

Mapping German discourse around documenta 14

- I want to reconstruct and give insight into the larger German discourse around documenta 14, where it is coming from and which debates influenced it. - Of course, my mapping involves my subjective choices. I am also not sure whether I will be able to cover the whole map in the following 20 minutes.
- Most important to note: the German media outrage and anti-semitism accusations against documenta 14 did *not* start with Taring Padi's "People's Justice" in June
- ...but already in mid-January 2022. Neither were they about Taring Padi, or about Subversive Film, but mainly about the collective Question of Funding, and also about documenta fifteen Lumbung members who had signed pro-Palestinian statements. This was almost half a year before documenta fifteen opened and any works could actually be seen.
- while this started with a blog posting of a very small local activist group in Kassel, it took only a few days until the accusations were repeated in leading national news media, particularly DIE ZEIT and Frankfurter Allgemeine (= Volkskrant & NRC, or like The Economist and The Daily Telegraph), along with demands by their columnists to defund documenta. This op-ed piece by Frankfurter Allgemeine, for example, was published only 5 days after blog posting: "Hetzkunst" (means "Hate Agitation Art").
- this could explode because of the media dynamic: BGA -> Ruhrbarone -> Perlentaucher -> national media (cultural/debate section, debate culture established by

Schirmacher)

- also to debunk the idea that it was mainly political op-ed writers who attacked documenta fifteen: the author, is Frankfurter Allgemeine's main art critic, a PhD and university professor art historian who worked in a research group of art historian Horst Bredekamp.
- Other journalists who repeated the accusations against documenta fifteen, and played major roles in the media outrage, later also have prestigious German academic humanities backgrounds: Jürgen Kaube, editor-at-large at Frankfurter Allgemeine, was formerly assistant professor with sociologist and system theorist Niklas Luhmann, Ulf Poschardt, editor-in-chief of the conservative paper Die Welt, is a former PhD candidate of media theoretician Friedrich Kittler.
- At this point, the judgment on documenta fifteen was largely made, and - from the point of the view of the media - the only question was whether documenta organization, ruangrupa and the artists would take any active corrective measures or not.
- but back to the initial blog posting: where does this come from? A particular subculture, or tendency, of the German radical left, which calls itself "Anti-German", and which, briefly summarized, whose position is radically and uncompromisingly pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian.
- It originated in the early 1990s, split between anti-Germans and anti-imperialists in light of two historical events: (a) German unification [actually incorporation of East Germany into former West Germany], (b) a history of pro-Palestinian and partly anti-Jewish violence in the West German radical left of the 1970s.

- Konkret and jungle world; for some people also - paradigm shift from the Soviet Union as anti-fascist protecting power to Israel as anti-fascist protecting power: quite obviously visible in the fact the main activist of the Kassel anti-German group is an ex-DKP member.
- intellectual debates: in Germany, take place in newspapers, less in academia, even when they are academic in origin:
- Historikerstreit; right-wing historians, partly drawing on revisionists like David Irving, relativize the Third Reich and the Shoah by framing it as a preemptive reaction to Soviet communist Gulag. Effectively, Historikerstreit established the view of the Shoah as being singular as a humanitarian crime as German political consensus.
- Historikerstreit 2.0: roles reversed, now the conservative, liberal and center-left accusing decolonial/postcolonial scholars of relativizing the Shoah by putting it into a historical context of other, particularly colonial genocides; along with the view of Israel as a colonial settler or apartheid state. -> Achille Mbembe
- reiteration of classical anti-imperialist positions regarding Israel and Palestine, also triggering the German radical left with a West German history of anti-Jewish violence linked to Pro-Palestinian causes.
- In short, "The Question of Funding"; ruang rupa, Taring Padi and others were perceived as embodiments of a postcolonial/decolonial discourse and Historikerstreit 2.0; although this might arguably not really be the case, and the right target would have been Berlin Biennale rather than documenta.

- other shadow battles: the campaign of Frankfurter Allgemeine against Emily Becker-Dische (journalist, documenta fifteen advisor and co-author of ruangrupa's public defense statement against the German anti-semitism accusations, member of Forensic Architecture, and a left-wing German Jewish person), falsely accusing her of having written for a Lebanese paper when it was close to Hizbollah. Clearly, this is larger campaign in the context of Historikerstreit 2.0, with Dische-Becker being among others a co-initiator of the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism (as an alternative to the controversial anti-semitism definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) and curator of the controversial conference "Hijacking Memory" on the hijacking of Holocaust through the political right.
- the whole debate and mental history, btw., shows that East German experience and history plays practically no role in today's German public discourse. For someone who grew up in East Germany before 1989, these might be as difficult to follow as for someone in the Netherlands.
- virtue signaling: It's part of German folklore, particularly on the left, to accuse each other of anti-semitism and fascism. But, in my experience, it's an entirely new phenomenon that whole Germany - from extreme to moderate left, liberal, conservative and far-right - is united by accusing others, and in this case guests and non-European non-white foreigners, of being anti-semitic - in some cases even Israeli Jews.
- And out of something that, as a German, I would call perpetrator narcissism: seemingly with the idea that nobody knows anti-semitism better, and thus can teach the rest of the world, than the country that committed the

Shoah. Vergangenheitsbewältigungs-Weltmeister.

- Interestingly, the Anti-German movement once began with the slogan “Deutschland, halt’s Maul - Germany shut up”. The Kassel group still has this slogan on its blog. It’s remarkable that it doesn’t seem to be aware of the contradiction.
- moral panic: I think the moral panic is best, and hilariously, exemplified by the press accusations that Hamja Ahsan’s fastfood joint sign “United Front for the Liberation of Fried Chicken” was anti-semitic. [Could be a joke from a Coen brothers film.]
- In the end, the moral panic (especially among politicians) was not actually about ruangrupa, documenta fifteen and its Lumbung collectives, but simply about the fact that something that could be seen as an anti-semitic manifestation would happen in Germany, as a government-sponsored official event and factually a piece of German state art. (That’s what documenta and other public art in Germany factually is - with politicians directly involved in its organization, unlike publicly funded art in the Netherlands.)
- So documenta fifteen, just by the fact that it included controversial works, haunted Germany with its own past, and with ambiguities, uncomfortable and potentially dangerous debates it doesn’t have the capacity of sustaining - especially when it concerns the issue of Israel versus Palestine.