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## Antisemitism, Anti-Racism, and the Holocaust in Germany: A Discussion Between Susan Neiman and Anna-Esther Younes

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**Susan Neiman:** I think there are two major failings in the German working through of the past, and I think they're connected. One is the utter failure to take account of East German anti-fascism, namely the absolute dismissal of what was done in the East Germany. One of the charges that West Germans and other people tend to make about East Germany, if they pay attention to it at all, is that East Germany did not prioritize Jews. They won't put it that way. Instead, they'll say East Germany is antisemitic because they didn't focus on the Jews. My view is that East Germany was right to focus on racism in general and antisemitism as a subspecies of racism. So it didn't confine anti-fascism to antisemitism. It also talked about the fourteen million Slavic victims of the Nazis.

What happened then, of course, when unification came and everything in East Germany was ignored or vilified was that antisemitism became the sole Nazi crime, and that's just a mistake, because we know that the Nazis planned to colonize all of Eastern Europe and Africa. They were perfectly happy to murder vast numbers of people. But all of that got left out in favour of, the idea that, the only thing that the Nazis did wrong was antisemitism. And what that means, of course, is that in the present day Federal Republic of Germany we have the accusation of antisemitism as toxic, and it's thrown around very easily. And it's been thrown around at me ever since I joined the initiative, which is quite extraordinary. But other groups, especially people of colour who are discriminated against in various way, fall by the wayside, and one doesn't really know what to do with them. And of course that's particularly true of Palestinians, whether Muslim or not. So I think we're in a dangerous situation.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** It is a very dangerous situation indeed! And you are right about the political lens of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism that the GDR presented as its state ideology. But I think we would both agree that East Germany wasn't entirely anti-racist. GDR policy still firmly located itself within parameters of ethnic belonging, making it illegal for instance for contracted socialist labour from so-called brother states to have children here or take root in any way that would diverge from the mode of contracted labour and give them equal citizen rights. Equally, everyday racism against people of colour generally, for instance, was pretty common and not eradicated. I think this case

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also best exemplifies the intricacies of race generally: one can be anti-racist, but not anti-imperialist, or the other way around. Separating one from the other however doesn't solve the problem – it rather turns the whole issue around race into a circular logic, always revolving around what it actually is not about, or only revolving around atomized and split off aspects of it, but never the whole picture.

I also think you are very right when you say you observe that “East Germany was ignored or vilified,” because “antisemitism became the sole Nazi crime.” In this current debate on antisemitism, however, I am rather interested in thinking in another direction – away from a Eurocentric lens of locating and understanding racism. How can we bring in the question of the colonies and what happened there and understand Europe from there, too? How can we bring in questions of who counts as a human today, generally speaking, and not only think racial violence and genocide within the geographical boundaries of Europe? I think that when you mention that the Nazis were colonizing North Africa, that's an important point. Susan Slyomovics also notes the continuing and inseparable intersections of race and colonialism and the intersections of anti-Muslim racism and anti-Jewish racism during that time: “Inspired, so to speak, by Nazi decrees, many Vichy functionaries in Algeria (often members of the European settler population) were notorious for virulent antisemitism of more than one variety: they were both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim Algerian.”<sup>1</sup> In short, framing the questions of antisemitism and racism only within European or European Jewish history, means to also invisibilize an Arab-Jewish positionality, i.e. as well as the legacy of German direct and indirect colonialism and it's not lived up to past and responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Also eclipsed in this are the Algerians, Palestinians, the entire historical context that led to race as a construction and then eventually also ended up in Auschwitz.

**Susan Neiman:** First of all, I agree with what you just said. If Rommel hadn't been stopped by the British Army, the plans were to colonize also sub Saharan Africa. What I don't understand is why anything I said was Eurocentric. I said we cannot understand where we are, unless we understand how we got there: why is that a Eurocentric statement?

**Anna-Esther Younes:** I think it's an epistemological critique rather than me calling you Eurocentric as a person. What I wanted to say is that there is an epistemological reflex in speaking only about Europe when speaking about the Shoah, which filters our understanding and seeing of a problem. What I would qualify as Eurocentric is to only start from twentieth century Europe when trying to understand the Shoah, for instance. It doesn't mean that it's wrong to think about Europe. Or that it's not historically important to talk about the Holocaust from a West-European and East European analytical starting point – but we then need to move beyond Europe, to fully understand Europe. I think that is the strength of decolonial or postcolonial or race critical scholarship: it marks Europe as having always been in relation to the non-European. Europe has no identity, legal

<sup>1</sup> Susan Slyomovics, “French Restitution, German Compensation: Algerian Jews and Vichy's Financial Legacy,” *Journal of North African Studies* 17, no. 5 (2012): 881–901, 885.

<sup>2</sup> And also of importance is Matthias Goldmann's legal work on behalf of the Ovaherero and Nama. Court Case: Vekuii Rukoro, Johannes Isaack, Barnabas Veraa Katuuu v. the Federal Republic of Germany, Civ. No. 17-0062, United States District Court Southern District of New York, 2018, Matthias Goldmann. Furthermore, legal anthropologist Howard Rechia-Taylor compares Germany's approach to the Nazi genocides and the Namibian genocide. See Howard Rechia-Taylor, “Liberal Common Sense and Reparations for Colonial Genocide,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 8 August 2020, <https://polarjournal.org/2020/08/08/liberal-common-sense-and-reparations-for-colonial-genocide/>

framework, or a soaring economy because of its independence from the rest of the world, but rather because of its dependence on and violent relationship with the non-European. Europe understood through racial capitalism is, after all, a construction of 500 years. However, it's this ritualistic demand for an "original sin" which wants us to locate it in time and space in twentieth century Europe, just like we want to locate – from a Eurocentric perspective – everything in Europe – the good and the bad. At the same time, I understand that there is a point to be made about an "original sin," but then I would focus on the invention of race in Europe. Then we would need to understand the whole story from at least 500 years ago, if not longer – with the witch hunts, the *Reconquista*, the colonization of the Americas, slavery. What we look at today when speaking of the Shoah is actually the ongoing aftermath of an "original sin." A transhistorical and global perspective could thus teach us something about what happened in the twentieth century in Europe. That's what I meant. And I know you do not disagree with that.

**Susan Neiman:** I do not think you are making a personal critique; you do not know me or my work. But you have called my opening statement Eurocentric, which is a critique. I must reply that if we're asked to talk about Germany, we are, first of all talking about Europe. The point that I was making was that there used to be a view in Germany that was an internationalist view. This is not to say that East Germany did everything perfectly. I acknowledge that they certainly didn't. I know perfectly well that racism was present in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) even though it conflicted with state ideology. It's pretty hard to eradicate deep-seated racism, especially in a people deeply influenced by Nazi propaganda, in one generation. I also acknowledge that the GDR instrumentalized their anti-fascism; all of this is discussed at length in my book *Learning from the Germans*.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, their view of Nazi crimes was that it was racist *schlechthin*, and consequently they spent a lot of time paying attention to colonized peoples and offering forms of support. So I think you're using a kind of kneejerk reproach of Eurocentrism where it just doesn't have any place on the subject. I think the internationalist movement was a very non-Eurocentric movement; that was all I was pointing to.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Yes, I see what you mean, there was indeed a lot more support to those fighting against Western capitalism globally – after all, it was the Cold War. There was also a lot more political and economic support for the Palestinian cause. But I don't know if we can take this as an example of radical anti-racist state politics.<sup>4</sup> And, even if we start speaking from this East–West divide, then there is still an equally important part of Germany that is located in Namibia (or the colonies), too, until today, no? So why not talk about that too then: Germany in Namibia? The question is, how can we come back to a more internationalist way of thinking, for instance? Or maybe a thinking that centres historical dependency and interrelationality – can we extend history and responsibility beyond European borders? Can we start thinking from the margins of the world, back to the economic centres, for instance – through time and space?

But what I was actually interested in for today's conversation was to discuss philosemitism as a form of racism – and not just argue about antisemitism from the viewpoint of a Cold-War debate or a second *Historikerstreit* (Historians' Dispute).<sup>5</sup> You mentioned, for

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Toni Weis, "The Politics Machine: On the Concept of 'Solidarity' in East German Support for SWAPO," *Institutions and Languages of Governance and Struggle* 37, no. 2 (2011): 351–67.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Wiedemann, "Debatte um Erinnerungskulture: Lob der Verunsicherung," *taz*, 17 March 2021.

instance, that (West) Germany's focus on antisemitism is part of the problem. However, there are scholars who have written on philosemitism as a racial state ideology, for instance, which would fall in line with that argument of yours. Frank Stern, i.e. argued in the *Whitewashing of the Jewish Badge* that philosemitism was the discursive policy pillar upon which a post-WWII Germany was rebuilt to re-enter the world of Western global powers – epitomized in Adenauer's anti- and philosemitism as the founder of a "new Germany."<sup>6</sup> Moshe Zuckermann claims (West-) German memory culture grew into a (psychoanalytically defined) fetishized "Shoah-euphoria," which enabled a denial of guilt at the same time that it fostered political complacency.<sup>7</sup> And historian Martin Braach-Maskvytis stipulates Germany's post-war philo-Semitic turn as having continued today in a notion of "German redemptive proxy-colonialism" through Israel.<sup>8</sup> French thinker and activist Houria Bouteldja calls it a "state philosemitism" along with Alana Lentin<sup>9</sup> who writes of "philosemitism" as being the "good antisemitism" that is welcomed and in fact embraced as a form to "govern and rule." I witnessed the unfolding of philosemitism in state-funded anti-antisemitism workshops, where I ethnographically observed predominantly white Germans trying to speak about the past, the present, and Germany.<sup>10</sup> Those narrations fundamentally trouble our understanding of antisemitism, for instance, and it also teaches us a lot about how race functions. The question I want to raise is thus this one: can we understand philosemitism as a type of racism that is equally as violent and vicious as antisemitism is?

**Susan Neiman:** Look, I agree with you, I think that philosemitism is a weaker form of racism and antisemitism, but it's also a form of racism. And I agree with you entirely but you see, I think first you need to establish, and not just in a German context, that antisemitism is a form of racism and not something entirely different from racism. As I am sure you know, there are many people who disagree with that. I am a universalist Jew, which means that I believe prejudice towards Jews is different from prejudice towards Muslims, Palestinians, black people, and Asians, but every form of racism has its own story, its own clichés. All these differences are interesting historically, anthropologically, sociologically, but they do not matter morally. I am a philosopher who reads a lot of history and other fields, but my interest in the end a moral interest. And simply to convince Germans that antisemitism is one form of racism and that racism is the problem would be, it seems to me, serious progress, because then racism towards people of colour and other minorities would be as toxic and as awful as antisemitism is. The reason I brought up East Germany was there was an alternative view: that the main Nazi crime was racism. But all of that got erased, so that the only Nazi crime that most Germans know about is antisemitism and Auschwitz.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Stern, "Philosemitism: The Whitewashing of The Yellow Badge in West Germany 1945–1952," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 4 (1989): 463–77.

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Zuckermann, *Antisemit – Ein Vorwurf als Herrschaftsinstrument* (Vienna: Promedia Verlag, 2014), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Braach-Maksvytis, "Germany, Palestine, Israel, and the (Post) Colonial Imagination," in *Race, The Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, ed. Volker Langbehn and Mohammed Salama (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 294–314.

<sup>9</sup> Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love* (Paris: La Fabrique Éditions, 2016), and Alana Lentin, *Why Race Still Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Anna-Esther Younes, "Race, Colonialism and the Figure of the Jew in a New Europe" (PhD diss., Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2015), and Anna-Esther Younes, "Reading Alana Lentin in Germany," in *Decolonizing the Question of Palestine*, ed. Riccardo Bocco and Ibrahim Said (provisional titles, forthcoming 2021).

My work has not revolved around questions of antisemitism or Israel and Palestine. Because I am Jewish those are questions that I've had to read and think about. It has not been my central focus and I never wanted it to be my central focus. I am now in the middle of all this because I couldn't stand some of the things that were going on in Germany and got politically engaged. And one of the things that's I've experienced in the last month is how very little Germans know about Jews. I mean it's painful and embarrassing that the philosemites or, perhaps, particularly the philosemites, know almost nothing about real living Jews. So they need to know more about real Jews. They need, of course, to know more about a lot of people as well, but part of the problem is they view Jews solely in relation to their own experiences. The one thing they know about Jews is that their parents and grandparents murdered them, and that in itself is so traumatic that you see them not engaging any further.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Yes, you are right about conceiving of antisemitism and racism as emanating from the same source: race. That this is epistemologically and – by extension – ontologically kept separate and defended by all means possible is a real problem in Germany. And, most importantly, what's the function of a separate discourse for antisemitism for German society, right? However, coming back to what you said before: Is the Holocaust really traumatic for Germans? Or is it maybe the mere fact that their family members could have been truly *cruel* although everyone around them tells them that Europeans are the truly civilized and cultured people in the world? Maybe they are traumatized from their illusions of German grandeur and civility falling apart, but traumatized by the Shoah? Maybe people are traumatized by war, violent parenting or emotionally absent family members? Or they do not know how to manage the unconscious inter-generational transference of hatred vis-à-vis an international politics of condemnation of that hatred? But that is a long conversation here and I am not sure if race in the unconscious is actually represented as "race" (whatever that is in fact), and not rather as images and words and feelings of attachment and aggression. In short, however, I contest the notion that the German nation and people suffered trauma as a result of the Shoah. I think there was an international public discourse shaming Germans into facing their racial violence and human cruelty. I guess that can maybe be traumatic – to have one's reputation tainted publically. I mean, Germans aren't traumatized by their genocide against the Ovaherero, Nama Nama or Maji Maji – why not then? Trauma also didn't happen to the French, for instance by their colonization of and war upon Algeria, nor are white Americans traumatized by slavery or settler colonialism. That's why I am saying it might be a stretch, but we seem to easily say that about white Germans and the Shoah. This is incredibly interesting to me. So do we really talk about trauma here, or maybe a hurt and shamed nationalist pride, or white narcissism as Fanon would call it, imposed, relationally, by stronger Western powers? Or, posed differently, had Hitler gotten away with everything – as he speculated – would Germans feel bad about the Shoah?

**Susan Neiman:** I'm not sure it's interesting to argue about counterfactuals. The fact is that the Nazis did not get away with everything; they lost the war, and the resulting mixture of shame – wounded pride, if you like – and guilt, both from external and internal sources, left a deep residue that has sometimes been productive. This was the focus of my recent book *Learning from the Germans*. But it also produced trauma that has made them

often unable to deal with living Jews or Palestinians, and with the present conditions in Israel and Palestine, because they remain focused on their own past.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Right, when I say “narcissism,” I mean an obsessive looking at one’s own history or misery from a very specific perspective. I think we agree in that, but took different lessons from it. And it’s also true, that there was a different type of socialist state politics. But, again, I want to come back to philosemitism. You said it’s a weaker form of antisemitism and I would doubt that. Fanon already teaches us that in a racist society loving or hating someone because they are Black, is equally violent, racist, and “sick.”<sup>11</sup> I think that’s quite interesting and I would position philosemitism in that matrix, too, and on a state level. In short: to understand that you can be a victim of racism (antisemitism in this case), whilst philosemitism is appropriated as a state concept to enlarge or to continue white imperialist, or just simply white supremacist politics, might be quite overwhelming for Jews affected by antisemitism, for instance, but it teaches us a lot about the parasitic nature of whiteness or racism generally. How can admiration, idealization, fetishization, and love of a *phantasized* Judaism or any Other *racialized figure* contribute to our understanding of what race is and how it functions especially in relation to the state? I believe it is important for us to better understand what race can be, how to fight against antisemitism or racism in general and how such a fight has to look like.

**Susan Neiman:** First of all, whiteness, like other racial categories, is constructed, and it’s important to remember that until quite recently, Jews were not considered white – not only by the Nazis but by Americans quite late into the twentieth century. I’m not sure the British really consider Jews white today – or for that matter, the Irish. Secondly, I have experienced plenty of philosemitism, since I have lived in Berlin for most of the years since 1982. I do not experience it as a form of love whatsoever. So I don’t quite see why that’s relevant.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Yes, I am aware that Whiteness is constructed and, I might add, it is also conditionally conferred upon different groups through time and space and geopolitics. Secondly, I am not talking about “true love,” when I talk about *philosemitism* as an imperial and racist geopolitical moment that is also directed against Jews.<sup>12</sup>

But either way, if we take Fanon seriously, he was talking about a racialized system that has two sides of a coin, one is hatred and that’s usually easier to find: We understand what racism is if someone is hated or seen as an object of hate (or so we like to believe). If someone, for instance, is chased through the streets, that’s something we understand as racism, most of the time. Although also that claim was troubled by Judith Butler with a Fanonian epistemology on the Rodney King case in the US.<sup>13</sup> Butler called the ensuing predicament of seeing and knowing racism in a white supremacist structure a “racially saturated field of visibility,” where the jury looking at the footage of police brutality saw the police defending itself against a supposedly violent but still Black body lying on the ground. So, if we cannot even truly see “hatred” and racism although we have

<sup>11</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press. 2008/1952). The reference to “sick” is on p. xii. His books details the libidinal attachments and internalized inferiority/superiority complexes leading to racialized attachments.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Kirsch, “With Friends Like These ...,” *The New Republic*, 3 June 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15–22.

ample footage and thus proof of it, how can we see and understand love infused with race?

Take the antisemitism delegate of the German government, Mr. Felix Klein. In an interview from 2018, he talked about how he is driven to make the life of “Jewish humans” [*sic*] (jüdischen Menschen) more visible in German everyday life. And about how Israel, given its European but also “Oriental” character is thus “a country worth dealing with” and supporting.<sup>14</sup> Finally, he states that whoever “wants to be successful in Germany” in their career will have to accept German “sensibilities” around the past and present, and if violating them, one has to face the full consequences of the German legal system. People have been threatened with eviction from Germany, in the case of Arab or African refugees from their antisemitic “breeding grounds,”<sup>15</sup> or when it comes to political speakers and activists with non-European or non-German citizenships.<sup>16</sup> Effectively, there is already a *Berufsverbot* in Germany for those violating those loosely defined boundaries of German sensibilities – and since the BDS movement gained more traction it is getting more severe. I mean, honestly, the list just goes on ... .

**Susan Neiman:** You were the one who brought up love; I did not.

**Anna Younes:** Yes. To invite us to expand our understanding of antisemitism.

**Susan Neiman:** I would not call philosemitism any form of love and I don’t care what Felix Klein or any of those people say about it. I am not talking about romantic love and I am not sure that there is such a thing as metaphysical love, but I experience philosemitism as an extremely creepy form of discrimination. However, it’s less creepy than the drunk neighbour that I had to deal with for three years, who was trying to beat down my door. Interestingly enough, he was an equal opportunity racist: he would yell “Jews should be gassed” but he would also talk about killing so-called *kanaken*; later he went after a gay couple in the house. In my own apartment where I am sitting now, I’ve had to experience German antisemitism in a violent and threatening form and it took years to get the guy out of the building. Still, I see philosemitism as the other side of the coin, I don’t see it as anything that’s really different. It’s a milder form, and it’s certainly more pleasant than having to call the police in the middle of the night because somebody who is fixed on you as a Jew is trying to beat down your door.

But both antisemitism and philosemitism are unrelated to love in any form. And that’s why I brought up trauma, because I think that the form of focus that Germans have on contemporary Jews or questions of Israel and Palestine really is the product of trauma, of their having come to terms with their parents or grandparents, having been Nazis, having been *Mitläufer*. That is a deep fact about German consciousness.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Again, I am not talking about “true love.” I am talking about a racial structure which immanently objectifies the Other in either way: negatively or positively. As for “German trauma”: I wouldn’t use the language of genocide trauma for Germans in that regard. I would use the language of transference, maybe unconscious transference of racism, which would turn into philosemitism in the next generation – I

<sup>14</sup> DW Deutsch, “Felix Klein: ‘Null Toleranz gegenüber Judenfeindlichkeit,’” Deutsche Welle, 4 August 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk\\_FviTCUGU&fbclid=IwAR1-Ln3S3NREtcB\\_wwoPd5uGUPswdqZCKGk8bXKiDjFKWrxApiEQYdrik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk_FviTCUGU&fbclid=IwAR1-Ln3S3NREtcB_wwoPd5uGUPswdqZCKGk8bXKiDjFKWrxApiEQYdrik) (accessed online 17 March 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Anna-Esther Younes, “Islamophobia in Germany: National Report 2018,” in *European Islamophobia Report 2018*, ed. Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (Istanbul: SETA, 2018), 369–406: 390.

<sup>16</sup> Anna-Esther Younes, “Il ‘diritto di recar dannao’ contro il diritto di boicottare?,” in *Palestinesi*, special issue of *Il Ponte* 76, no. 1 (2020): 352–68.



can see that leap, however, I think that it is quite difficult to argue or even prove clinically. Meaning, I can see how unconscious attachments, images, and semantics, are transferred intergenerationally leading to a re-packaging of unconscious images and words in the next generation. That is in fact something I tried to understand and write about in my PhD. What I could understand, though, is that someone is traumatized by violent parenting, emotional coldness and forms of manipulative behaviour, war. And there's a trauma with this WWII generation who are attached to their family members, but I would be cautious to use this type of trauma and posit it on equal pair with survivors of the Nazi regime such as Sinti and Roma, the non-abled, or Jews. It would put traumatized racialized survivors on pair with white Germans for a regime many wanted, or for aggressive and violent (white) German parenting.

**Susan Neiman:** Do you think racial trauma is the only kind of trauma in the world? There are many kinds of trauma.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** I think we need to be careful when to call someone a victim of trauma and, most importantly, *in what context* – for clinical reasons as well as for social and historical reasons. I am aware of what trauma is in a psychoanalytic universe: namely, when an outside force imposes itself and overwhelms the ego in its capacities to understand (beforehand), anticipate, and/or being able to protect itself – I don't see how that applies to today's generations in power? Today, Germany rather "controls a narrative of trauma" instead of being "controlled by trauma."<sup>17</sup> Besides, is it really necessary for us to use the word "trauma" – of all words – for Germans *today* to understand what we are talking about, *today*? Maybe I don't fully understand, but it just feels like we are re-centering white German victimhood here. I also strongly disagree that accepting responsibility and being reminded of a genocidal past three generations later should be considered traumatic, on top of it! That's all. Otherwise everyone is traumatized in this world and we lose any reasonable meaning of the word. Just like we lost the meaning of antisemitism in a way already. Another problem, I see in this is that Europe is either in control and doesn't care about what we say, or it is traumatized and unwilling to discuss with us based on its own "trauma."

**Journal of Genocide Research:** People have talked about perpetrator trauma.<sup>18</sup> It's obviously different from victims' trauma. This is a fascinating discussion about philosemitism and its relationship to antisemitism. Can we now bring in the German public sphere debate about the German parliamentary Resolution on the BDS, is that a form of "love"?

**Susan Neiman:** I often try to understand my opponents as responding to trauma: people like Volker Beck and Felix Klein have said that we are the *Täternation* (perpetrator nation), that's a pretty heavy and I think rather crazy reduction of thousands of years of German history to say we are the *Täternation* and that's it. But that is what they live with and they don't think of the fourteen million Slavs, they don't think of Palestinians who were of course displaced as a result of the Holocaust. They think about Jews and their own relation to the murderers.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Right. I am unsure if Palestinians were displaced because of the Shoah, or because of an already (European-wide) existing settler colonial project and

<sup>17</sup> Avgi Saketopoulou, "Trauma Lives Us: Affective Excess, Safe Spaces and the Erasure of Subjectivity," *Bully Bloggers*, 6 December 2014, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/12/06/trauma-lives-us-affective-excess-safe-spaces-and-the-erasure-of-subjectivity/> (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>18</sup> A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

mentality that supported a “population exchange” from Jews to the Middle East and then found a catalyst through Nazism.<sup>19</sup> But, yes, I agree with the moderator that we should discuss the antisemitism discourse here these days and we were asked to comment on texts of each other, especially in the wake of the Mbembe affair, as some people call it. Let’s take the initiative GG 5.3 *Weltoffenheit*. In your article “Who speaks for Jews” you write: “The initiative made it to the 7th position on the list of anti-Semitic people/institutions of the Simon Wiesenthal Zentrums.”<sup>20</sup> And your Jewish American colleagues have congratulated you for getting on that list – and that’s all good. But I want to talk about that “being congratulated” and being applauded for speaking out: There has been an initiative, The Bundestag 3, also by Palestinians,<sup>21</sup> for example, that sued the Bundestag for the BDS resolution already in September 2020. That law suite however did not rise to the same prominence or media publicity of that of the GG 5.3 initiative, for instance. Plus, there is an immediate reflex to distance yourself from an accused person with the wrong family name and wrong opinion, the possibility for interviews dies. We are not applauded, nor congratulated for writing, demonstrating, for upholding democracy, in fact for paving the way for many people to understand and articulate what has been happening for decades now. In that political economy, we are not even seen as contributing to a debate.

In 2016, two other Palestinian German women and me were defamed in the media for curating a Palestinian arts festival. Within two weeks, more than fifty articles were published about us, slanderous articles, accusing us essentially of using tax-payer money for an antisemitic festival, or of incitement to (racial) violence – for putting modern dance on stage, or a Palestinian drag queen? Not one journalist, not one (!), called us or the theater where the festival took place for a counter statement, for instance. It was as though we had no voice and were just “talked about.” It is social death, political erasure, and, Palestinians here or in Palestine are visibilized primarily through narratives of criminalizations.

Or let’s take RIAS (Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus), for instance: a by now famous research and data collection centre, often positively invoked by Felix Klein as well.<sup>22</sup> It prepared a “dossier” about me that was shared secretly with a high-ranking organizer and Berlin left-wing politician of an event on racism. The file was sent to get me dis-invited, eighteen hours prior to the event, based on my (postcolonial inspired) scholarship or for signing a letter (along with other non-/ Jewish intellectuals and critics) that critiqued the BDS resolution of the Bundestag.<sup>23</sup> Even being supported by Judith Butler is used as a reason in that file. Since RIAS considers criticism of Israeli policies (so-called “antiisrael activism”<sup>24</sup>) as a form of antisemitism, they might have engaged in this “surveillance-like” practice also with other scholars, intellectuals, and activists. On the day of the

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan M. Hess, “Sugar Island Jews? Jewish Colonialism and the Rhetoric of ‘Civic Improvement’ in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 1 (1998): 92–100.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Neiman, “Antisemitismus-Debatte: Wer darf für Juden sprechen?,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 5 January 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Bundestag 3 For Palestine: <https://www.bt3p.org/>

<sup>22</sup> RIAS: Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus, <https://www.report-antisemitism.de>

<sup>23</sup> “Aufruf an Individuen und Institutionen in Deutschland, der Gleichsetzung von Kritik am Staat Israel und Antisemitismus ein Ende zu Setzen,” *taz*, March 2019.

<sup>24</sup> RIAS, *Antisemitische Vorfälle: 2019 Report*, 9: “Hier überwiegt die antiisraelische Motivation der verantwortlichen Personen bzw. Gruppen eindeutig gegenüber einer Positionierung etwa im linken, rechten oder islamistischem Milieu. Zum antiisraelischen Aktivismus zählt RIAS Berlin beispielsweise säkulare palästinensische Gruppen sowie Aktivist\_innen, die antisemitische Boykottkampagnen gegen den jüdischen Staat Israel unterstützen,”

event, some people asked where I was and I was then publically narrated along the white-supremacist Halle shooter that wanted to kill Jews. I could not defend myself, for I wasn't even there, but a full audience was there to hear such accusations being spread.

Or, related to that, around one month after this white supremacist shooting attack on the Halle Synagogue during Yom Kippur and a kebab shop that killed two people on 9 October 2019, the German Universities Rector's Conference (HRK) which represents all universities in Germany, published a statement saying they are against BDS on German campuses and embrace the IHRA definition of antisemitism.<sup>25</sup> The list just continues. It's a war, a "war on antisemitism" and it started well before the hysteria around BDS now!<sup>26</sup>

**Susan Neiman:** Oh, if you're criticizing the text of the initiative, I can tell you there are many things each of us might have written differently. I don't know if you've ever tried to write or be part of thirty six different institutions trying to agree on a text that everyone can feel that they can sign. If I had been in charge of that text, I would have written it quite differently. I thought the focus on the *Grundgesetz* was much too narrow, frankly. I would have actually gone in the direction that I was trying to describe in the *Berliner Zeitung* piece, which is to talk about the way in which the political right uses philosemitism as a way of disguising its other forms of racism, I think that's terribly important. We see it in the United States, we're seeing it in Germany, we see it in Hungary, we see it all over the place. And of course people like Netanyahu get very far on that. That is the point that I would have focused on and what I did focus on when I wrote a text myself.

You quoted one sentence of that text without quoting any of the context. And believe me, the German media was not shy about criticizing the Initiative GG 5.3; in mid-March 2021, Felix Klein published an article attacking me personally, and there have been several others.<sup>27</sup> By and large, the German reaction to the Initiative has been surprisingly hostile, without actually paying attention to our arguments. We've been called antisemites, useful idiots, and have encountered a lot of hostility and misunderstanding. The reason Jewish American and Israeli friends congratulated me is that, contrary to the Germans, they know the Simon Wiesenthal Center is a very rightwing organization, supporting Donald Trump and partly financially supported by his family. My friends know that such organizations thrive on calling any criticisms of Israeli policy antisemitic. In Germany, precisely because of the postwar trauma I mentioned, the charge of antisemitism prevents people from seeing straight. Again: had it been entirely up to me, I would have written less about a formal than a substantive question: the ways in which the right abuses philosemitism. The focus on the *Grundgesetz* was a desire of these various institutional leaders who got together qua institutions to try to head off something in the most, if you like, narrow and legalistic sense of the word, and we got through, that is, the *Wissenschaftlicher Dienst* of the *Bundestag*, said yes, that the Bundestag's BDS resolution would be unconstitutional if it were actually a law, and that took them twelve

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[https://report-antisemitism.de/documents/2020-04-29\\_rias-be\\_Annual\\_Antisemitische-Vorfaelle-2019.pdf](https://report-antisemitism.de/documents/2020-04-29_rias-be_Annual_Antisemitische-Vorfaelle-2019.pdf) (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (HRK), "Kein Platz für Antisemitismus Entschließung der HRK-Mitgliederversammlung vom 19.11.2019," <https://www.hrk.de/positionen/beschluss/detail/kein-platz-fuer-antisemitismus/> (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Anna-Esther Younes, "Fighting Antisemitism in Contemporary Germany," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020): 249–66.

<sup>27</sup> Felix Klein, "Es gibt keinen harmlosen Antisemitismus," *Berliner Zeitung*, 17 March 2021.

days after we published our *Plädoyer* (plea). So, the idea was to find the claims that everyone can agree on, that might have a chance of furthering the kinds of discussions that we would all like to have of inviting more people.

I have various reasons for not supporting BDS, but I think it needs to be talked about by sane and reasonable people. I do think that Israel is an Apartheid state and I thought it before B'Tselem, for example, argued for it. I have been to the territories with friends who are part of *Ta'ayush*, and I entirely agree with those claims. But we were looking for the least common denominator that might have some practical force – and that was to focus on the *Grundgesetz*.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Yes, I fully and totally understand that it's extremely difficult – and scary for many – to speak out on these questions especially in the German context, which is why this initiative is important. But I don't view my contribution in this debate as a personal one; meaning I didn't say that to critique you as a person, I am interested in structural critique. However, I would like to add to your statement that the "right-wing is using philosemitism." I think it is the other way around: White supremacy makes right-wing extremism and its politics possible to begin with. Or, in other words, philosemitism is part of White supremacy which grants right-wing extremism the possibility to appropriate it as well – regardless of political affiliation; which is why the Right is definitely using it to market itself as a democratic player in a German political landscape.<sup>28</sup>

So I do appreciate this initiative and I think it is very important. It creates an opening in Germany to have a conversation to begin with – because there was no conversation so far. But as a German Palestinian, all I tried to say today is that on a structural level I don't really feel implicated or interpellated in this text, and there were a lot of people who had the same feeling when this came out. Honestly I think I am not only speaking for myself when I say that we feel pretty voiceless here – and in my mind I am speaking more to the readers than to you personally. I am very thankful for the opportunity the Journal of Genocide Research gave us. And I understand the difficulty of organizing this. So, the reason why I am saying this today is because it will be printed and thus gives voice to our experiences.

Another thing that I thought when this initiative came out or also when you sent me the text about *Die Antisemitismus-Debatte*, I really wondered "Why is this happening now?" Others before Achille Mbembe have been attacked: Judith Butler, Brian Klug, Jasbir Puar, and many other internationally renowned scholars, for instance. Those are all people with immense international cultural and political capital, and they have all been silenced here and even decried as antisemites; or, if they are Palestinians, as "terrorists."<sup>29</sup>

**Susan Neiman:** Do you have an explanation of why now?

**Anna-Esther Younes:** I think we see the racial contradiction of the US empire unfold in the open for the whole world to see and that has, I would say, also an impact on European politics. Covid 19, the work of anti-racist and decolonial activists and intellectuals in Germany, Black Lives Matter in the US has been around since 2013 now, as well as

<sup>28</sup> Younes, "Islamophobia in Germany," 382.

<sup>29</sup> Sindyan Qasem, "'Little more than terrorists': Eine Reflektion über das Verhältnis von Islamismusprävention und Palästinadiskurs," *Islamophobia Studies Yearbook*, 11 (2020): 71–90.

dynamics within the US empire created an opening where we can talk about antisemitism and anti-racism now in Germany on a very powerful public stage. I'm just worried about who is again excluded in this opportunity and what that means for the future of this discourse.

Today, maybe the reason why so many people in Germany and the Western hemisphere now seem to be able to understand the need to talk about race writ-large is because Blackness or the black body came to stand in for something that is often considered "the non-human." This awareness might be an opening that now enables us and – funnily enough – a white middle-upper class in Germany of cultural policy makers to talk about race. But again, it's not us – those who actually are affected – who are speaking. It's not the Black subject necessarily in Germany that gets the stage, it's not the Muslim citizen, the person of colour, the migrant, or the refugee. Mbembe's case did distil a lot of intersecting national debates and global problems. And he himself said in his article, leaning on Fanon, that he is treated like a "Nègre": an object that is not supposed to think independently, or even have a moral standpoint.<sup>30</sup> In Germany, the Palestinian can also be classified as the German "Nègre" in a Fanonian scenario. I read "Nègre" here as a stand in for Blacks, the coolies of India, the Arab in Algeria, and so on.<sup>31</sup> This positionality marks the voiceless, subjects that are only objects of fantasy projections, those on the brink of disappearance, or even ontological erasure.

**Susan Neiman:** What do you think we should have done instead, I'd be interested to know.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Who is *we*? I am not discussing this as a critique against you necessarily ...

**Susan Neiman:** It certainly sounds like one. And I'd be totally open to interesting critiques of what we should have done differently.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Yes. It wasn't my intention to say that this is a critique against you, or the initiative *per se*.

**Susan Neiman:** All you have done in the last few minutes is to talk about what was wrong with the initiative. So I ask you in a spirit of honesty and openness, what else should we have done, I mean that genuinely.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** This debate for me is a discourse. I am not saying the initiative is wrong, or taking a moral stance saying "this is the wrong initiative." I am looking at a historical continuation of a narrative and I am wondering why this is happening now. Because it has never happened before, and the "cancel culture" with regards to this topic has been here already for decades. So, I am just asking – rhetorically – how come now? And I made the connection to the United States of America, because people's understandings of politics and policy finally includes white supremacy.

What could have been different about the initiative? I mean what you're asking me now, is what a politician would say, and I am not a politician. I consider myself in this conversation here to be an academic and a scholar of race. And, in retrospect, there are many things we could have done differently, but we as a collective didn't do them and that's the whole problem with the past: it is *passé*. So we have to talk about what we can do in a future that starts now.

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<sup>30</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Gigantische Diffamierungskampagne," *taz*, 11 May 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (London: Hurst, 2015).

How we can come up with wonderful utopias of common understanding, for instance? Maybe for instance, henceforth, it would be great if all the subjects that are actually affected by this discourse would be listened to and taken seriously and not threatened with their career or reputation in this country. I mean there has even been an article in this forum that was published anonymously out of fear of not being allowed an academic and tenured future in this country! We all know that we cannot become professors or heads of important institutions in this country with our opinions, whilst others can be professors and members of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). That's the level we are at in Germany.

**Susan Neiman:** I don't say that that cultural power is always distributed well. But this was very specifically an initiative of people who are heads of cultural institutions; other people could sign our letter of support. The point was that if enough powerful institutions in the German cultural scene worked together, we would get results, and in that way we wouldn't get in trouble: the latter has not been true. In fact it's been quite striking how sharply we've been criticized in the media. "Self-hating Jew" is the nicest thing I've been called. I've been compared to the historian Ernst Nolte for relativizing the Holocaust, and so forth. It's been surprising how much animosity we received.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** I am not surprised, I can very well imagine. It's an inversion of democracy for some time now. And it's very important that you speak about these attacks against you and others, because it shows that if people with so much political, social and cultural capital are attacked like that, then what are people with less social, economic, cultural and racial capital experiencing – and what have other people experienced already?

**Susan Neiman:** It was a situation in which people felt, to put it in an American idiom, if we use our privilege in order to support voices that would not otherwise be heard, because people are afraid of this BDS-*Beschluss*, then we are using our privilege in good ways. And honestly, I cannot see anything wrong with doing that, on the contrary.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** I am not saying it is wrong. There is a difference between a moral accusation and an analysis of moral politics.

**Susan Neiman:** Actually, that is not a distinction that I often buy, because I think people from critical theory – starting with the original critical theorists in the Frankfurt school and going on to today – often have a really problematic tendency to fudge the normative and the descriptive. I often have arguments with friends who claim "I was just being descriptive," and I say "your description carrying normative weight"; the people who are reading you draw normative conclusions from your work.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** We need to be able to narrate a discourse historically, otherwise it's just policy.

**Susan Neiman:** But, I think that if one is saying things with normative implications, one has to then be willing to talk about the consequences of what one has said. I am not simply talking about policy, but (the need to be) able to respond.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** I am not opposed to anything you did. I am just saying that these structures, people or institutions have, until this initiative, not necessarily supported critical and public Palestinian voices, for instance. But now they are the ones leading the debate – again without us. We need to not only safeguard liberalism for white people. We need to safeguard the idea of an inclusive democracy for everyone.

**Susan Neiman:** You know why? Several people in cultural organizations have decided neither to invite Israelis nor Palestinians, because they're afraid of the drama. Why this happened at a particular time? It's often very hard to say why one really rather minor historical event – in this case, it was Achille Mbembe – why that set off a chain reaction. My book *Evil in Modern Thought* discusses why one event suddenly becomes the focus of what has been brewing for quite a long time. It's interesting to look at, but I don't think there's anything sinister about it. First of all, we started meeting before Black Lives Matter took off at the end of May 2020, so it wasn't directly related to that. There were a series of events, one was Peter Schäfer being forced to resign as Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, which really upset a lot of people, including me. When I tried to mention it at one of the boards that I belong to, the response was "we can't say anything against the *Bundestag* resolution." Something or other had to be the last straw. By the way, you talk about Germans and Jews: there are some fifty two people now, not all of them heads of institutions, some of them are listed as advisors, but in the *Rundbriefe* that we get only four of us are Jewish, and that's an important fact about the Initiative.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** All I am saying is that these debates have been there before and I wouldn't write them out of said "chain reaction." It's been people of colour, Palestinians, Arabs ...

**Susan Neiman:** Nobody would deny that.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Well, but maybe we can think about why most progressive discourses are represented by white Europeans eventually – Europe always re-/invents itself as the harbinger of progress, as Stuart Hall already pointed out.<sup>32</sup> And that's the point I was trying to make. And now that we see this debate unfolding what I fear is that again there's a discourse happening, that we are spoken about rather than ...

**Journal of Genocide Research:** There is an exclusion in the whole debate. That's your main critique, that postcolonial and still subaltern perspectives are still excluded completely from this debate?

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Well, that's one way of seeing it. I am saying that people only seem to listen and newspapers are only interested, if there is a majority voice deploying a liberal discourse in this country – and that power to represent is shaped by race (whiteness) and liberalism (legal and political). I would like to shift our gaze onto how this power works and how it is reified instead of stating the obvious and speak about "who is excluded." I do not want to be included in a public debate for instance that changes in "representation," but not in content. So maybe it's better to ask: "Which demands for structural change have been excluded and who represents those demands?" Based on that I would question the Initiative's stance on interpellating German law but not embracing the BDS' movements interpellation of international law, for instance. I am wondering if that results from a positionality that doesn't want to lose privileges – the privileges to continue inviting whomever they want without being policed by state ideology. And that is, ironically, quite a reasonable democratic demand and shows how far things got here.

Having said that, another thing that caught my eye when I saw the Initiative GG 5.3 was its distancing from BDS while interpellating the German constitution. Why can we refer to German Basic law but not to International Law? It seems the aim of BDS to appeal to International Law is seen as a matter of opinion in the text of the GG 5.3 initiative. The legal

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<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall, "Europe's Other Self," *Marxism Today*, 8 (1991): 18–9.

aspirations of the dispossessed, so to say, and their hope to be at least represented in front of the law are subsumed under the rubric that “their rights” might be an opinion. This is why I want to come back to Fanon, because we are speaking of a zone of non-being here, we are speaking of a population that is not a legal *subject* in front of the law. We are *objects* in front of the law, and we have not gained subject-hood in (international) law, yet. So whereas the initiative is important, it is still troubled by an understanding of humanity, where (some) Germans have the right to stand up for their rights, whereas it seems to still be a matter of opinion and debate, if Palestinians are even allowed entry into the law. This is very *kafkaesque*.

**Susan Neiman:** I am rather tired of forms of argument that centre on claims about positionality, rather than on beliefs for which people can argue. You continue to claim that you are not criticizing the Initiative but your entire discussion of it can be reduced to: why were no people of colour asked to speak for the Initiative? Yes, the members of the Initiative are largely white (depending on whether one counts Jews as white). No doubt being white opened doors to the minor positions of power we have that may have been closed to people of colour. The idea, however, was to use that small amount of cultural power we have in order to insure that the cultural scene stays open to people with critical views, people who have even less power than we do, centrally including people of colour, of course. Instead of focusing on our goal, and the ideas behind it, you keep calling out our positionality. Yes, most of the heads of German cultural institutions are white Germans. This is not news, and it wasn't the point of the Initiative.

Perhaps it would help to say that the initiative certainly had no intention of stopping with writing a plea. Our plan is to hold a series of events in which otherwise unheard or marginalized voices who are connected with this debate, can speak at our institutions without fear of falling under criticism or being cancelled because of the BDS-Resolution. So I just don't get the critique, frankly, if the goal is to make public space for marginalized and non-European voices. That was our goal.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** Alright, well. I appreciate the Initiative for using people's cultural and national power and I think this might even be the start of a broader conversation. It opened an institutional debate and that is very important! I hope that in the future people feel more secure about speaking out. People need to know that they are not being persecuted, or excluded from public discourse afterwards, or disallowed jobs, or a successful career – as Felix Klein has threatened “social death” upon everyone violating the rules.<sup>33</sup>

**Susan Neiman:** That is what we're trying, and that is precisely why it had to be powerful German cultural institutions that banded together. That is precisely what we're trying to ensure.

**Anna-Esther Younes:** And I believe you. I hope that the conversations can continue with a lot more people participating, whilst being actually recognized in their right to speak and to continue with their jobs, with their full citizenship (if they have it) or if they are on the way to obtaining it – without being punished. I don't know if the Initiative and the Bundestag 3 will be able to do that. But it is my utopia right now.

**Susan Neiman:** That's my utopia, too.

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<sup>33</sup> DW Deutsch, “Felix Klein.”



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Anna-Esther Younes** is a scholar of race critical theories, psychoanalysis, and (settler) colonial studies. She works primarily on the intersections of the historical and contemporary figurations of Jews and Muslims in Germany and how both are put in conflict through today's discourse on a "New antisemitism." In her PhD, "Race, Colonialism and the Figure of the Jew in a New Germany" (2016), she traced the polit-economic and psychic investments into the figure of the Jew for a white German nation. In her book (under review), *Seduction*, she traces the politics of higher education and epistemologies of "researching-down" along our libidinal economic investments into race. Younes wrote the German country report on Islamophobia and is committed to what anthropologist call "researching up to power" and "researching home." She is currently a post-doctoral scholar. Further information: [www.annaestheryounes.net](http://www.annaestheryounes.net)

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