

# Preface: Europe's Disgrace

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1

I've been in Europe (Berlin and now Paris) continuously since May 2023, and I've often found myself uncomfortably puzzled by some of its attitudes toward its wrongdoing pasts. In a very Freudian way, Europe is bedeviled by its unreconciled pasts—pasts it hoped it had mastered but clearly has not. There are many possible lines of reflection here—this is just one of them.

It is perhaps well-enough known, but still bears repeating, that what is astonishing about White Europeans, by contrast with White Americans, is their presumption of historical innocence, of goodness, of rationality, of virtue. Everybody knows, and stands ready to declaim against, the scarcely disputed vulgarity and philistinism of Americans—the cynical gratification they derive from sheer global power. But there is nothing Europeans enjoy more than feeling morally and intellectually superior to Americans, forgetting that the United States is scarcely more than the *wayward* child of Europe, the child that dared to thumb its nose at its parents and embrace without apology the world-transforming forces unleashed by early modern Europe in its classical age of conquest. This is why Europeans are fascinated by America. For them, visiting America is much like going to a psychoanalyst to look into their repressed unconscious and to ponder one distorted trajectory from a common point of origin. And, needless to say, Americans are equally fascinated by Europe—as an old civilization of quaint ruins, a place to spend good money, and a world to mock and sneer at for its supine dependence on the United States it so helplessly despises.

## 2

In 1946, the esteemed existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers published a short book titled (in its 1947 English translation) *The Question of German Guilt*, based on a series of lectures delivered in 1945, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Jaspers had only recently been restored to the professorship in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg that had been stripped from him by the Nazis in 1937 because of his being married to a Jew.<sup>2</sup> Jaspers is one of the most singular figures of this dark period of modern European history, a conscientious and steadfast anti-Nazi who nevertheless remained in Germany throughout the war and whose principled survival lent his voice a unique, perhaps unequalled, authenticity and authority. As readers of this book well know, *The Question of German Guilt* is a work of profound and incisive illumination—one in which Jaspers seeks to respond to the widespread indictment of Germany for the Nazi atrocity: the “outrage, horror, hatred and scorn” directed at Germans and the righteous (and sometimes self-righteous) demand for punishment and retribution. “In Germany,” he writes, “there are some who admit guilt, including their own, and many who hold themselves guiltless but pronounce others guilty” (21).

So, in the anomalous wake of the war, in the chaotic midst of avowals and disavowals, of charges and counter-charges of recrimination and exculpation (the Nuremberg trials, remember, took place between November 1945 and October 1946), Jaspers explored a reparatory path that would nevertheless embrace appropriate registers of accountability. As is well known, at the center of *The Question of German Guilt* is a “scheme of distinctions,” a fourfold typology of guilt, by which to assess differential dimensions of responsibility for wrongdoing. I mention them briefly: (1) criminal guilt—the guilt that belongs to individuals who have committed acts that “violate unequivocal laws” and for which an appropriate court can weigh the facts and determine punishment; (2) political guilt—the guilt that the entire citizenry of a state are presumed to bear in respect of the wrongdoing of their governments and fellow citizens, irrespective of their own approval or disapproval of the regime in question; (3) moral guilt—the guilt that an individual bears before the tribunal of their own conscience for actions for which they have a personal responsibility (including deciding to follow or not follow orders to do wrong); and finally, (4) metaphysical guilt—the guilt that derives from the fact that as human beings in a common world we are “co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in [one’s] presence or with [one’s] knowledge” (25–26).

If you know anything at all about Jaspers you know that he was not only a man of immense and careful learning but also a man of humanity in the best senses of the European (religious and philosophical) traditions of humanism. Jaspers was a philosopher for whom, as Suzanne Kirkbright’s biography attests, truthfulness was a basic and unshakable virtue, and *The Question of German Guilt* reckoned candidly with the painful destruction of the world as he knew it, the sui generis world that was, in a sense, his tacit horizon of intelligibility.<sup>3</sup> No one need doubt Jaspers’s wholehearted sincerity. But one does need to ask, Which world is it that he pondered with such earnest disquiet and hopeful determination?

1 Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (1947; repr., New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). Originally published as *Die Schuldfrage* in 1946. Hereafter cited in the text.

2 For details, see Suzanne Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers: Navigations in Truth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

3 See Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers*.

## 3

In 1955, less than a decade after Jaspers's book was published, the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire released the definitive edition (in English translation) of *Discourse on Colonialism*, an essay offering a very different response to the midcentury catastrophe, on the basis of a very different conception of the "world" at stake.<sup>4</sup> Césaire was the *député* for Martinique in the French National Assembly and still at the time a member of the French Communist Party. He would offer his famous letter of resignation the following year.<sup>5</sup> Although perhaps not directed specifically at Jaspers, *Discourse on Colonialism* is certainly a rebuke of the kind of humanism represented by *The Question of German Guilt*. For Césaire, the history of Europe assumed by Jaspers in his German meditation was not only too narrow but also too preciously *self-regarding*, too heedlessly *self-serving*. In the very heart of his noble despair at the seeming brutal end of European innocence there was a conceit—indeed, a *disavowal*—that implicated him in the history of colonial atrocity that in fact formed one of the very conditions of the Nazi will to power.

Now of course Césaire was acutely aware of the horror through which Europe had just passed and that it was precisely in the midst of its soul-searching, hand-wringing crisis of conscience that Jaspers had so impressively written. Césaire could see that a wound had opened in the center of Europe's idea of itself. But something about the expression of shock and grief and outrage seemed to him askew, even disingenuous, and in its way dishonest. It depended, Césaire suggests, on the *repression* of a whole area of historical experience. For hundreds of years, colonizing Europe had plundered, enslaved, maimed, murdered, raped, and expropriated—in the process destroying whole societies and cultures and enriching itself—and few if any Europeans had raised so much as an eyebrow, let alone expressed open opposition. On Césaire's account, Europeans could not have expected to violate others over so long a period without the "poison" of that "barbarism" becoming "distilled" into their own veins, degrading them, "*deciviliz[ing]*" them, and propelling them toward internally directed "savagery" (35–36; italics in original). It is not surprising to him, then, that "one fine day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss." For Europeans this seemed inexplicably unprecedented. People were startled, indignant, aggrieved. But why should they have been, since after all, Césaire writes polemically, before Europeans were the victims of Nazism they were "accomplices" of colonial fascism—"They tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them . . . because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples" (36). Here is the area of Jaspers's silence, and Europe's disgrace.

*Discourse on Colonialism* is presented as an indictment of Europe's capacity to disavow its colonial past, to disappear it, to render it inoperable, invisible—and not only the structures of violence that constituted it but also the extraction and enrichment that it made possible. Like other Black radicals of his generation, Césaire was a humanist. But his humanism stood in contrast to

4 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (1955; repr., New York: Monthly Review, 2000). Originally published as *Discours sur le colonialisme* in 1950. Hereafter cited in the text.

5 Aimé Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez," trans. Chika Jeffers, *Social Text*, no. 103 (Summer 2010): 145–52. For a formidable discussion of Césaire (and Léopold Sédar Senghor) in relation to the politics of decolonization, see Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

that exemplified by Jaspers, deep and thoughtful and reparatory as it was. Césaire sought a humanism that was at once critical of the solipsistic imperial silencing embodied in European humanism and rich with the cultural and intellectual contributions of all those whose humanity has for so long been traduced, ridiculed, ignored. The problem, as Césaire puts it in *Discourse on Colonialism*, in a passage to which I endlessly return, is that “at the very time when it most often mouths the word, the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world” (73).

## 4

Michael Rothberg has written boldly and eloquently in favor of a kind of critical practice that seeks to read in multiple directions at once, in effect a critical practice that seeks to hold the multiple, sometimes rival, dimensions of *one* interconnected historical world in view. Taking up precisely the question of the relation between the memory of the Holocaust and that of New World slavery, and the contemporary identities these memories inform, his much admired *Multidirectional Memory* offers itself as a critique of the “framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources”—and advances the capacious view that “we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.”<sup>6</sup> Against the binaries that polarize critical debates about Jewish and Black memory and identity, Rothberg’s idea of a contemporary multidimensional practice of “making memory” is meant to disable attempts to claim priority of one cultural past over another. I share this impetus. I too reject the idea that memories and identities should be thought of as pure or authentic and that one can invidiously compare the pain and suffering of Blacks and Jews. But I have a reservation. It seems to me that what agitates and propels Black critics of the sort that Rothberg disapproves of is not merely the perverse desire to assert a pure or authentic identity on the basis of a privileged claim to victimhood but also an injured sense that the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of slavery are informed by differently *empowered* infrastructures and modes of authorization, canonization, and circulation. The Holocaust is a metahistorical structure of global memory; slavery is not—though it *should* be.<sup>7</sup> This asymmetry, which Rothberg largely overlooks, needs to be taken into account in order to realize his laudable goal of getting beyond the insidious dead ends of competitive memory.

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6 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3 (italics in original). I have also profited from his more recent book, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), which, likewise, is concerned with getting us beyond a confounding impasse.

7 I explore a somewhat different direction than Rothberg in my most recent book, *Irreparable Evil: An Essay in Moral and Reparatory History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), which might well have been subtitled “Remembering Slavery in the Age of the Holocaust.”