a discursive formation (Nonhoff and Stengel 2014, 53).

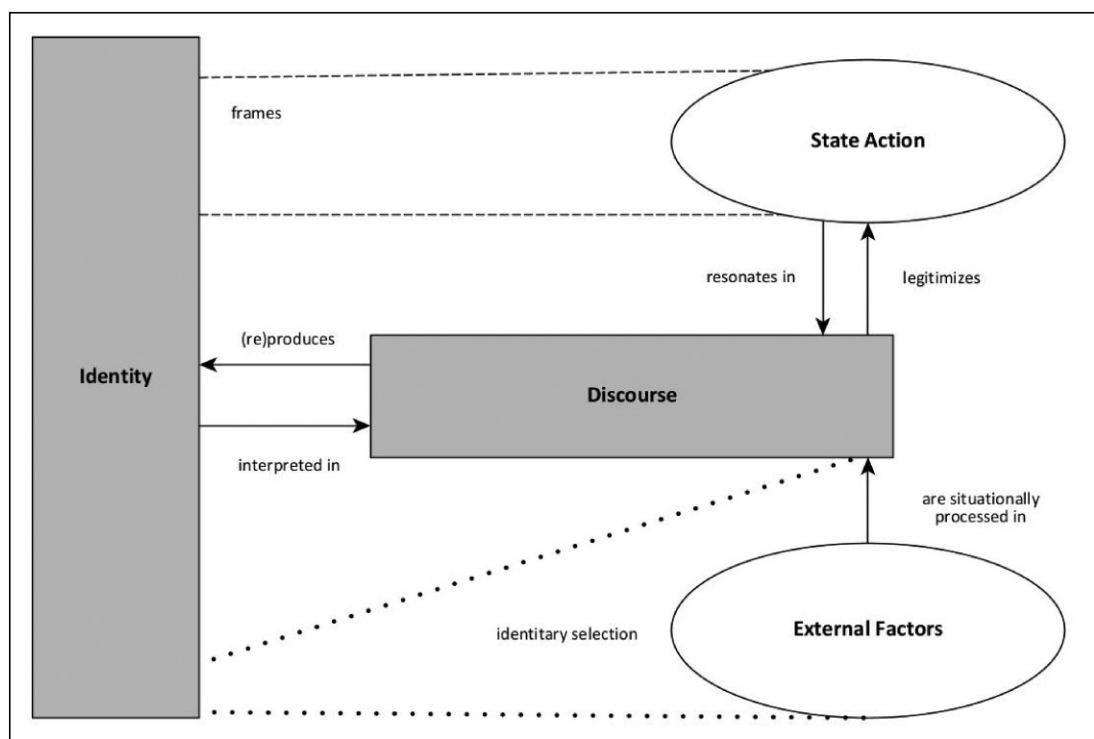
In the following, we particularly look at the dynamics of silencing regarding the inclusion of external factors (e.g., reality shocks) in the discourse by different discursive formations. National identity, as part of the formation rules, frames their interpretative processing. The silencing of these realities becomes a by-product of identity selection (Achino-Loeb 2006a, 3). According to Achino-Loeb (2006b, 35), identity corresponds to a “suppression of experience that does not confirm with such selection.” While Achino-Loeb (2006b, 38) places individuals at the center of her analysis, discourse-bound identity theory is guided by the Foucauldian assumption of selection through discourse itself. Formation rules (discursive relations and practices) decide on the inclusion of certain realities (Foucault 1981, 58–70).

It is therefore necessary to establish a connection between external factors and the discursive relations and practices prevailing within a discursive formation (Laclau 2014, 20). Applied to discourse-bound identity theory, this means that the inclusion of external factors depends on their compatibility with the identity grounded chains of argumentation of discursive formations. External factors are given meaning by the formations in such a way that they can be integrated into the logical equivalence of the argumentation. Yet, it must be considered that strong connections between the respective arguments and the context of meaning already prevail in the established chains of argumentation, which is why the connectivity of external factors is limited (Laclau 2014, 35). Thus, silencing can be operationalized as a product of identity selection in order to comply with formation rules. Discursive formations that are not able to integrate external factors into their argumentation keep silent about them in an articulated or non-articulated way.

Non-articulated silencing encompasses the disregard of certain realities on the part of a discursive formation due to an identity-anchored selection and indicates a high degree of non-connectivity (Hansen 2006, 33). Non-articulated silencing creates an empty space in discourse, which can be filled and therefore function as catalysts for discursive change (Foucault 1985, 27). This activating effect is to be expected especially when hegemonic formations are silent but challenging discursive formations can easily integrate the external factor into their own chains of argumentation, strengthen them, and gain interpretive power. In contrast, articulated silencing comprises different discursive modes of a discursive formation in order to invalidate external factors that are already included in the discourse by competing formations but do not find a connection to the chains of argumentation, or only to a limited extent. Nonhoff (2007, 177f.) calls this articulated antagonism “contrarity.”

Through an analysis of German political discourse on the colonial atrocities committed against the Herero and Nama, non-articulated silencing can be revealed, articulated silencing modes identified, and silencing dynamics understood. We argue that the hegemonic interpretation of the identity element “responsibility” and the argumentation chains

³Other identity elements include: “Germany as part of the West,” “the German question,” “never alone,” “Germany as part of Europe” (Nadoll 2003, 350).



Own illustration, based on Nadoll 2003: 181

Figure 2. *Discourse-bound identity theory.*

Note: Own illustration, based on Nadoll 2003: 181.

based on it could not discursively include the genocide for a long time. Only its contestation and reinterpretation made this possible. Hence, our approach not only integrates silence into discourse-bound identity theory and contributes to explaining how and why silencing occurred and changed over time, but also adds to Achino-Loeb's work on how silence and collective identities are mutually interconnected.

Analysis of German Responsibility Discourse (1980–2021)

With regard to the analysis, three central questions need to be clarified: What is the data basis? What is the methodological approach? What are the objectives?

Following the outline of the relevant privileged storytellers in German foreign policy and remembrance discourse, we included debates, parliamentary questions and written answers, government communications, and speeches by the German President, Chancellor, and Foreign Minister in the discourse analysis. In an online search including the keywords “Herero and Nama” and “Namibia,” a total of 3 speeches, 14 press conferences, 24 parliamentary questions, 10 motions, 21 debates, and 6 reports were found, covering a period of time from 1979 to May 2021.

The discourse analysis itself was pursued in MAXQDA and—to increase reliability and quality of the results—conducted, compared, and adjusted by three researchers. In a first review of the material, the identity element “responsibility” proved to be particularly relevant. Accordingly, this identity element and the argumentation chains and discursive formations derived from it formed the framework for the following discourse analysis. In a first step, special attention was paid to reality shocks, i.e., external factors that are “brought up in the discourse but do[es] not fit into the dominant interpretation of ‘reality’ in the society”

(Krüger and Stahl 2016, 6). In our case, four reality shocks, namely Namibia's independence in 1990, the 100th anniversary of the genocide against the Herero and Nama in 2004, the recognition of the genocide against the Armenians in 2016, and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, were included by the discursive formations and interpreted in accordance with their chains of argumentation. In this respect, the analysis is divided into three phases, each of them delimited by a reality shock. In a second step, the focus lay on silencing—both non-articulated and articulated. We grasped non-articulated silencing (discursive blanks) by triangulating data. The articulated silencing modes were derived from the literature (see chapter 2) and expanded through our discourse analysis.

The overall objective of the study is to reveal the discursive shifts among the German political elite that have led to the official recognition of the genocide. Furthermore, the underlying objective is to identify non-articulated and articulated silences in the German responsibility discourse, to expose its emergence as a result of identitary selection, and to understand its dynamics in the struggle for discourse hegemony.

Briefly Present, Soon Absent (1980–2003)

After the 1971 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling had declared South African foreign rule on Namibia since 1920 illegal, independence movements [e.g., South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO)] were strengthened. Germany co-founded the Namibia Initiative in 1977 together with its allies the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and France. Its goal was to support the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 435 including free elections in Namibia (UNSC 1978). Within the context of Namibia's independence—reached in 1990—several

plenary debates took place in the German Bundestag, in which German responsibility for Namibia was discussed. Hence, Namibia's aspirations for independence had a catalyzing effect on the West-German responsibility discourse. Until 1983, a consensus between the governing parties—the Social-Democrats (SPD) and the Liberals (FDP)—and the opposition (Christian-Democrats, CDU/CSU) dominated. German responsibility was justified by all parties either in a realist or cultural manner.

The realist argumentation linked responsibility with *Westbindung*: “Too often Africans have knocked on Western doors in vain; they have been fobbed off with fine words or even shown the door. I am not surprised that some of them turned bitterly to Moscow” (Bundestag 1980 [Cortier CDU/CSU], 15699). In addition to this Cold War argument, German responsibility was justified culturally and exclusively in relation to the German minority in Namibia: “The Federal government is aware of its special responsibility for the Germans living in Namibia” (Bundestag 1979, 5). This interpretation of responsibility prevented the inclusion of Germany's colonial past into the discourse. Instead, colonialism was declared a closed case: “It has certainly not escaped your attention that in these international organizations the concept of colonialism continues to be used as if dependence on the European states had not long since ceased in large parts of Africa” (Bundestag 1980 [Strecken CDU/CSU], 15693). This articulated silencing mode attempts to close the subject as a whole. The then Minister for Economic Cooperation Offergeld spoke of “traces of their [European] culture” (Bundestag 1980 [Offergeld SPD], 15727) in African states and saw colonialism as the cause of current problems there. In this case, although historical responsibility was linked to colonialism in general, German colonial atrocities were silenced. In addition, articulated silencing modes such as trivialization (reference to colonial cruelties as “problems”) or counterweighing (not Germany but “European colonial powers”) led to further avoidance of the topic (Bundestag 1980 [Offergeld SPD], 15727). We call the dominant discursive formation, which was supported by all parties until 1983, *traditional-realist*.

Its hegemonic position was challenged only when the Green Party entered the German Bundestag, and when the SPD moved into opposition. While the new governing parties CDU/CSU and FDP continued to use traditional-realist lines of argumentation, the Green Party contested the dominant formation by establishing a link between responsibility and German colonial atrocities, using the free space in the discourse that non-articulated silence opened: “The crimes of the Germans in this country [Namibia] are known only to a few today. At that time, brutal violence was used to eliminate any resistance to the undesirable German protective rule. In 1904, for example, the Hereros dared a desperate uprising against the overpowering colonial rulers. The response of the German Empire is genocide” (Bundestag 1984 [Schwenninger Green Party], 3873). The incumbent Foreign Minister Genscher (Bundestag 1984, 3876) reacted not only by silencing the topic as a whole, but also by denouncing the Green Party MP and thereby withdrawing his credibility. However, the Green Party drew attention in the Bundestag to the government's reaction to Germany's colonial crimes: “They have remained silent” (Bundestag 1989a [Eid Green Party], 9503). In addition, members of the party challenged speakers of the traditional-realist formation by interjections: “What about the genocide on the Herero?” (Bundestag 1989a [Eid Green Party], 9495). While one part of the SPD still followed the traditional-realist formation, several MPs hesitantly began to take up the Green Party's line of argument by pointing out the “injustice that was

committed there in the German name” (Bundestag [Verheugen SPD], 3865). In the 1989 Bundestag debate, MPs of the SPD adopted the term genocide and linked it to German responsibility (Bundestag 1989a [Verheugen SPD], 9508). By grounding German responsibility for Namibia idealistically as a commitment to peace and also by adopting a cultural minority argument a *social-idealist formation* took shape (Bundestag 1984 [Verheugen SPD], 3865; Bundestag 1989b).

Despite this discursive contestation from the emerging social-idealist formation, the traditional-realist formation continued to dominate the German responsibility discourse in the 1980s, with privileged storytellers using articulated silencing modes to exclude the alternative responsibility interpretation. In addition to closing the subject, trivialization, counterweighing, and withdrawal of credibility, further modes of the traditional-realist formation can be identified such as subordination, framing, and meaning extraction. While subordination means the hierarchization of responsibility reasons, e.g., prioritizing *Westbindung* over German minorities (Bundestag 1983, 2), framing in this context emphasizes the positive aspects of German colonialism: “As nonsensical as the unrestrained glorification of this epoch was in the past, as undifferentiated is its unrestrained defamation today. German farmers, craftsmen, technicians, scholars, and missionaries accomplished impressive pioneering feats” (Bundestag 1989a [Klein CDU/CSU], 9495). The most striking silencing mode is meaning extraction. This was made possible either by a lack of explanation (Bundestag 1984 [Stercken CDU/CSU], 3868) or by a reference to what has already been said (Bundestag 1984 [Waldburg-Zeil CDU/CSU], 3890). Hence, responsibility is deprived of any meaning. Regarding the social-idealist formation, it is also noteworthy that all relevant articulators linked Namibian independence to the end of German responsibility (Bundestag 1984 [Schwenninger Green Party], 3873; [Verheugen SPD], 3865). With this closure of the topic, they laid the foundation for a phase of non-articulated silence about Germany's colonial atrocities that lasted until the early 2000s. The avoidance of primary evils on the part of the dominant traditional-realist discursive formation, as well as a failure to reappraise them after Namibia's independence on the part of all discursive formations, perpetuate colonial cruelty, with silence taking a prominent role.

Discursive Ruptures and Silence Breakers⁴ (2003–2015)

The second phase started with the reality shock of the 100th commemoration for the genocide on Herero and Nama in 2004. With that event, the topic reappeared in the Bundestag debates. Of particular relevance was a speech by the then minister for development and economic cooperation, Wiczorek-Zeul, in August 2004 at the commemorative ceremony in Namibia. For the first time, a representative of the German federal government officially apologized for the atrocities and asked for forgiveness. She was also the first government official to use the term “genocide” in this context (Wiczorek-Zeul 2004). Although her speech has later been framed as “private opinion” (Bundestag 2015a, 5) and has been left out of the official German position, it subsequently triggered debates and motions in the parliament. In particular, members of the traditional-realist discursive

⁴ Referring to Zerubavel (2006, 61–62), we found that the more silencing occurs, the more increase the chances of the silencing being broken. For us, silence breakers are thus privileged storytellers who explicitly articulate an issue (break the silence) that has not been articulated before or was subject to silencing modes in their respective discourse formation.

formation had difficulties integrating a “compensation-relevant” (Spiegel 2004) apology into their argumentation chain and therefore hardly referred to the speech of Wieczorek-Zeul (non-articulated silence). However, the established discursive silence was to face even greater challenges after 2006. This can be explained by two reasons: First, in October 2006, the Namibian parliament recognized the genocide of the Herero and Nama for the first time; second, in 2007, with the merger of the two radical-left-wing parties (Party of Democratic Socialism [PDS] and Labour and Social Justice Alternative [WASG]) into “The Left,” they were able to combine their articulatory power. In the following years, The Left introduced most parliamentary questions and motions on the genocide of the Herero and Nama. In its argumentation chain, The Left largely followed the argumentation of the social-idealist formation but extended it further into a *radical social-idealist* formation. Their main arguments were the demand for dialogue with Namibia, the lack of official recognition as genocide, and the necessary promotion of the topic in civil society through education coupled with an extensive culture of remembrance (Bundestag 2007 [Aydin The Left], 10518–19, Bundestag 2012a [Kekeritz Green Party], 19993). However, differences from the now *moderate social-idealist* formation can also be discerned. For example, the silence of the German government was criticized openly: “Today it is a matter of breaking the official silence. Until today, no federal government has acknowledged the existence of this genocide. I call that a disgrace.” (Bundestag 2007 [Aydin The Left], 10580). Furthermore, The Left repeatedly raised the issue of reparations in the political discourse. By advocating reparations and detaching them from current development aid, it opposed all other formations and took a marginal position in political discourse. Although making use of similar chains of argumentation, The Left developed its own discursive formation, the radical social-idealist one, as it differed in its recommendation for action (reparation payments necessary) from parts of the SPD and the Green Party (no reparation payments necessary) and took a more active role in breaking the silence. This disagreement prevented the creation of a discursive alliance between the moderate and the radical social-idealist formation and hindered it from achieving discursive hegemony.

The traditional-realist discursive formation remained largely in place until 2015 and retained discourse hegemony through the divided social-idealist discursive formation and the following silencing modes. One of the formation’s dominant chain of argumentation was that responsibility is met by extensive development aid for Namibia. This closure of the topic went hand in hand with subordination. Here, Germany’s historical responsibility was linked to current problems in Namibia (land reform, AIDS, education, and infrastructure), pointing to future German–Namibian relations, detached from the context of genocide, and thus detached from German responsibility: “Today we reaffirm this special responsibility for history, but also the special responsibility for the present and the future development of Namibia. Indeed, there are many problems Namibia has to cope with. But to see the cause for this solely in the colonial past would certainly be too short-sighted.” (Bundestag 2008 [Schuster FDP], 5570). As in the first phase, reference was made to earlier debates, depriving the concept of responsibility of its meaning (meaning extraction). Moreover, the tendency to a closure of the topic was particularly dominant: “The problem [concerning reparations] was settled in a dignified manner at that time [with Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech]”

(Bundestag 2011a [Hoyer FDP], 17264). This was complemented by further silencing strategies, such as relativizing genocide and not recognizing it by invoking pretextual legalistic arguments: “The Convention of 9 December 1948 on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide entered into force on 12 January 1951—for the Federal Republic of Germany on 22 February 1955. It does not apply retroactively” (Bundestag 2011b, 5). This legal argument was repeatedly harshly criticized by the social-idealist formation: “Genocide is, after all, not a legal problem in the first place. It is a human problem, an ethical and a moral problem” (Bundestag 2012a [Kekeritz Green Party], 1382). However, at this stage, it did not lead to an official recognition of the genocide by the federal government. The Left as the main silence breaker was delegitimized, in particular, by pointing out that they were not yet represented in the Bundestag during earlier resolutions (Bundestag 2007 [Eymer CDU], 10580). Accordingly, a certain muteness can be identified among The Left, as they are deprived of their capabilities to speak, which results in a restraint to speak for the issue.

Overall, the period from 2004 to 2015 was characterized by an individual (Wieczorek-Zeul) and collective (The Left) silence breakers. The hegemony of the traditional-realist formation further consolidated their hegemonic interpretation of responsibility, so that, the discussion of reparations payments could be largely blocked (despite the fact that a dialogue between Namibia and Germany has been initiated in 2015). The maintenance of discourse hegemony was facilitated by the silencing modes listed above. In addition to the silence breakers, reality shocks also contributed to the fact that the topic repeatedly appeared in the political discourse in this phase. Beyond Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech, the recognition of the genocide in the Namibian Parliament in 2006 and the “diplomatic scandal” (Bundestag 2011c, 4) around the repatriation of Herero and Nama bones in 2011 should be mentioned here.

On the Way to Recognition (2015–2021)

Another reality shock, the recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Bundestag on June 2, 2016, was formative for the responsibility discourse of the third phase (Bundestag 2016a). Addressed in the Bundestag the previous year, the debate about this particular recognition gave an opportunity to individual members of the Green Party and The Left to point toward the lacking reappraisal of the genocide committed in Namibia (Bundestag 2015b [Özdemir Green Party], 9659; Bundestag 2015c [Liebich The Left], 9856). In connection to the official recognition of the Armenian genocide, the argumentative line of the traditional-realist formation (in government) came under pressure. For instance, the Bundestag’s head, Norbert Lammert (CDU/CSU), stated in one of Germany’s major weekly newspapers “*Die ZEIT*” that Germany can no longer evade its responsibility for Namibia after the recognition of the Armenian genocide (Lammert 2015). The silence was further broken when the Bundestag officially recognized the term “genocide” in connection to the crimes committed against the Herero and Nama by accepting a motion introduced by the Green Party (Bundestag 2015d). In the following, for the first time, a government press speaker confirmed that the colonial atrocities were indeed genocide by reading out loud a motion introduced by the Green Party and the SPD in 2012 (Bundestag 2012b). Yet, the government continued to exhibit various silencing modes. While repeatedly

Table 1. Discourse overview

Until 1983		Traditional-realist			
Discursive formations					
Members	CDU/CSU, FDP, SPD				
Arguments for responsibility	- Realist: <i>Westbindung</i> - Cultural: German minorities				
Recommended action	- Leaving colonialism behind				
Silence	✓ <u>Non-articulated silence</u> : no reference to committed atrocities ✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : trivialization, counterweighting, closure of the topic				
1984–2004		Traditional-realist (heg.)	Social-idealist (cont.)		
Discursive formations					
Members	CDU/CSU, FDP, parts of SPD		Green Party, parts of SPD		
Arguments for responsibility	- Realist: <i>Westbindung</i> - Cultural: German minorities - Historical: colonial past		- Idealist: peaceful world - Cultural: German minorities - Historical: committed colonial atrocities		
Recommended action	- Differentiated view of Germany's colonial past		- Breaking the myth of German colonialism		
Silence	✓ <u>Non-articulated silence</u> : no reference to committed atrocities ✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : trivialization, counterweighting, closure of the topic, withdrawal of credibility, subordination, framing, meaning extraction		✓ <u>Non-articulated silence</u> : no reference to committed atrocities after independence ✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : closure of the topic × <u>Partial silence breaking</u> : naming colonial cruelties		
2004–2015		Traditional-realist (heg.)	Moderate social-idealist	Radical social-idealist	
Discursive formations					
Members	CDU/CSU, FDP, parts of SPD		Green Party, parts of SPD	The Left	
Arguments for responsibility	- Realist: current problems, met by development cooperation - Historical: colonial past and injustice		- Idealist: moral and ethical foundation - Historical: committed genocide - Reappraisal - Official excuse	- Idealist: moral and ethical foundation - Historical: committed genocide - Reparation - Official excuse	
Recommended action	- Development aid				
Silence	✓ <u>Non-articulated silence</u> : no response to remarks by Wieczorek-Zeul ✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : trivialization, closure of the topic, withdrawal of credibility, subordination, framing, meaning extraction		✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : references to earlier resolutions (sporadically) × <u>Partial silence breaking</u>	× <u>Collective silence breaking</u> : active promotion and demands for recognition, criticism of government silence	
2015–2021		Revisionist	Traditional-realist	Moderate social-idealist	Radical social-idealist
Discursive formations					
Arguments for responsibility	- no responsibility mentioned		- Realist: current problems, met by development cooperation - Historical: committed genocide	- Idealist: moral and ethical foundation - Historical: committed genocide	- Idealist: moral and ethical foundation - Historical: committed genocide
Members	AfD		CDU/CSU, FDP, parts of SPD	Green Party, parts of SPD	The Left
Recommended action	- Re-establishing the myth of German colonialism Cont.		- Development aid - Educational measures - Recognition	- Reappraisal - Recognition	- Reappraisal - Recognition
Silence	✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : trivialization, framing		✓ <u>Articulated silence</u> : excluding victims × <u>Partial silence breaking</u> : integrating external factors, changing recommended action	× <u>Collective silence breaking</u>	× <u>Collective silence breaking</u>

Analysis of German Responsibility Discourse (1980-2021).

affirming its responsibility for Namibia, the government did not mention it when questioned about the lawsuit brought against the German government by a group of Herero and Nama descendants in New York in 2017. Confronted with an inquiry about the beginning of court proceedings, foreign office spokesperson Schäfer responded: “At the moment—yesterday evening was only a few hours ago—we have no knowledge of our own as to whether it is true that there

is such a legal claim. In any case, there is nothing that has been served on us or anything like that” (Government 2017). Silencing is further indicated by transferring responsibility to the Namibian government. This for instance is the case when asked about the inclusion of victim groups in the often-referenced dialogue between the two governments (Bundestag 2016b). In a press conference in 2016, Chancellor Merkel evaded a question when she was asked about the

subject (Government 2016). Here, non-articulated silence is displayed. This, however, proves that silence can occur if members of the discursive hegemony cannot integrate the external event if it does not fit their line of reasoning. Regardless of signs of the traditional-realist hegemony coming under pressure, various argumentative lines and silencing strategies remained in place throughout the contributions of the CDU/CSU and parts of the SPD. It was highlighted that Germany's responsibility was already being met through development cooperation. Further, references of former debates and motions were repeated enabling the extraction of meaning of the term "responsibility" (Bundestag 2016c [Wöhrle CDU/CSU], 15910).

Using that external factor and the following silence of the traditional-realist hegemony to their advantage, both social-idealist formations gained momentum. Demanding concrete steps on how the public could live up to its responsibility, the moderate social-idealist formation continued to speak about the outstanding reappraisal of the colonial crimes. Both formations strongly criticized the special initiative launched by the German government in 2015 for the provided funding not paying tribute to the communities of the descendants (Bundestag 2018a [Holtz Green Party], 731; Bundestag 2018b). Equally, the inconsistent legal argument of the traditional-realist formation was highlighted. Acting as a silence breaker, the radical social-idealist formation pointed out German inconsistency in acknowledging its responsibility, especially in the context of the Armenian genocide. It is underlined that, "[s]o far, the Federal Government has shied away from this." (Bundestag 2015c [Liebich The Left], 9856). Moreover, this formation called for attention to the different attitudes toward the issue in both countries and emphasized that the inequality existing in Namibian society today is rooted in colonial structures that have not yet been overcome. They also addressed the issue of the individual responsibility of the preparators, which, admittedly, cannot be held accountable anymore (Bundestag 2018c).

Over the course of phase III, parts of the traditional-realist formation moved closer toward the social-idealist formations: Concerns about the lacking education on German colonial atrocities were addressed (Bundestag 2020a [Motschmann CDU/CSU], 24235) and doubts regarding the development aid policy were raised for ignoring the responsibility for colonial injustice (Bundestag 2020a [Lechte FDP], 24234). The Left can be witnessed to equally move closer toward the moderate social-idealist formation. While having demanded reparation payments in earlier debates, The Left proposed to establish a foundation for the reappraisal of colonial crimes, which converged with Green Party demands (Bundestag 2018b). First, the Black Lives Matter movement can be seen as a catalyst for this rapprochement. Causing societal debates about racism and colonialism, the Black Lives Matter movement can be identified as the final reality shock leading up to the official recognition of the genocide by the government in May 2021. References such as the following were incorporated in the debate: "Yes, we are at the beginning of the reappraisal, but something is finally happening. We know how many people are involved in anti-racist work, how many people support the Black Lives Matter movement, not only in the USA, but also here in Germany" (Bundestag 2020a [Brugger Green Party], 24229). Showing a convergence in perspectives, most speakers thanked the Green Party for introducing a motion on the recognition of colonial injustice during the debate in November 2020 (Bundestag 2020b). Second, this shift can be seen as result of all factions uniting in opposition against the radical right party AfD. Having entered the Bundestag

in 2013, the AfD represents an emerging fourth discursive formation toward the end of phase III. The faction holds a revisionist stance regarding the recognition of the genocide against the Herero and Nama in particular and the reappraisal of colonial atrocities more generally (Bundestag 2019). Opposing this *revisionist formation* and facing difficulties in integrating the external factors, the traditional-realist hegemony broke down over the course of phase III and a discursive alliance with the social-idealist formations can be attested. As a result, it was possible for silence breakers to strengthen their position and gain more influence paving the way for the official recognition of the genocide by the German government on May 28, 2021.

Conclusion

The aim of our study was both to contribute to the theorization of silence and to understand Germany's late acknowledgment of the genocide on the Herero and Nama. Our analysis shows that the inclusion of silence in discourse-bound identity theory and the consequent focus on (non-) articulated silencing increases the explanatory value of the theory and broadens its scope. However, discourse-bound identity theory also offers an explanation for the emergence of silence as a result of identity selection. Building on this study, interesting follow-up questions can be addressed, especially the interaction between different discourses. This particularly includes a central point that has been side-lined in this study: the influence of Namibian discourse and its interaction with the discourse in Germany. Namibian voices appear only occasionally (linked to reality shocks, e.g., independence or memorandum) in the analysis, but henceforth require more detailed consideration in future research.

Turning now to answering the first research question: How did silence enable the denial of the genocide against the Herero and Nama? To this end, it is first necessary to distinguish between non-articulated and articulated silencing. As retrieved by the discourse analysis, different types of silence can be identified over time. Especially at the beginning of the debates in phase I, the dominant interpretation of "responsibility" did not include colonial cruelties; hence, non-articulated silence prevailed as a result of identity selection. Since the only discourse formation in the first part of phase I was not contested, non-articulated silence had a delaying effect on discursive change toward an inclusion of colonial mass atrocities. Nevertheless, non-articulated silence also opens new spaces for contesting discursive formations to introduce and promote their issues, as shown by the Green Party in phase I. Thus, non-articulated silence is ambiguous as it may enable and delay change at the same time.

In contrast, articulated silencing mainly delays discursive change, as can be seen in parts of phase I (when contested) or phase II and III. Here, the persistent denial of colonial cruelties was made possible by articulated silencing modes. The hegemonic formation struggled with including those cruelties, which already entered the discourse, into their chains of argumentation due to identity contrariness. Thus, prominent silencing modes such as framing, subordination, counterweighting, or trivialization could be identified. However, the study also allowed for exploring new silencing modes: closure of the topic, withdrawal of credibility, or meaning extraction. Taken together, they succeeded in repeatedly blocking the topic in discourse. This long-term denial could be maintained through articulated silencing until the pressure of reality shocks and structural changes in the discursive constellations grew too strong. Considering both the delaying and the enabling dimension of silencing opens up new perspectives on the connection

between silence and cruelty. It can be assumed that delaying silencing prevents dealing with colonial cruelties and thus constitutes a cruelty itself, whereas the enabling function of silencing can contribute both to actively reveal the cruelty of (delaying) silencing and to thematize colonial cruelties.

This brings us to the second research question: How did the official recognition of the genocide in 2021 finally become possible? As already touched upon, reality shocks play a fundamental role. They act as catalysts and/or triggers with the possibility of breaking the hegemonic silence in political discourse, since they come up with content-related points of reference that have to be integrated by the established discursive formations. If a hegemonic discursive formation has difficulties integrating a reality shock into its chains of argumentation, two consequences are conceivable: First, the formations may use articulated silencing modes, as it can be observed in particular in phase II of the discourse analysis. These allow inclusion in the discourse without having to integrate the reality shock in a meaningful way and without having to deviate from the established chains of argumentation. At the same time, reality shocks can lead to a situation in which the hegemonic discursive formation has to approach the contesting ones in terms of argumentation or even build a discourse alliance, leading to a gradual integration of the topic into the discourse. This was more evident in the third phase when the recognition of the Armenian genocide led to increased attention to the genocide of the Herero and Nama and to discursive concessions on the part of the hegemonic discursive formation, which finally resulted in official recognition.

While the reality shocks are more to be found at the level of content, there have also been structural shocks in the discourse over time, especially through the emergence of new discursive participants. This is the second factor that paved the way to recognition. The entry of the Green Party led to an articulation of the issue and to the emergence of a contestant formation, while the accession of The Left to the Bundestag initially hardened the boundaries between the formations. The radical position of The Left allowed the hegemonic traditional-realist discursive formation to clearly distance itself from their arguments—partly through silencing modes (e.g., through withdrawal of responsibility)—and split the social-idealist formation. The appearance of the AfD from 2013 onward structurally had an opposite effect. In demarcation from the AfD, the hegemonic discursive formation and the social-idealist formations converged. This and further reality shocks finally enabled recognition of the genocide against the Herero and Nama. In conclusion, the official recognition of the genocide and the breaking of silence was possible through an interplay of reality shocks, constantly reinforcing the topic on a content-related dimension, and the emergence of new discursive participants that disrupted the discourse on a structural dimension.

Finally, the question remains to what extent Germany continues to be committed to coming to terms with its colonial cruelties. Will the years of silence now be followed by articulation? Or are we facing a new phase of non-articulated silence now that the issue has been discursively closed as we could observe at the end of phase I? The findings from this paper suggest the latter, although a more in-depth reappraisal would be desirable against the backdrop of German historical and moral responsibility. This not only includes the strengthening of public reappraisal and the inclusion of

Namibian voices, but also an extension of colonial remembrance policy to further cruelties such as the Maji-Maji “Rebellion” or the Boxer “Uprising” that, until today, remain cloaked in silence.

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