

In the name of trauma! – Censorship and memory politics by the University of Munich and the necessity of promoting democracy today

In memoriam of Wulf Kansteiner

Remembrance and commemoration are, as we know, eminently political. The fact that they are also essential to functioning democratic societies, and that committed remembrance work is therefore always of great importance for young and old alike, can currently be seen in the unrestrained autocratic measures taken by US President Donald Trump. For he is not only attacking the judiciary, the free press, and academia, and exposing certain groups of people to illegal state persecution, terror and deportation. He is also beginning to purge the country's museums and memorials of unwelcome content—as if he wanted to wipe away the dark side of American history

Commemoration and historiography are also important because collective memory is usually very controversial and emotional—and it is precisely these difficult negotiations that keep a democracy viable. The fine art of discussing controversial and emotionally charged issues is not easy to achieve—and it must be constantly cultivated.

However, it is by no means only the anti-democrats of this world who have the greatest difficulty with the art of controversial dialogue – or who even proactively disregard it. The fact that even we emphatic democrats sometimes lack respect for free science and engaged debate and act with dictatorial vehemence – especially when a presumed ‘raison d'état’ and other ideological beliefs are at play – was recently demonstrated once again by a remarkable incident in academic Munich.

In early summer last year (2024), FAZ editor Patrick Bahners picked up on this incident, which was initially purely local. He questioned the inexplicable absence of video documentation of Prof. Wulf Kansteiner's “Munich History Lecture,” who, coming from Denmark and the US, spoke about “memory culture in the present day.”¹ The only subsequent letter to the editor came from Bavaria and, in my view, gave even more cause for concern. But what was particularly worrying was the deafening silence that followed. Was this a successful act of “censorship from Bavaria for the world”? That is the question we must ask ourselves today.

This silence weighed heavily in summer and fall 2024 and has become even heavier since then. For we had obviously reached a point worldwide that a culture of political correctness, language regulation, and dignified vulnerability – combined with increasingly intrusive enforcement of identity-political moral concepts – had ultimately contributed to a very fatal course of history: Donald Trump, mentioned above, had recently become president of the

¹ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/universitaet-muenchen-was-war-anstoessig-an-wulf-kansteiners-vortrag-19732236.html>

United States again, and right-wing extremist parties here in Germany have been rejoicing ever since—and we all share responsibility for this! Because we were all there, and obviously, in our political actions over the years and decades, we had failed to set the right priorities.

But what does that comparatively minor incident in Munich surrounding Kansteiner's lecture have to do with this? How should we view its connection to the autocratic erosion of freedom in the so-called free world? And what exactly happened there at Ludwig Maximilian University?

The fact that we cannot currently say this with complete precision is inherent to the situation. After all, we are being denied access to something that took place in public, and the available documentation is being curtailed. Nevertheless, we can make an educated guess: Kansteiner's lecture apparently dealt with questions of memory politics and pedagogy in our explosive present. Incidentally, these questions are also of great importance for my own field of work—the practical promotion of democracy in various sectors of our society. However, the Munich university authorities seem to have reprimanded Prof. Kansteiner's remarks in a peculiar manner, abruptly breaking off the discussion on site and quickly appointing a kind of substitute speaker for the topic, who was supposed to, so to speak, settle the matter and wipe away Kansteiner's lecture. In doing so, the dean in charge also seemed to have been incited by a group of students.

In any case, the routinely produced video documentation of this “Munich History Lecture” has since been persistently kept under wraps by the Bavarian authorities.² It was as if they wanted to erase the memory of what had been presented on that evening and of Prof. Kansteiner's dedicated work in the field of memory studies altogether – hence an almost Chinese-style censorship scenario in Bavaria: “Xi Jinping plus Söder (MP of Bavaria) plus Ludwig Maximilian University as a model region for memory politics in the present day, which also appeals to Trump and Putin!”, would Kansteiner probably have said smilingly in his ever-wise wit – if he were still with us today.

Then there was that letter to the editor in the FAZ. It also came from the faculty of a Bavarian university, seemed a little contrived, and has remained unique since then—hence the aforementioned leaden silence from Bavaria and Frankfurt. Already in its title, this letter to the editor raises the moral accusation of “disrespect for victims,” which is unfortunately uttered all too often today, but which, as experience shows, one must be quite wary of. The fact that the author of the letter “felt” Kansteiner's reflections to be disrespectful, citing her own emotions, is hardly surprising in the current climate. These are often shaped by perceived truths, felt facts, and bitter moral and ideological accusations – and they frequently result in passive-aggressive demands for trigger warnings. This is why caution and concern for civil liberties are also called for here.

² Archiv der „Munich History Lectures“, <https://www.geschichte.uni-muenchen.de/mhl/mhl-aufzeichnungen/index.html>; zuletzt abgerufen 23.8.2025

The latent frenzy, which is usually inherent in such “feelings towards victims”, manifested itself in this case as an almost baroque reference to all kinds of victim groups. For the author “felt” disrespect to all “those who died at the Berlin Wall and other victims of the SED regime, [...] the victims of the massacre by Hamas and other terrorists on Israeli soil on October 7, 2023, and [...] the suffering of Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip” – in other words, a kind of “overkill of victim groups” emerges here, as Kansteiner would probably say, with clever but all the more constructive deliberation; but more on that later.

Especially since this was written by a “criminal law expert” from the law faculty, who nevertheless—apparently once again carried away by her “feelings”—did not refrain from assessing the speaker's “tone of voice” in order to judge it as “mocking” and as it were punish him for this. Wulf Kansteiner, as it were reprimanded by a Bavarian criminal justice authority in form of a letter to the editor, for being a cynical super monster toward all conceivable victim groups of the present day? A professor of memory studies and European contemporary history, and president of the Memory Studies Association? Can this really be true? And what are we to make of it?

At least someone wrote something at all in response to Bahner’s challenging article, and in parts it was touching, almost innocent, given that little ‘Bavarian hunting scene’ of the supposed academic will against anything deemed indecent. At least this encouraged the video documentation of Kansteiner's lecture to finally be made publicly available, even though she also expressed strong feelings of “stomach ache” and “irritation” about it. Respect!

But perhaps all of this was more or less unconsciously staged – a little Bavarian simulation of controversy and debate. Because nothing has happened since then, and the video of the lecture has still not been added to the public archive. Nor has the video of the “replacement speaker” who was booked at the time, who obviously only found out about the circumstances of his invitation immediately before his lecture, and accordingly only wanted to release the video of his lecture for the online archive if the video of Wulf Kansteiner was also posted.

It was as if the so-called German *raison d'état* had struck relentlessly. In the federal state of divine catholic wrath, it was even more relentless – a double whammy from Bavaria, so to speak, designed to put two constitutional troublemakers out of action since they tend to insistingly challenge all morally correct behavior: the free science and the free press. For, as to the important question posed by FAZ editor Bahners, “What was so offensive about Wulf Kansteiner's lecture?”, nothing could be learned here, except for the information that one simply felt offended – which was complicatedly arranged via a letter to the editor. But since then, Bahners and the FAZ have also fallen silent, and are not responding to emails on this issue. Hence the inquisition has left the building—and science and the press have been silent ever since.

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Genuine debate in the spirit of free science and a democratic civil society looks different. This is reason enough to return from 'emotion' to reason, and to revisit and expand on the question posed. What is actually going on in Munich—and in today's era of passive-aggressive victim sensitivity? This is especially important since, as I said, great vigilance is always required when it comes to accusations of disrespect towards victims and trauma. This is because it is well known that restrictions on thought and censorship of speech often follow hot on the heels of such accusations, and the stronger the emotion, the stronger the restrictions. Ultimately, people will find us so untrustworthy and unsympathetic that they would rather vote democracy out of office.

Yet all these Bavarian machinations are ultimately completely nonsensical! Because, of course, we will be able to see the video of this lecture at some point, one way or another. We have not yet sunk so low that we can really count on the demise of the European Enlightenment. So, at some point, the important debate in this small Munich case will be able to begin.

In the meantime, we have been owing Mr. Kansteiner our gratitude for his sovereign patience and forbearance. Had we not known that historians such as Wulf Kansteiner are aware of and acknowledge the *longue durée* of historical processes, we would have recommended that he take immediate legal action to protect his intellectual property and professional reputation. This alone reveals the remarkable inspiration behind Kansteiner's reflections, with which I have been personally familiar for a long time. They reveal our intellectual and emotional inhibitions, as well as our possibly trauma-related tendencies towards restrictive encroachment, dictatorial acts and censorship. They also spur us on to confront these issues decisively and courageously. For freedom must be earned. Those who do not practise freedom of thought and speech, and who allow themselves to be intimidated in this regard, will lose this freedom. Freedom needs to be nurtured, just as the law needs to be administered. But more on that later.

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Also in the meantime, let's briefly return to my own field of work: promoting democracy and preventing extremism. This actually means preventing 'group-focused enmity', i.e. hostility and hatred towards groups of people, and disrespect for human rights. This is particularly prevalent in the socioeconomically challenged areas of our increasingly unfair and unequal society, but also in its supposed centre. Yet what exactly is there to promote in democracy? And how does this relate to our little Munich case?

The answers to these questions are simpler than one might think. After all, what has been in urgent need of promotion in liberal democracies for decades is not elections. Elections are also held in China and Russia, somehow, not to mention the US. However, what needs to be strongly supported and developed everywhere is the ability to engage in dialogue. A democratic society is essentially nothing other than dialogue, ideally between everyone and about everything, as freely, unreservedly and intensively as possible. This can be public,

informal or private, and should be free from moral judgements and bitter disagreements. It is maximally open dialogue with varying degrees of commitment and validity of what is said, in different settings, limited only by legal guidelines deemed necessary and democratically decided upon.

In the field of democracy promotion and extremism prevention at all levels, it is therefore always a matter of supporting the ability to talk to one another also in deep dialogue – especially where it becomes exhausting and talking seems unbearable. And here, everyone must participate as much as possible, expose themselves, question themselves – especially the leading social elites.

Working with young people at risk of becoming right-wing extremists or displaying authoritarian tendencies has taught me that the more we impose moral and ideological speech bans and raise our index fingers with stern expressions, the more we factually limit what can be thought and talked about. Yet the less we engage in open, taboo-free and sincere thinking and talking, the more we use our emotional “stomach aches” and “irritations” as the yardstick for others' thoughts and expressions, the more we will continue to lose young people's trust in our democratic society. Conversely, our teams learnt a great deal from direct contact with these young people, observing how openly and unreservedly they talk to us and each other, whether in 'narrative conversation groups' or other dialogue formats, and how positive the effects of such formats of open discussion are.

This makes it all the more obvious that restrictions on speech, the stigmatisation of thoughts and censorship of free speech are poisonous to democratic societies, especially when they are initially cloaked in sensitive morality and intellectualism and are supported by powerful academic institutions.

From this point on, Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich should feel strongly encouraged to reflect on the value of freedom of thought, open dialogue, controversy, and unconditional (self-)reflection. Especially since the academic sector is repeatedly accused of being too timid and lacking impact.

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Incidentally, anyone who finds this waiting time—and the *longue durée* of Munich University with regard to this video document—too long may wish to make do for the time being with the video of a lecture on a largely identical topic, which Professor Kansteiner gave in the United States in the same year on “Nationalist Resurgence, Anti-Colonial Activism, and the Future of Holocaust Memory” at a quite conservative university, but apparently to a very open-minded audience.³

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u16MTt4rS8>

Since then, I have understood Wulf Kansteiner's fundamental assertions to mean that socially and societally sustainable thinking and remembrance of history, if it is to succeed, is inevitably a matter of thinking in terms of comparisons and analogies. This inevitably takes place through subjective approaches to comparison and approximation, which are always shaped by personal and generational experiences. They lead us into diverse intellectual and emotional resonances and frictions with others and can sometimes cause “stomach aches,” without which, however, insight and social impact are impossible.

Kansteiner's performative practice as an author and speaker corresponded fully to this. For he always gave us inspired, cheerful, and sometimes provocative, even cheeky encouragement to go deeper, to question ourselves, and to talk about much more than just history, e.g., about the transformation of traumatic injury into its most obvious psychodynamic “reaction”: our own restrictive aggression against others.⁴ This ‘reactionary’ reversal of trauma into aggression and censorship seems to be a fatal characteristic of today's world; it often occurs in well-cultivated, intellectual ways, but in any case it is restrictive and not enabling, not liberal and not insightful – and thus ultimately dangerous to democracy.

This is now also happening in the US, a country to which Kansteiner was deeply attached. The decline of democracy and civil liberties has been able to unfold under the considerable shared responsibility of the intellectual elites. As Bret Stephens (New York Times) summarised as early as 6 November 2024: 'The Democrats have become the party of know-it-alls, of smug lecturing and pomposity. It may give them a sense of righteousness, but how do they ever expect to win an election that way?'⁵

So it's essentially about civic responsibility! – and about preserving our social life in freedom! That is why responsibility must also be taken for the dictatorial know-it-all attitude in our Munich case, especially since such behavior is committed dozens of times a week in small and big ways everywhere in the country and beyond. The aggressive and shameful act of censorship on the part of the dean of Munich's LMU must be acknowledged and reversed – if our indignation at the growth in support for the AfD is to remain credible. It would be a shame if legal action were necessary to achieve a satisfactory outcome in this case, in the interests of freedom of speech and academic work. The FAZ must also be asked, in the context of press freedom and responsibility, why it initiated this matter and then failed to see it through to the end, and why it is now no longer responding to this issue. This behaviour by the FAZ also needs to be acknowledged and reversed.

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⁴ Vgl. auch Wulf Kansteiner & Harald Weilnböck (2008): Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma or How I Learned to Love the Suffering of Others without the Help of Psychotherapy. In: Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (Hg.): Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook. Berlin: De Gruyter. (2008) http://weilnböck.net/pages_en/essays.html

⁵ <https://www.ipg-journal.de/regionen/nordamerika/artikel/bratlos-7904/>

Meanwhile, we remember Wulf Kansteiner quietly, with deep affection and immense gratitude for his courage to dissent and for his tireless, always benevolent commitment, as long as his strength lasted—and, sadly, even beyond. We accept his immense legacy with great respect. This comes with the responsibility to continue his work—and to value people like him even more in the future.