Tropenkoller: the Interdiscursive Career of a German Colonial Syndrome

Stephan Besser

The cover illustration of Henry Wenden’s colonial novel *Tropenkoller* (1904) shows a remarkable combination of two pictorial elements. The image is framed by a stylized representation of the war flag of the German Empire, which divides the illustration into four equal-sized parts. From the right margin a white male hand, firmly holding a whip, projects into the picture. The lower part of the emblematic illustration is dominated by the somewhat menacing *inscriptio* ‘Tropenkoller’. The delicate ambiguity of the image results from the fact that it facilitates two readings without privileging one of them: On the one hand, the whip-swinging hand can appear as a disturbing intruder in the square heraldic order of the flag and can therefore be seen to highlight the incompatibility of German imperial authority and pathological forms of violence. On the other hand, it may also be regarded as a new heraldic element of the flag that is tentatively added to point to an intrinsic affinity between imperial power and sadistic violence.

In my exploration of the discursive history of Tropenkoller I shall attempt to show that the ambivalent conflation of the political and the pathological rather than being an accidental effect of this suggestive cover illustration is, in fact, an essential characteristic of the syndrome to which Wenden’s novel is devoted. Tropenkoller was an overdetermined cultural phenomenon: Circulating between politics, literature and sciences it was conceptualized according to a number of different cultural ‘frames’ that were neither intrinsically contradictory nor simply reducible to each other. In the first two parts of this chapter I will examine the conditions of Tropenkoller’s overdetermination in political and medical discourse. The third part scrutinizes the emergence of the syndrome as a crucial juncture in colonial discourses on sexuality and race. I end with a concluding remark on the question of how far this nervous disorder was a specifically German phenomenon.
In contrast to the naming of many other nervous disease entities – for example, George M. Beard’s ‘Neurasthenia’ – the term ‘Tropenkoller’ was not coined by professional physicians but on the street. According to a contemporary handbook of colloquial expressions, the buzzword ‘Tropenkoller’ – a compound of the German words for ‘tropics’ and ‘choleric’ – first appeared around 1895 in Berlin dialect as a mocking designation for the ‘pathological irritability’ (krankhafte Reizbarkeit)\(^1\) of European officers and officials in tropical colonies. The notorious linguistic inventiveness of the Berlin vernacular was most probably stimulated by various reports which were reaching the German capital at this time, about individual acts of violence against African natives – the so-called ‘colonial scandals’. The metropolitan public of Berlin became especially agitated about the violent crimes of Heinrich Leist, the chancellor and deputy governor of the Cameroons, who in 1893 had ordered the whipping of a group of naked Dahomeyan women in front of their husbands and who forced some native female prisoners into prostitution. The public’s attention was also captured by the cases of Ernst Wehlan, an assistant judge in the Cameroons, who had let his troops burn down some native villages and slaughter their inhabitants, and the excessive cruelty of Carl Peters, a famous German colonial pioneer in East Africa, who in 1891 had ordered the execution of his native concubine and her supposed lover. In this historical context, the newly invented disease entity obviously fulfilled a contemporary need to categorize and name: Over the course of the following decade Tropenkoller became a widely discussed issue in political debates on colonial politics as well as in the discourses of tropical medicine and contemporary psychiatry. And within a few years two Tropenkoller-novels appeared, by Frieda von Bülow (1896) and Henry Wenden (1904).

The popular origin of the syndrome had a key influence on Tropenkoller’s discursive history. Rather than being a clearly defined disease entity, the syndrome emerged as a polyvalent cultural topos that acquired a multitude of divergent meanings, definitions and discursive functions. In his theory of interdiscursivity, the literary critic Jürgen Link has termed this kind of semantically over-saturated cultural topos ‘collective symbols’. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of ‘interdiscursive configurations’,\(^2\) Link assumes that modern societies are characterized by a dialectics of discursive differentiation and interdiscursive reintegration of knowledge: On the one hand, the increasing societal division of labour leads to the emergence of specialized discourses, such as