

Germany's far-right AfD exploits famous artwork to promote Islamophobia

By Sybille Fuchs
10 May 2019

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is promoting xenophobia by crudely misusing a work of art. In Berlin, the party has hung large-format election posters with the slogan "Prevent Europe from becoming Eurabia!" The term Eurabia was used by the right-wing extremist Andreas Breivik to justify his mass murder in Norway; the Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant used similar language to warn against the alleged impending takeover of "white" states by Muslims.

The AfD has titled the series to which the poster belongs: "Learn from Europe's History." It is shamelessly exploiting a 19th-century painting to whip up fear of Muslims and create a pogrom-type mood against foreigners. The poster features a central section of the 1866 painting "The Slave Market" (*Le marché d'esclaves*) by the French historical painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). It shows a petite, naked woman surrounded by bearded, turban-wearing men who are apparently measuring up her value at market. Her lower body is obscured by the words "Europeans vote AfD."



***The Slave Market*, 1866, Jean-Léon Gérôme**

The use of this image and its interpretation by the AfD is an amalgam of historical falsification, outright lies and racist agitation, which can quite rightly be compared with the techniques used by the Nazis.

The AfD uses the cliché of Middle Eastern men who abuse white women, a cliché employed after the Cologne New Year's Eve frame-up in 2015 to undermine the broadly positive reception of foreigners in Germany (its "welcoming culture") and incite xenophobia. The same clichés were used by the Nazis to vilify Jews prior to their mass murder.

The term "Eurabia" stems from the British conspiracy theorist Gisèle Littman. It assumes that in future Europe will be under Islamic rule following the immigration of Muslims into the continent. All of this has nothing to do with the origin, historical background and content of the picture.

The painting dates back to an epoch when the West was engaged in conquering the East—not the other way around. The outrageous nature of the AfD's historical revisionism is evident from the party's selection of a painting from a period when European colonialism assumed increasingly brutal forms and the four-year American Civil War ended slavery in the United States just a year earlier. The consequences of the bloody suppression of large parts of Africa and the Middle East continue to plague these countries today and are among the main causes of the current movement of refugees.

The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, which owns the painting, has called upon the AfD to stop using the picture to advance its political agenda: "We strongly condemn the use of the painting to advance AfD's political stance and have written to them insisting that they cease and desist."

"We did not provide this picture to the AfD," Clark Art Institute's director, Olivier Meslay, clarified. However, there is no copyright "that allow us to control how it is used." Therefore, he could only appeal to the "decency of the AfD," Meslay wrote in a letter to the AfD.

This appeal, however, has fallen on deaf ears. Berlin AfD deputy Ronald Gläser said: "Actually, they should be grateful to us for making this picture, which is very beautiful, better known than it already is." On its Facebook page, the state association of the AfD trumpets: "Definitely an eye-catcher." It is most likely that the picture was created entirely from the imagination of the painter who created it in his studio. The depicted woman was meant to be an Abyssinian woman rather than a European. Gérôme had toured Turkey and Egypt and made character studies, but there is no evidence to suggest he actually experienced a scene as shown in the picture. The website of the museum describes the "disturbing scene on a courtyard market, which is intended to point to the Middle East." There are no clues in the picture as to the exact geographical location of the slave market.

Gérôme painted similar scenes with a very different historical background. One of his paintings shows a slave market in ancient Rome. White Roman men make bids for a naked woman; an old man has ripped off her robe.

Young girls and a mother with her children are also offered up for sale.

Another picture depicts a Turkish bath in which a half-naked African woman washes a curvaceous white woman.

Gérôme was regarded as a bitter opponent of Impressionist painting, the modern style of his time. He favoured instead the widespread European style of Orientalism, which was very popular in art and literature in the 18th and early 19th centuries and sought to depict in romantic fashion all that was mysterious, sensual and strange. Following the efforts of European powers to extend their rule over the Islamic world, such romantically distorted depictions of the Orient took on an ambivalent character.

With his Egypt campaign (1798-1801), Napoleon sought to transform Egypt into a French colony, end British supremacy in the Mediterranean and secure France a dominant role in Levantine trade. He was accompanied in his campaign by a group of scientists, engineers and artists who laid the foundation for Egyptology, the scientific exploration of Egyptian culture.

Gérôme's painting, composed 65 years later, allowed viewers to condemn the inhuman practice of the slave trade while enabling the viewer, at a time of bourgeois sexual prudery, to admire the naked women as does the potential buyer.

It should be noted that the slave trade at that time was by no means limited to the Orient. In its cruellest form, it was practiced from the 16th to the 19th century by European traders who supplied plantation owners on the American continent with slaves from Africa. Almost all of the European powers were involved in such trading in one form or another.

Scientific studies today estimate that between 1519 and 1867 over 11 million Africans were abducted and sent as slaves to America, of which 3.9 million were sent to Brazil. The number of those who died during transport across the Atlantic is estimated at up to 1.5 million.

Today, African refugees trying to escape the war and misery in their homeland are being enslaved and sold off by the Libyan Coast Guard and other militias armed by the European Union. At the same time, there has been a revival of colonialism in Africa by the rival great powers, Europe, the US and China.

Recently, the German chancellor travelled once again to a number of African countries and offered their despots weapons, military support and the training of the police in order to strengthen German influence on the resource-rich continent and forcibly prevent refugees from heading towards Europe. The government's policy is entirely in line with that of the AfD.

The grand coalition is doing all it can to promote the far-right agenda of the AfD, which increasingly resembles the racist propaganda and ideology of the Nazis. This is widely rejected, however, by the vast majority of the population, which has learnt from history that racial hatred, police states, militarism and rearmament lead to disaster.