



# Critical theory of racism, antisemitism, and the demonisation of Israel: Understanding their complex interrelations

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## Abstract

This article investigates the complex relationship between racism and antisemitism, advocating for an intersectional approach that highlights their distinct yet interconnected nature. The author critiques the tendency to subsume antisemitism under racism, arguing that such simplification overlooks unique aspects of antisemitism, particularly in contexts where it manifests through anti-Israel resentment. Drawing on a materialist tradition influenced by Marxist thought and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the article explores how both ideologies serve to mask social and economic contradictions in society. The concept of the ‘intersectionality of ideologies’ is introduced, allowing for a nuanced understanding that disentangles antisemitism from racism while examining their interconnections. This framework enables a deeper exploration of the socio-economic factors sustaining both ideologies. Additionally, the article addresses misconceptions surrounding the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA’s) definition of antisemitism, clarifying that it does not inhibit legitimate criticism of Israeli politics but instead distinguishes between criticism and resentment. Ultimately, the author emphasizes that racism and antisemitism require tailored analytical tools to effectively grasp their complexities and socio-political implications.

## Keywords

racism, antisemitism, anti-Zionism, critical theory, Israel, intersectionality, IHRA definition

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## Introduction

While some assume that antisemitism is a form of racism and nothing else (Yuval-Davis, 2024), others claim that ‘nothing is gained by defining antisemitism as a form of racism’ (Banton, 2018, p. 149). Both perspectives focus primarily on the subjective level and lack an analytical understanding of antisemitism and racism as socio-economically entrenched ideologies.

In this article I want to explore the relationship between racism and antisemitism as an intersectional relationship. I do not want to simply subsume antisemitism under racism, nor do I want to separate the two ideologies. Instead, I want to explore the dialectical relationship between them. On the one hand, it is understandable to emphasise that antisemitism is a form of racism, because all too often antisemitism is not sufficiently recognized as racism and thus falls outside the radar of antiracism (Baddiel, 2021; Gidley, 2023). On the other hand, if we see antisemitism *only* as a form of racism, we will not be able to deal with the new and modernised antisemitism that is not directly racist in nature but is camouflaged, for example, in resentment against Israel conceived as a Jewish collective, or in secondary antisemitism that seeks to relativise the Holocaust.

I do not intend to conduct a comprehensive study of existing theories of antisemitism and racism, as this would go beyond the scope of the article. Instead, I want to focus on a particular materialist tradition of analysis and critique that refers to Marx and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. As a further limitation, I will focus on theoretical arguments that have had a lasting influence on the German discourse on the relationship between racism and antisemitism. This tradition of argument recognises resentment against Israel as an important feature of contemporary antisemitism (e.g. Grigat, 2020; Rensmann, 2017; Salzborn, 2020; Scheit, 2004; Stögner, 2019). This strain of contemporary critical theory has been contested in the German (e.g. Friese, 2025) as well as in international academic discourses on antisemitism after 7 October (Butler & Hesse, 2023; Gessen, 2023; Neiman, 2023), when the solidarity with Israel and the corresponding academic discussions have widely been criticised and highlighted as deviating from international positions. This article also aims to contribute to the theoretical explanation of a specifically German academic position of solidarity with Israel, which is not only linked to the German Nazi past, but above all follows from a particular interpretation of early critical theory, especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.

The theorems on which I will focus clearly reconstruct continuities and discontinuities in racism and antisemitism and analyse both as socially induced ideologies that function to mask and veil social and economic contradictions – each in its own way, but nevertheless intertwined. I suggest that to properly understand each ideology and to be able to deconstruct it in the sense of understanding what social and economic factors are at work in it, we need to disentangle the ideologies. Only after disentangling them, we can re-entangle them and obtain a comprehensive picture of an ideological constellation. To this end, I propose to apply a new form of intersectionality – the ‘intersectionality of ideologies’ (Stögner, 2020).

In the first section I will review materialist analyses of racism and antisemitism that have become prominent in the German theoretical landscape, and which also serve as

background of an argument made for the concept of Israel-related antisemitism. I will also outline what I believe is missing from many of these accounts, namely the dialectical bridging of ideology and action using tools from psychoanalytic social psychology that focus centrally on the relationship between society, subject and nature. In the second section, I will develop an analysis of the role of Israel and the Middle East conflict in debates about antisemitism and racism. My aim in this section is to demonstrate analytically that in specific contexts hatred of Israel can be a modernised form of antisemitism in which racist elements are politicised and mediated and reappear in camouflaged form of collectivising Jews and Israel. In doing so I will clarify that it is not about inhibiting legitimate criticism of Israeli politics by pointing out when criticism of Israel tips over into resentment. This is particularly the case when Israel's right to exist is denied. In the final and concluding section, I will elaborate on why antisemitism and racism each require special tools for analysis and critique that cannot easily be conflated.

## **Materialist analyses of racism and antisemitism as ideologies**

### *What is ideology?*

Materialist analyses and critiques do not see racism and antisemitism primarily as a moral problem, nor as subjective evil qualities of racists and antisemites, but rather as ideologies that can certainly assert themselves behind the backs of the actors and without their conscious knowledge in their actions and discourses. This focus on ideological content draws attention to the structural conditions that make antisemitism and racism possible (Grigat, 1999; Marz, 2023; Schmitt-Egner, 1978). Thus, analysing antisemitism and racism is not about judging identity constructions of Jews or racialised people. Nor is it about placing the power of definition solely in the realm of those affected. While lived experience is certainly important, it is not an exclusive and sufficient basis for assessing whether and in what form structures and discourses are antisemitic or racist. This requires analytical tools that target the level of social ideology formation. Likewise, a one-sided focus on the subjective side of antisemites and racists, for example on their intentionality, carries the risk of relativisation: If 'antisemitism is understood as only carried by antisemites, insisting that someone is not antisemitic appears to erase the problem' (Gidley et al., 2020, p. 416). Gidley et al. use the term 'reservoir' to show that such a subjectivist approach is misplaced: 'The reservoir of antisemitic tropes can be drawn on wittingly or unwittingly by those who lack a commitment to an antisemitic worldview; antisemitism can be present in the absence of recognizable "antisemites"' (Gidley et al., 2020, p. 416; cf. Marin, 2000). This is close to a concept of ideology that I would like to use here, with reference to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (IfS, 1956; Lenk, 1971; Ritsert, 2002).

Such an understanding of ideology as a socially determined form of (un-)consciousness means, first and foremost, that racism and antisemitism do not require the conscious evil intent of the social actors, even though this is all too often the case. However, the critique of such ideologies is not so much a matter of moral outrage; rather, the critique of ideology as a method of critical theory exposes the naturalisation and fetishisation of social structures in antisemitism, racism or other ideologies, and the false universalisation

of dominant particulars. Both mechanisms lead to a 'taking for granted' (Jaeggi, 2009, p. 269) of the given. Hence, ideology is not relocated in the subject, but subjectivity itself is situated within the dialectical relationship between individual and society.

Ideologies as fixed ideas are relatively independent from the subjects and mirror the historical development of society. Thus, they are not to be simply dismissed as lies and untruths, but deconstructed, and that means here: questioned about their function in society. Antisemitism and racism provide an outlet for the unease and discomfort caused by the lack of equality otherwise promised by society. Ideologies are therefore part of a society that purports to be one of equal and free citizens, while in practice, through its very organisation, it constantly violates these ideals and blocks their realisation. Racism and antisemitism, but also sexism, are modes of concealing the fundamental contradiction between formal equality and actual socio-economic inequality while at the same time legitimising the exclusion of whole groups of people from universals such as humanity, freedom and equality. According to critical theory, ideologies owe both their emergence and their proof for those who follow them essentially to the diffuse experience of a problematic social condition that is not consciously reflected upon, but rather veiled and thus defended (IfS, 1956, pp. 162–181; see also Ritsert, 2002). In nationalism, antisemitism, racism, sexism, and the like, the desire for justice, equality, and freedom has been buried, suppressed and turned into its diametrical opposite. Ideology critique exposes the need for freedom and equality that is buried and mutilated in ideologies and turns it against ideologies.

Racism and antisemitism both obscure the reality of the class-based social structure and other cleavages within modern societies. The materialist critique embeds racism and antisemitism in the conditions of the valorisation of capital and traces the specific processes of concealment and legitimation intrinsic to both ideologies (Grigat, 1999; Marz, 2023; Schmitt-Egner, 1978). In a Marxian sense, racism and antisemitism are embedded in 'necessarily false consciousness', that is they result from the contradictions of bourgeois society. But while the social conditions of capitalism certainly force people to act within the framework of capitalist value valorisation even when they reflect on and criticise it, nobody is forced to become an antisemite or racist. Through their basic capacity to act and judge, people can expose and see through the social contradictions that, when unreflected, may lead to racism and antisemitism. This means that it is not enough to focus on the objective level of value valorisation to explain why some people are antisemitic or racist and others aren't. But even those who resist the easy temptation to seek an antisemitic or racist 'cure' for the social malaise cannot resolve the contradictions, which is why neither racism nor antisemitism can be fought at the level of subjective reflection alone (Löwenthal & Guterman, 2021).

Many materialist analyses refer to Marx's analysis of the form of value. It is precisely because of this common ground that racism and antisemitism take different, though corresponding, forms: racism is hatred of people constructed as inferior, while antisemitism is hatred of people constructed as superior. Antisemites feel inferior, while racists feel superior. But this belongs to one and the same Manichean world view, one that is clearly organized in terms of an order of superiority and inferiority, in which there seem to be no transitions or ambiguities, and in which there are only 'goats and sheep, the good guys, to whom one belongs, and the bad guys, the enemy invented specifically for this purpose' (Adorno, 1997, p. 363).

## *Racism and the analysis of the value form*

The materialist critique of modern racism, based on Frankfurt School critical theory – not a particularly well-researched area (Claussen, 1994; Demirović, 1992; Marz, 2017, 2023) – analyses capitalism and racism as structurally related phenomena. There were other forms of racism that occurred before capitalism, but here we are concerned with those forms of modern racism that emerged within colonialism and capitalism, a form of socialisation that is more than a synonym for ‘class society’ – it is driven by the ‘valorisation of value’ (Marx, 1867). The constitutive factors for its emergence were the division of the world into nation-states, which organize the framework conditions for valorisation and compete in this process (Klinger, 2008; Miles, 1993, p. 21; Miles & Brown, 2003), as well as colonial primitive accumulation, the plundering of natural resources and people (Marz, 2017; Winter, 2024).

The basis of the materialist analysis of racism is the dialectic of capitalism: that ‘the law of value produces both human rights and their negation. The developed monetary system is the realisation of freedom and equality in the abstraction of their content’ (Grigat, 1999). The bourgeois idea of equality sprouts from the soil of the abstract principle of equivalence, of formal equality in the sphere of circulation, which, however, is based on real inequality in the sphere of production and its relations of exploitation (Grigat, 1999). Thus, racism emerges as an element of domination determined by the economic imperatives of capitalist commodity production, particularly in the economy of the American planter colonies (Egger, 2024; Roepert, 2022), but likewise in the case of colonial Kenya, for which Miles and Brown (2003) show that ‘dialectically related processes of dispossession of the means of production and racialisation created a labouring class’ (Bassi, 2023). In *White But Not Quite*, Ivan Kalmar (2022) makes a similar point about racism against Eastern Europeans.

We need to ask, with Stephan Grigat (1999), why bourgeois society in colonialism departs from its own principle of formal equality in the exchange process (which also includes the commodity labour-power) and instead propagates racism as an ideology of human inequality. In other words: why does capitalism exploit free labour force in the metropolis, where workers are formally considered equal, while in the colony people are enslaved and thus deprived of any possibility of formal equality? Referring to Peter Schmitt-Egner (1978), Grigat sees the main reason in the structure of the colonial economy in relation to the economy of the metropolis:

‘Due to the organic composition of capital, that is, the relationship between variable and constant capital, the Europeans in the colonies primarily resort to the form of increasing absolute surplus value in the exploitation of labour, while in the metropolises the increase in relative surplus value, the increase in productivity, plays a much more important role. This extensification of surplus labour in the colonies [...] leads to a “permanent lowering of the commodity labour-power below its value”. Forced to work below the value of their labour, they are literally “less valuable”’. (Grigat, 1999; quoting Schmitt-Egner, 1978).

In bourgeois society, only those who can enter contracts and act as exchange partners on the market are recognized as subjects and thus formally equal citizens. The ‘white’

worker, who derives his humanity from the sale of his labour-power at its socially determined value, ‘benefits’ from this (Grigat, 1999). In contrast, the labour-power of the colonies is set outside the exchange relationship. Here, capitalist appropriation not only encompasses the surplus product of labour but is direct and concerns the human being as such: the slave becomes the property of the slave owner as a means of production. According to Ulrike Marz, racism today still implicitly draws on this historical difference between the free worker and the slave, opening the way to the ‘over-exploitation’ of racialized people and migrants (Marz, 2024, p. 5). For Balibar, too, racism hierarchizes the exploited in capitalism and allows all the characteristics originally ascribed to the working class to be transferred to the colonized and migrants (Balibar, 1991; cf. also Kalmar, 2022; Marz, 2017). For Eric Williams (1994), racism was a reaction to the exploitation of people as unpaid labour. Thus, slavery is not the product of racism, but racism is a quasi-subsequent legitimization of slavery. Leo Roepert also follows this thesis and understands racism as a practice of domination in the colonies, for the legitimisation of which racial theories emerged only later (Roepert, 2022, p. 255). Thus, it is about exploring ‘how the *idea of ‘race’* intersects with capitalist social relations’ without making ‘race’ a real thing (Bassi, 2023; see also Virdee, 2019). Similarly, Paul Gilroy argues for ‘a more consistent effort to de-nature and de-ontologize “race”’ (quoted in Bassi, 2023).

Racism legitimising the over-exploitation of racialised labour-power is not bound to the colour line, as the Nazi racist system of exploitation proves. Millions of Slavs were deported to concentration and work camps and exploited to the point of death. To justify this, they were declared subhuman (Snyder, 2011). The German civilian population also profited massively from this system of slave labour, as they were assigned forced labourers who were at their disposal at will. Even today, the racism against Eastern Europeans continues to function in this tradition (Lewicki, 2023; Panagiotidis & Petersen, 2024). In the National Socialist system of slave labour and racist exploitation, a decisive difference between racism and antisemitism becomes apparent, as will be explained in the next section.

### *Antisemitism and the analysis of the value form*

Moishe Postone’s seminal 1980 essay ‘Antisemitism and National Socialism’ is arguably the most well-known contribution to the analysis of antisemitism in relation to the value form. In his essay, he draws on both Marx and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. In antisemitism, the relationship to the value form is different from that in racism. Unlike modern racism, modern antisemitism is not about legitimising the exploitation of unpaid Jewish labour, but about projecting the negatively experienced aspects of capitalism onto Jews: in Europe, there is a long history of denigrating and persecuting Jews as ‘greedy money Jews’; in modern antisemitism they are blamed for the crises of capitalism, manifest in social upheavals, explosive urbanisation, rural exodus, the decline of traditional social classes, the emergence of a large, increasingly organized industrial proletariat (Postone, 1980, p. 107; cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, pp. 141–144), but also centrally the weakening of traditional gender roles and patriarchal family structures (Stögner, 2014). ‘The abstract domination of capital, which – particularly with rapid

industrialization – caught people up in a web of dynamic forces they could not understand, became perceived as the domination of International Jewry’ (Postone, 1980, p. 107).

In his analysis of modern antisemitism as a distorted form of anticapitalism, Postone refers to the double character of the value form that appears in money as the manifest form of value and in the commodity as the manifest form of use-value. This double character leads to the social opposition between money, perceived as abstract, evil and international, and the commodity as purported ‘thingly nature’. ‘Capitalist social relations appear to find their expression only in the abstract dimension – for example as money and as externalized, abstract, universal “laws”’ (Postone, 1980, p. 109). In contrast, industrial labour, that is the production of commodities, is ideologically removed from the capitalist social relation and ‘appears as the linear descendent of “natural” artisanal labor, in opposition to “parasitic” finance capital’ (Postone, 1980, p. 110). This is the basis of the antisemitic distinction in National Socialism between ‘creative capital’ and ‘rapacious capital’.

In a process of social racialisation and biologisation, these abstract aspects of capitalism are identified with the Jews: ‘The opposition of the concrete material and the abstract becomes the racial opposition of the Arians and the Jews’ (Postone, 1980, p. 112). The abstract identified with the Jews appears as global power operating behind the scenes – the so-called Jewish world conspiracy, ‘the personification of the intangible, destructive, immensely powerful, and international domination of capital as a social form’ (Postone, 1980, p. 112).

Postone (1980, p. 113) cites several reasons for this identification process to take place particularly in Germany: the long history of antisemitism and the related association of Jews with money, the expansion of industrial capital without liberal values, the political and civil emancipation of the Jews and the corresponding debates about the ‘Jewish question’ (Fine & Spencer, 2018). But for him, the most important precondition for this modern form of antisemitism was the division of the individual into citizen and person in bourgeois society. As a citizen, the individual was supposed to act for the common good; as a person, the individual was characterized by self-interest. Accordingly, the citizen side was considered abstract, equal before the law, while the individual as person experienced himself as concrete, embedded in class (and gender) relations, and considered private (Postone, 1980, p. 113). Particularly in Germany and other Central and Eastern European countries, the nation as a purely political entity, abstract from the substantiality of civil society, was never fully realized, but was rather conceived as concrete, grounded in language, soil, myths of origin, traditions, religion – as an ethnically conceived culture nation (Postone, 1980, p. 113; see also Brubaker, 1992; Salzborn, 2020; Smith, 1994). Jews, however, did not belong to this form of nation; they ‘fulfilled the determination of citizenship as a pure political abstraction’ (Postone, 1980, p. 113; see Holz, 2001). This is why, ideologically, the bourgeois state and the abstract law of citizenship ‘became closely identified with the Jews’ (Postone, 1980, p. 113). They were therefore also perceived as non-identical, lacking all ties, boundaries and identity.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most striking passages in Postone’s seminal essay is the last section, in which the difference between antisemitism and other forms of racism (such as colonial racism) becomes clear. Nazism was inseparable from its exterminatory antisemitism;

indeed, this ideology became so self-serving that it largely abandoned the functionality of domination and, unlike racism, largely lacks even the most inhumane economic rationale:

‘A capitalist factory is a place where value is produced, which “unfortunately” has to take the form of the production of goods. [...] The extermination camps were *not* a terrible version of such a factory but, rather, should be seen as its grotesque, Arian, “anti-capitalist” *negation*. Auschwitz was a factory to “destroy value”, i.e. to destroy the personifications of the abstract. Its organization was that of a fiendish industrial process, the aim of which was to “liberate” the concrete from the abstract’. (Postone, 1980, p. 114)

Nazi antisemites did not want to exploit Jews and their labour-power in the first place, they did not want to keep Jews alive to exploit them, they wanted to annihilate them because that was their belief in salvation. This is why Saul Friedländer (1997) said the Nazis’ exterminatory antisemitism was a redemptive antisemitism. This particularity of Nazi antisemitism is also expressed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: ‘the blacks must be kept in their place, but the Jews are to be wiped from the face of the earth, and the call to exterminate them like vermin finds an echo among the prospective fascists of all countries’ (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 137).

In a similar vein, Michael Banton, following Oliver C. Cox, viewed ‘antisemitism as a form of social intolerance directed towards the conversion, expulsion or eradication of a specific minority; racism, on the other hand, serves to rationalize and justify exploitation. The Jew is hated for being different; black people are expected to remain different – and subordinate’ (Banton, 2018, p. 143).

Racism legitimizes the exploitation of unpaid labour, that is, the undermining of the principle of exchange of equivalents as a principle of mediation. Racism therefore also implies a re-traditionalisation of domination – domination becomes direct, immediate and personal again. All mediation is levelled out. Antisemitism, on the other hand, while mirroring the abstractness of modern, indirect domination, also demonizes mediation in form of the market sphere or abstract law and attributes these processes of abstraction to the Jews. Thus both, racism and antisemitism, reject modern forms of mediation and seek to reinstate traditional forms of direct domination.<sup>2</sup>

The racialised people represent the concrete in the sense of nature that can be appropriated and mastered. Jews, by contrast, are the representatives of the abstract that antisemitism wants to get rid of. So here, too, the immediacy of the relationship to nature is to be established in a roundabout way, by violently expelling the abstract from the Jews and equating them with mere nature not in exploitation, but in extermination. In both antisemitism and racism, we find a specific way of a compulsive pseudo-concretisation and pseudo-naturalisation of abstract and mediated social relations. This brings us to an important point: the social relationship to nature and its expression in racism and antisemitism. It also implies a turn to the subject and his/her motivation to follow antisemitic and racist ideologies.

### *Nature and subjectivity in racism and antisemitism*

From a materialistic analytical perspective, racism is the justification and rationalisation of access to exploitable labour (Marz, 2024, p. 5), which arises from the logic of

exploitation (and not from individual malice or prejudice). This formal aspect is necessary in the analysis of modern racism that goes beyond pure functionality of domination. For 'the relation of value does not distinguish by origin, colour or gender. [...] Capitalism does not necessarily need racism, but where it serves it, it uses its function of exclusion for the exploitation and utilisation of labour' (Marz, 2017, p. 254). Racism is consistently nature-centred and understands the difference between the in-group and the out-group as one between the subject and nature. While the in-group is identified with autonomy, subjectivity, reason, civilisation, historical progress, etc., the racialised others are simply denied these qualities and are thus completely dehumanised. This makes them seemingly legitimate objects of domination and exploitation (Roepert, 2022, p. 250). They are regarded as nature, the material of domination (Horkheimer, 1947). In materialistic terms, the racialised appear to the racist subject not as the embodiment of value but of use value, as nature (Grigat, 1999). From here we understand that in bourgeois society nature is not pre-social, but deeply entangled in the social, economic and historical dialectics of progress and regression, enlightenment and myth, domination and freedom (Marcuse, 2007). As Horkheimer and Adorno argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), nature is the result of human relations, especially of socially organised labour.

Modern racism is directly linked to the emergence of the bourgeois subject. But only those who act as exchangers and can autonomously enter contracts are recognised as subjects, that is only formally free and mature people. Therefore, one can only be a subject if one is free from direct external constraints. In these subjects, external domination is increasingly replaced by self-domination, and bourgeois self-discipline is the means of survival against the anonymous economic imperatives of capitalist commodity production (Roepert, 2022, p. 269; see also Allen, 2018; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). The flip side of bourgeois self-discipline is racism: because racialised people are denied reason, they must be controlled from the outside, like nature. The background to this, however, is not a real closeness to nature, but the structure of the colonial economy described above: the colonised and enslaved are deprived of their subject status because they are denied the ability to contract. They are not allowed to sell their labour-power on the labour market under contractual conditions, but their labour-power is directly appropriated without remuneration. This forecloses any possibility of formal equality and thus of subject status.<sup>3</sup> Racism serves a simple circular argument: 'As human rights were the rights of human beings, white racists argued that Black people were not fully human or not as human as whites' (Herf, 2024, p. 176). In racism, a social power relationship manifests itself as the domination of external and internal nature.

The social relationship with nature is also visible in antisemitism, but in a different way. Unlike racialised people, Jews are associated with modernity, urbanity, abstraction, cosmopolitanism and intellectualism. Related to this are the stereotypes of rootlessness, bloodlessness, lack of authenticity and identity. The antisemitic stereotype of the Jew is that of someone without ties and boundaries, whether national or natural (the two are mixed in ethnic nationalism). Thus, in antisemitism, the 'Jew' is representative of anti-nature rather than of nature.

Antisemitism is not about mastering first nature, but about rejecting second nature – reason, civilisation, mediation, abstract social relations, in other words: the antisemites

project onto the Jews everything they experience as an anonymous social system. Antisemitism primarily abhors the abstract bourgeois law and intellectuality represented by the 'Jewish elite', that is an individuality and subjectivity corresponding to universal rights, as opposed to a particularist idea of the nation as an ethnic community. 'Jewish anti-nature', however, is forcefully and violently reduced to mere nature: The Nazis deported Jews in wagons like cattle, sheared them like sheep, numbered and gassed them like parasites. This is the most extreme and brutal form of violent reduction of human beings to nature as mere material.

While racism pits bourgeois instrumental reason against nature and presents nature as thoroughly controllable, antisemitism rebels against the liberal implications of bourgeois reason and reinstates nature in a distorted form. In their annihilation, the Jews, as representatives of abstraction, are transformed into mere nature. The ambivalent relationships of society and the subject to nature is manifested in the constellation of racism and antisemitism. Racism is a deformed 'away from nature' – a defence against first nature –, while antisemitism is a distorted 'towards nature' – a defence against second nature. 'While the victims of racism had to embody the opposition to the subject, the contradiction in the subject itself is carried out on the victims of antisemitism' (Bruhn, 1994, p. 99). In both cases, the contradictory tension between society, subjectivation and nature remains unresolved and the unequal power relations are maintained.

But what is this damaged relationship to nature, which in its own way is played out in racism and antisemitism? Critical theory's explanation is based on the social organisation of labour that has crucial consequences for the shape of the inner nature of human beings, that is their drives, desires, anxieties, emotions. Herbert Marcuse, for example, applies a social and political reading of Freudian psychoanalysis to grasp the relationship between nature, society and the subject. He depicts domination as threefold, based on the repressive transformation of instincts as the basis of civilisation:

'First, domination over one's self, over one's own nature, over the sensual drives that want only pleasure and gratification; second, domination over the labor achieved by such disciplined and controlled individuals; and third, domination of outward nature, science and technology'. (Marcuse, 2007, p. 169)

This threefold mastery of nature is at the same time a precondition for threefold freedom (which means that freedom within capitalist society is always incomplete and damaged):

'First, freedom from the mere necessity of satisfying one's drives, that is, freedom for renunciation and thus for socially acceptable pleasure – moral freedom; second, freedom from arbitrary violence and from the anarchy of the struggle for existence, social freedom characterized by the division of labor, with legal rights and duties – political freedom; and third, freedom from the power of nature, that is, the mastery of nature, freedom to change the world through human reason – intellectual freedom'. (Marcuse, 2007, p. 169)

This dialectical relationship between freedom and repression is the result of civilisation's substitution of labour for the mimetic impulse, in the sense of man's desire to

indulge in the enjoyment of the natural world. But life under the conditions of threefold domination can never completely control this impulse (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 151). The bourgeois self-preservation consists in forcing the subject to suppress the multiple demands of the inner nature that could distract from the linear path of instrumental progress; this is done at the expense of the desires and drives of the subjects – they are constantly denigrated, and their energies channelled into the alienated process of work. The subject is so integrated into the machinery that it eventually resembles nature as mere material to be mastered, utilised, and exchanged. In the end, this consequent domination of nature causes its product, the autonomous subject, to disappear itself. As Horkheimer wrote in *Eclipse of Reason*:

‘As the end of the process, we have on the one hand the self, the abstract ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and on earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any other purpose than that of its very domination’. (Horkheimer, 1947, p. 97)

As life is organised under the alienating conditions of the capitalist performance principle (Marcuse, 2007), the mimetic impulse is neither reconciled nor pacified. It reappears as the ‘mimesis of death’ (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 141) – individuals experience themselves as the dead and replaceable things into which nature has been transformed. Repressed nature returns through projection. In racism and antisemitism, projection is always the retribution for the denial, tabooing and repression of mimesis under conditions of threefold domination. The dialectic that subjects increasingly resemble nature as a dead and interchangeable material through the ever more consistent domination of their own inner nature is crucial for understanding racism and antisemitism as modes of ideological compensation for the flickering plurality of life that individuals must deny to themselves. One of the main characteristics of antisemitism is that it characterises Jews in very contradictory terms: on the one hand, as representatives of civilisation and therefore anti-nature. On the other hand, antisemitism implies that Jews do not work but exploit non-Jews, which opens up the associations that Jews enjoy life in a way that is denied to non-Jews. Racialised people, on the other hand, are seen as immature and therefore outside the dynamic of joyless subjectivation. Thus both, antisemitism and racism are very much about un-lived life being projected on the Jews and racialised others (Frosh, 2023, p. 138). In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this is called ‘idiosyncrasy’ (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 147); in the *Eclipse of Reason* it is referred to as ‘the revolt of nature’ (Horkheimer, 1947). In capitalist society, the domination of nature is transformed into the subjects’ idiosyncratic abhorrence of anything that reminds them of nature; nature is seen as disgusting and inferior – and this disqualification extends to those who are associated with nature. Nature has gone through the logic of civilisation and has thus taken on an ambiguous meaning: on the one hand, it is reduced to mere material and dead form – nature to be exploited and mastered; on the other hand, nature contains a secret *promesse de bonheur* and is likely to take on the appearance of powerless happiness, as Horkheimer and Adorno point out:

‘The purpose of human rights was to promise happiness even where power was lacking. Because the cheated masses are dimly aware that this promise, being universal, remains a lie as long as classes exist, it arouses their anger; they feel themselves scorned. They must constantly repress the thought of that happiness, even as a possibility, an idea, and they deny it all the more fiercely the more its rime has come’. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 141)

Also Stephen Frosh (2023, p. 139) referring to Derek Hook (2018, p. 258) points out that ‘racism is to be understood as a response to the “real” of enjoyment – be it at an individual level (in respect of finding a way to relate to one’s own “stolen” jouissance) or at the societal level (as an attempt to account for the multiple contingencies, conflicts, and deadlocks of a given society)’. The hidden promise of happiness that secretly underlies racism and antisemitism is not limited to the subjective level but operates in society as a denied possibility of ending hardship and misery. The closer we come to ending hardship and suffering through social, political, economic and technical progress, the more this possibility is denied. Instead of seeking enjoyment in this life, the yearning for it is split off and projected onto others as fulfilled: ‘Racism is characterised by a perceived “theft of enjoyment”’ (Frosh, 2023, p. 140).

As this section has shown, the complex relationship between nature, society and subjectivation is important for the functioning of antisemitism and racism. Nature as ideology emerges as a mediating moment between racism and antisemitism. In racist contexts, the power of the racialised is traced back to first nature, not to abstract domination. This is particularly reflected in projective images of the sexual potency of racialised people. Racialised men are portrayed as extremely sexually potent, and often the image of the ‘black rapist’ is added. The power of racialised men is presented as a mindless force of nature to be tamed through violence and exploitation. On the other hand, the power attributed to Jews is not nature but second nature – a nature degenerated by an allegedly subversive spirit. This is also reflected in antisemitic sexual images: Jewish men are imagined not as rapists, but as insidious seducers who buy the favours of ‘Aryan’ women with money, thus destroying the ‘purity of the people’ from within. The power attributed to Jews is not natural, not tameable, but omnipresent, subversive and deeply evil.<sup>4</sup>

## **Modernized forms of racism and antisemitism**

### *Racism without races and new antisemitism*

As reactions to uncomprehended contradictions in the structure of society, racism and antisemitism are not static phenomena but appear in different forms throughout the history of modern society. For several decades now, racism researchers have been talking about a new racism or a neo-racism that does not rely on the idea of races and instead focuses on culture, which is essentialised as unchangeable. The argument is based on a perceived irreversibility of cultural differences (Balibar, 1991). In this context, racialisation does not primarily take the route of physical characteristics such as skin colour. For neo-racism, the colour line no longer plays a direct role. Instead, neo-racism naturalises culture and unanimously identifies people with culture, creating uniform and homogeneous groups that deny the individuality of those identified, as

well as the conflicts and contradictions within culture. Such a broad concept of neo-racism allows, for example, the conceptual integration of anti-Muslim resentment, which does not criticise Islam as a strategy of domination (also against Muslims) in an ideology-critical way, but which attacks Muslims collectively and indiscriminately and is therefore conceived of as racist.

As early as 1955, in *Guilt and Defense*, Adorno pointed to a shift in the ideological reference point of racism from race to culture (Marz, 2017, p. 260) and spoke of 'subtle mechanisms of the adaptation of the racial theory to the changed political situation' (Adorno, 2010, p. 148) in Germany in the immediate post-war period, where the racist discourse increasingly replaced 'white race' with 'occidental civilization': 'It is not rare that fascist nationalism transforms into pan-European chauvinism [...]. The noble word "culture" replaces the prescribed term "race", though it remains a mere disguise for the brutal claim to domination' (Adorno, 2010, p. 149). Similarly, Frantz Fanon pointed to a transformation of racism: 'racism that aspires to be rational, individual, genotypically and phenotypically determined, becomes transformed into cultural racism. [...] "Occidental values" oddly blend with the already famous appeal to the fight of the "cross against the crescent"' (Fanon, 1967, pp. 32–33).

Neo-racism (Balibar, 1991; Taguieff, 1997) or cultural racism does not directly refer to biology and no longer necessarily implies a clear hierarchy of top and bottom; the 'other' culture is not inevitably postulated as inferior. It can also be considered equivalent, but by no means the same. The focus here is on preventing the mixing of cultures.<sup>5</sup> The ethno-pluralism of the Identitarian movement, for example, plays on this: Muslims are not inferior if they stay where they supposedly belong, and in this ideology that means as long as they do not migrate to Europe.<sup>6</sup> Replacing the biological reference point with the social one of culture or religion still leaves room for old racist elements: 'The fear of "racial defilement" is reflected in the postulate of the right to difference, the idea of labour exploitation in the talk of useful migrants with economic added value' (Marz, 2017, p. 261).

Just as neo-racism exists as a racism without races, a new antisemitism has developed (Heilbronn et al., 2019; Rabinovici et al., 2004), which operates with traditional antisemitic elements but in a mediated way. This antisemitism is 'connected to the changes that Israel has brought about for the position of the Jews' (Shaw, 2015, p. 149). It no longer projects all the evils of the world directly onto the enemy stereotype of the Jew, but onto Israel, which becomes the 'collective Jew': 'New antisemitism treats Israel not as a real country, embroiled in real conflicts, marked by real defects, characterized by the usual distinctions between state and civil society, but rather as a symbolic vessel into which all that is bad in the world can be projected' (Cousin & Fine, 2012, p. 177). Hence, new antisemitism is not the same as criticism of Israeli policies or of racism, sexism and other forms of exclusion in Israeli society. New antisemitism utilises Israel as an empty shell that can be filled with any content and easily used as a straw man for antisemitism that is otherwise not openly expressed. The goal of the new antisemitism is to undermine Israel's legitimacy to the extent that it no longer exists as a Jewish nation-state. What may appear to be simple criticism of nationalism ultimately suggests that Israel should no longer serve as a refuge for Jews worldwide, thereby rejecting the historical justification for its creation in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Like other forms

of antisemitism, explicit antisemitic intent is not necessary for its expression – the ideology can operate effectively even without conscious awareness.

As Michael Banton emphasises, ‘it is often difficult to distinguish hostility towards Jews from hostility towards Israeli politics’ (Banton, 2018, p. 145), implying that Jews worldwide tend to be blamed for Israeli policies, and that the delegitimisation of Israel translates into the global experience of antisemitism by Jews. Therefore, ‘behind that is called “criticism of Israel” there can lurk the reconstruction of old antisemitic motifs in a new guise’ (Cousin & Fine, 2012, p. 177). This requires careful analysis and interpretation of each case, as not all forms of criticism of Israel’s politics towards the Palestinians are necessarily antisemitic. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA’s) 2016 working definition of antisemitism attempts to distinguish between legitimate criticism on the one hand and criticism as a pretext for a hidden antisemitic agenda on the other (Jikeli, 2021; Penslar, 2022; Rensmann, 2020, 2021). It reads: ‘Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities’ (IHRA, 2016). The state of Israel is considered a Jewish institution that may be the specific target of antisemitic attacks: ‘Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic’ (IHRA, 2016).

Other definitions of antisemitism, such as the Jerusalem Declaration (JDA, 2021), also identify Israel-related forms of antisemitism, for example when Israel is equated with Nazism or when Jews are called upon to publicly condemn Israel or Zionism simply because they are Jews. However, the JDA does not include the denial of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish nation-state as antisemitic. This means that the threat of Israel’s annihilation, for example by the Iranian regime and its proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, appears not as antisemitism but as political criticism. In this way, the fact that the destruction of Israel also refers to the Jews living there is left unsaid.<sup>7</sup>

### *Why is the new antisemitism approach controversial?*

There has been and continues to be strong criticism of connecting forms of hostility against Israel with antisemitism. For example Nira Yuval-Davis says that ‘in this discourse, *any* critique of Zionism as a settler colonial movement and a critique of the right of Israel to exist as a Zionist state in which non-Jews (including the indigenous Palestinians who currently constitute more than 20% of Israeli formal citizenry ...), do not have full, equal rights, is seen as antisemitic’ (Yuval-Davis, 2024, p. 785, emphasis added). Similarly, Abigail B. Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban claim that ‘ongoing efforts to promote the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism have led to an explicitly asserted link between criticism of the policies of the State of Israel and antisemitism’ (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024, p. 237). However, that is not correct. The IHRA definition itself is clear that *not any* criticism of Israel or Zionism is antisemitic, but particularly those forms of criticism that treat Israel differently from other nation-states. Singling out one nation-state while letting

others off the hook is a double standard, which is itself to be considered a racist praxis. Thus, Camila Bassi (2023) explains: 'It is perfectly possible for academics to criticise the Israeli state's ongoing repression of the Palestinians without being antisemitic. Anti-Jewish racism enters this critical space when Israel is irrationally and moralistically deemed the most harmful, deplorable and illegitimate nation state that must accordingly be destroyed'.

It is noticeable that critics of the new antisemitism approach hardly give any details as to what exactly they are criticising in Israel, including Yuval-Davis, who only writes that Arab Israelis are denied equal rights. However, this remains in the realm of innuendo and fails to mention details and analytical distinctions between legal equality/inequality and social discrimination (similarly Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024, p. 231). In Israel, as in any society, there are forms of racism (and also sexism) that must be criticised, and which indeed are criticised and struggled against in broad parts of the very diverse Israeli society. On a legal level, Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel officially have equal political rights. There are Arab parties in the Knesset, one of which was part of the coalition government in 2021. However, there are restrictions for Arab Israelis, for example in land ownership. This connects to one of the central points of criticism against Israel and Zionism: that the right of return applies to Jews worldwide, but not to the descendants of the Palestinians expelled during the Nakba (Butler, 2012). This fact contradicts the universal value of equality and makes Zionism appear to many as a form of racism. However, this contradiction is not rooted in Zionism alone, but in the Jewish experience of antisemitism and annihilation. The creation of the state of Israel is a response to the extermination of the Jewish people by the Nazis, but also to the fact that the world stood by and did nothing to stop the extermination. Against this background, Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectics* that 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen' (Adorno, 2007, p. 365). After the Shoah this new categorical imperative implies supporting the basic idea of Zionism, namely the assumption that a defensible Jewish state is necessary to enable Jews to defend themselves against antisemitism after the experience of National Socialism and to prevent a new policy of annihilation (Grigat, 2020). This was also Marcuse's position, even though he was critical of Israeli politics:

'I believe that the historical goal which motivated the foundation of the State of Israel was to prevent a recurrence of the concentration camps, the pogroms, and other forms of persecution and discrimination. I fully adhere to this goal which, for me, is part of the struggle for liberty and equality for all persecuted racial and national minorities the world over. Under present international conditions, pursuance of this goal presupposes the existence of a sovereign state which is able to accept and protect Jews who are persecuted or live under the threat of persecution'. (Marcuse cited in Jacobs, 2015, p. 120)

Elsewhere, Marcuse implied that 'lasting protection for the Jewish people cannot be found in the creation of a self-enclosed, isolated, fear-stricken minority, but only in the coexistence of Jews and Arabs as citizens with equal rights and liberties' (cited in Jacobs, 2015, p. 121). Alternatively, however, he suggested a two-state solution.

Today a certain anti-Zionist position, advocated by Judith Butler (2012), for example, calls for the dismantling of the Jewish state and the establishment of cohabitation in a one-state-solution without Jewish sovereignty. She views Jewish sovereignty as part of ‘colonizing practices as binding Israel to its colonized for all time and so constituting within the very terms of colonialism another, perhaps most fundamental, form of wretched binationalism’ (Butler, 2012, p. 213). Against the background of lasting Arab and Islamic antisemitism which preceded the creation of Israel as a Jewish state (Bensoussan, 2019; Brunner, 2023; Herf, 2009; Motadel, 2014) and which became ever more apparent in the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October, the idea that Jews would be safe in a binational state without Jewish sovereignty is a utopian idea, if not naïve, as Micha Brumlik (2013) points out.<sup>8</sup>

The historical experience of extermination in the Shoah and the experience of an ongoing threat of global antisemitism, in the Middle East region particularly from the Islamic Republic of Iran, from Hamas and Hezbollah, forms the major context of the basic idea of Zionism that the state of Israel must remain a Jewish state. This Zionist remedy – a state for the Jews where they are safe from antisemitism – inevitably leads to unequal treatment of Jewish immigrants and Palestinians who wish to return to Israel. This contradiction, which is itself caused by antisemitism, needs to be addressed to do justice to the matter.

This is why the attacks on Israeli civilians on 7 October, in which almost 1,200 people were murdered in the most horrific ways – burned, mutilated and raped – and more than 240 taken hostage by the Hamas, are compounding a major crisis that goes beyond the immediate horror of the victims and affects Zionism as ‘a political philosophy that was created for the express purpose of protecting and defending Jews, *to ensure that nothing like this could ever happen*, and to eradicate or seriously reduce antisemitism by normalizing the Jewish people in a nation state of their own’ (Chatterley, 2024). This crisis, deliberately brought about by the Hamas rapist-murderers and rejoiced by their supporters worldwide, is an essential context for the iron determination with which Israel asserts its right to self-defence which cost the lives of a terrible number of Palestinian civilians.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, contrary to claims being made by critics of the new-antisemitism-concept (among others Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024), it does not make criticism of Israeli policy impossible. It targets those forms of criticism that are not directed at Israeli politics or society, but at the very existence of the state itself. Accordingly, it is considered antisemitic to call for the state of Israel to be wiped off the map or dismantled (Butler, 2024), as manifested for instance in the slogan ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’. For many who advocate that slogan, for example the BDS movement (for a critique see Hirsh, 2018, p. 100f.), the two-state solution is an anathema because it is seen to legitimise the ‘settler-colonialism’ of Israel itself (e.g. Barghouti, 2013). Instead, this slogan calls for a single Palestinian state, which would require the ‘decolonisation of Israel’, a demand that makes all Jewish Israelis settlers and thus legitimate targets of Hamas, falsely presented as ‘decolonial resistance’ (Bassi, 2023). This is not just a political demand; it is a racist one because it conflates all Israeli Jews into a settler camp and denies the Jews the right to national self-determination. Vice versa, the slogan ‘From the river to the sea’ is also being used by Israeli ultra-right wing politicians and activists in order to bring forward the idea

of a 'greater Israel' that incorporates not only Gaza and the Westbank, but in its most extreme form also territories of the neighbouring Arab countries. This rhetoric is often racist, but opposing it does not necessarily mean rejecting Israel's right to exist as the world's only Jewish state.

### *The history of new antisemitism*

Criticism of the concept of Israel-related or new antisemitism rarely focuses on the history of this ideology. In fact, it is not as new as it is supposed to be. Long before the creation of the State of Israel based on the UN Partition Plan for Palestine and Resolution 181 (1947),<sup>10</sup> antizionism,<sup>11</sup> which denied Jews the right to national self-determination, was part of Nazi antisemitic propaganda. Central to the Nazi ideology was the delusion that Zionism was the agent of a Jewish world conspiracy. Hitler claimed that the Jews, 'for lack of their own productive capacities', were incapable of 'building a state in a spatially perceived way' (quoted in Grigat, 2023, p. 23). If Jews were to create a state-like structure, it could be nothing more than 'a kind of university for the Jewish subversive spirit' that would lead real states to disaster (quoted in Grigat, 2023, p. 23). In his programmatic 1920 speech 'Why We Are Antisemites', Hitler said: 'The whole Zionist state shall become nothing more than the last completed university for their international thievery, and everything shall be directed from there' (quoted in Phelps, 1968, p. 406).

As early as the 1920s, the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg wrote against the idea of a Zionist state and regarded 'all Jews as Zionists and Zionists as representatives of the whole of Judaism' (Nicosia, 2012, p. 99; Grigat, 2023). Rosenberg's central antisemitic premises are reflected in the antizionist denunciation of the idea of a Jewish state as a supposedly rootless, illegitimate 'entity' (Rensmann, 2020).

Today, this form of antizionism can be observed on the part of Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as on the part of the Iranian Mullah regime, who speak of Israel as a 'Zionist entity', implying the illegitimacy and inauthenticity of the Israeli state and using the term Zionists pejoratively as an antisemitic cipher for the Jews.<sup>12</sup> The claim is that Arabs have a greater right to the land than Jews, without addressing the complex historical migrations of both populations (Bensoussan, 2019; Weinstock, 2019). However, states are never authentic or natural, but always the result of historical power relations, and the establishment and maintenance of states has rarely been non-violent. Those who reject the new antisemitism approach often focus on Israel with a particular sharpness that they do not apply to other nation-states (such as Butler, 2012; Davis, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2024). In this way, Israel becomes the representative of all that is bad in the principle of the state per se. While Israel stands for the abstract state (rooted in abstract law), Arab states and the Palestinian communities are seen as rooted in the region and connected to the land (e.g. in Davis, 2016; Puar, 2007).

The antizionist critique of nationalism functions in a similar way to the antisemitic critique of capitalism: 'The opposition between the abstract and the concrete, between "rapacious" and "creative" capital, is here translated into the political: the supposedly organic, genuine states are opposed to "artificial Zionism" as a subversive negation. This opposition found its echo after 1945 in Arab nationalism as well as in the anti-

imperialist radical left and in the various varieties of Islamism. Today, German neo-Nazis place themselves squarely in this tradition and postulate: “Israel is our misfortune” (Grigat, 2023, p. 23). Parts of the left also seek redemption from global injustice in the elimination of Israel (Bassi, 2023). In Germany, far right and parts of radical left-wing discourses resemble each other in this respect (Rajal, 2025).

Antisemites conflate the state with an ethnic-national community, projecting onto Israel what they refuse to acknowledge as a defining feature of the modern state: its artificial and abstract nature, rooted in the principle of sovereignty, the state’s monopoly on the use of force, and the separation of powers. To fully identify with the state, they idealize it as a tangible, authentic, and primordial national community. In this view, the abstract state and its legal structures must dissolve into the immediacy of communal traditions. In radical antizionist state-phobia, Israel becomes the ultimate symbol of artificiality and is thus marked for eradication. The destruction of the Zionist state is perceived as deliverance from abstraction, mirroring ideological elements of exterminationist antisemitism – it promises liberation from doubt, contradiction, ambiguity, and abstractness. This longing for salvation is encapsulated in a slogan seen at anti-Israel demonstrations in Germany: ‘Palestine will set us free’.

With Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, we can draw some insights from this development regarding the conditions for the possibility of emancipation in a society based on inequality. The exclusion of Jews today takes place on a different level than it did at the time of bourgeois emancipation: ‘we find ourselves having once again to emancipate ourselves from the grip of the Jewish question. All formulations of the Jewish question come back to the harm the Jews allegedly inflict on humanity at large and to what is to be done about this harm. [...] The Enlightenment credo that “we must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals”, re-emerges as a discourse opposed to racism against Jews as individuals but correspondingly open to the stigmatisation of the Jews as a nation’ (Fine & Spencer, 2018, p. 103).

The old Jewish question returns in the new Israel question, which, according to Martin Shaw, is ‘central to current threats to Jews, and also one of the drivers of extreme Islamism, and so the attempt to write Israel wholly out of the question is unconvincing’ (Shaw, 2015, p. 151). The peculiarity of the ‘Israel question’ is that it cuts across opposing political camps and thus serves as an ideology that strangely integrates right-wing extremists (Rajal, 2025; Weiß, 2017), parts of the left (Bassi, 2023; Fine & Spencer, 2018; Hirsh, 2018) and Islamists (Grigat, 2021; Herf, 2009; Küntzel, 2024). Likewise, large parts of intersectional and queer feminism can agree on it (Jesella, 2024; Illouz, 2024; Stögner, 2019, 2021).

## **Conclusion: it is all about Israel**

According to the outlined materialist analysis and critique, antisemitism and racism are not the same, but they overlap in essential points. In this article, therefore, I argue not for subsuming antisemitism under racism, but for placing the two in a constellation of ideologies. The law of value in modern societies and their relationship to nature have been analysed as mediating moments. Racism and antisemitism are embedded differently in these conditions: racism is the ideological *legitimation* of the exploitation of racialised

people; antisemitism is the ideological *accusation* of exploitation directed against the Jews. Racists defend their own supremacy, while antisemitism, as a distorted anti-capitalism, appears as a rebellious ideology critical of modern forms of domination. Both racism and antisemitism resist modern processes of mediation and reinstate a mode of immediacy for which nature is representative. But the deformed social relationship to nature is reflected differently in racism and antisemitism. Racism is a deformed 'away from nature' in the sense that racists identify themselves with progress and civilisation, while reducing racialised people to mere nature to be exploited at will. Antisemitism, on the other hand, is a distorted 'towards nature' in the sense that Jews are falsely identified as a powerful intellectual elite representing anti-nature, while antisemites see themselves as representatives of a highly idealised nature bound to ethno-nationalist ideology. In both cases, the contradiction between society, the individual and nature remains unresolved, and unequal power relations and thus domination are maintained. From this point of view, it makes no sense to draw the distinction between racism and antisemitism too sharply, despite the major differences between the two ideologies.

In contrast to this view of mediation, many believe that antisemitism is simply a form of racism. This view, however, is limited to those forms of antisemitism that are specifically directed against 'Jews as Jews' (Klug, 2013, p. 3). This is also the wording used in the *Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism* (JDA, 2021). It differs from the IHRA definition in that antisemitism is understood as prejudice against Jews, rather than as an ideology that permeates society and has taken on camouflaged forms of expression in the aftermath of the Shoah. Modernised antisemitism is characterised by indirect communication or communicative latency (Bergmann, 1998), that is the publicly communicated enemy image is no longer directly 'Jews as Jews' but is linked to tropes with antisemitic connotations that are widespread not only in right-wing but also in left-wing antisemitism: 'finance capital', 'the East Coast', 'imperialism', 'settler colonialism' and, finally, 'Zionism'. Yet Zionism is an integral part of the political identity and commitment of many Jews also outside Israel. Brian Klug and the JDA unwillingly confirm that Jews are acceptable within and by the left only as 'exceptional Jews' who declare themselves to be anti-Zionist (Bassi, 2023; Fine & Spencer, 2018, p. 2). Thus it is claimed that Israel-related antisemitism on the left does not exist except as a fabricated accusation to silence progressive voices critical of Israel (Bassi, 2023).

Especially in parts of the global left, antisemitism is made 'virtuous' by such indirect communication, as Jean Améry ([1969] 2022) wrote as early as 1969. Since, as we have seen, antisemitism usually involves claims of conspiracy, including the accusation that Jews are behind the negative aspects of modernity – capitalism, exploitation, processes of social abstraction – such camouflaged antisemitism can falsely pass for the just outcry of the oppressed. This 'virtuous antisemitism' (Illouz, 2024) is particularly directed against the state of Israel and characterizes it as a 'racist pariah state'. The real conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is often de-realised and sacralised in Western discourse as a conflict on the outcome of which world peace would depend. Such demonisation is often based on comparisons between Israel and National Socialism (e.g. Gessen, 2023). Not only is the comparison antisemitic because it seeks to make the victims as guilty as the perpetrators; the conclusion drawn from the comparison, namely that Israel as a Jewish state should disappear from the map, is also antisemitic.

The demand to dismantle Israel as a Jewish nation-state is all the more eccentric in light of the fact that after World War II there were hardly any demands to dismantle Germany as a German state, let alone to implement them.

There is another analytical problem with subsuming antisemitism under racism, if racism is understood, as it often is in intersectionality and postcolonial studies, primarily in terms of the effects of colonialism and the colour line (for a critical view see Bassi, 2023; Frosh, 2023; Illouz, 2024; Schraub, 2019). One of the most prominent analytical tools for analysing and critiquing racism today is the theorem of critical whiteness, which frames global social relations of domination and exploitation as one between whites and Blacks, with whites usually on the side of privilege, while Blacks are exploited and oppressed. Thus, as David Schraub (2019) has convincingly argued, the whiteness frame makes sense when it comes to making visible the hidden privileges of whites, for example that whites tend to have more influence in the media, politics and the economy, that they have better access to institutions of higher education, or that they tend to live in greater security than Black people.

However, antisemitism does not operate along colour lines (Du Bois, 2023, p. 79) and Jews, particularly in US society, have been perceived as white for decades (Brodkin, 2000). They are therefore perceived less as a minority experiencing a specific form of racism than as part of white hegemony. Antisemitism portrays Jews as extremely powerful and harmful to the rest of humanity, and as an elite that surreptitiously rules the world. Hence, Jews are hated not because they are perceived as inferior, but because they are perceived as superior. Thus, when the whiteness frame is applied to Jewishness, it does not reveal hidden social structures and Jews are not recognised as a racial group that is discriminated against in similar ways as other racialised groups. On the contrary, existing antisemitic stereotypes are reinforced, as David Schraub makes clear: ‘The effect of applying whiteness to Jewishness is affirmative: “I always thought that Jews had all this power and privilege – and look how right I was!”’ (Schraub, 2019, p. 391). As Hen Mazzig (2019) points out, the perception of Jews as a privileged people also dominates the view of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Jews and Israelis are seen as white, despite the fact that more than three-quarters of Israeli citizens are non-white.

Eva Illouz (2024, p. 34) also put it succinctly: ‘As the Jews had not been colonised but exterminated, antisemitism could not fit into the framework of colonialist racism, which had become the dominant scheme for explaining social injustice’. Thus, just as the whiteness frame is inappropriate for the analysis and critique of antisemitism, the postcolonial theorem has proved inappropriate for the analysis of Zionism and the conditions under which the state of Israel was founded (Elbe, 2024). In conjunction with the whiteness frame, Zionism enters the frame of colonial racism, instead of being recognised as an anti-colonial movement against the European colonial powers, just like Arab nationalism in the MENA-region, with all the mistakes that go hand in hand with liberation nationalism. Stephen Frosh illustrates this with reference to Albert Memmi, who was involved in the anti-colonial struggles in Tunisia but realised early on that, as a Jew, he had no place in Arab nationalism:

‘Memmi’s view was that “mythical nativism” was a legitimate African development towards the reappropriation of cultural values for social and political use. Newold myths

of national self-determination are needed, in this view, to fuel the journey of decolonial emancipation. This might also apply to Jews, in that adopting a Southern perspective one might see Zionism as “a decolonial movement that responds to the condition of global Jewry. As a consequence, it should be interpreted as a movement of the national liberation of Jews on par with other liberation movements, in the Maghreb, in Africa and elsewhere in the world”’. (Frush, 2023, p. 155; quoting Slabodsky, 2014, p. 139)

Postcolonial approaches that frame Zionism as a colonial ideology make Jews in Israel strangers and Israel itself a settler-colonial state, rather than recognising it as a post-colonial state of refugees not only from Europe but also from the MENA-region. Framing Zionism as a colonial ideology obscures the millennia of Jewish life in the region of present-day Israel. If Zionism is indeed colonialism, then it is a ‘colonialism of the displaced’ or a ‘colonialism of ethnic survival’ (Yiftachel, 2002, p. 224f.).

The debates, only briefly touched upon here, show that the relationship between racism and antisemitism is not only highly complex in analytical terms, but that it is also a global political debate in which global power relations are often reduced in a Manichean, simplistic way to the West versus the Global South. In Western discourses, Israel often serves as a scapegoat for all the colonial atrocities that have yet to be addressed in the West. However, my aim in this article is not to protect Israeli politics and society from legitimate criticism, but to do justice to the historical and political complexity of the situation in the MENA region and to expose ideological entanglements in the West.

### **Consent to participate**

Not applicable.

### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

### **Data availability statement**

All literature used in this article is available in print or online.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.


### **Ethical approval statement**

The article deals with theories and their political implications. No data was used that has not already been published elsewhere. Ethical principles were observed throughout in the approach and presentation.

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## Notes

1. In Postone's analysis, as in that of Horkheimer and Adorno, modern antisemitism is linked to capitalism and its inherent social contradictions, for which antisemitism serves as both an outlet and a legitimization. However, not all capitalist nation-states have developed state antisemitism like Nazi Germany. On the contrary, the United States and the United Kingdom went to war to defeat Nazi Germany. But the reason for their involvement was not primarily to prevent the Holocaust, let alone to combat antisemitism. The studies in the Authoritarian Personality (Adorno et al., 2019), carried out in the 1950s, clearly demonstrated the extent of antisemitism and the fascist potential in the United States. That the Holocaust took place in Germany and not in the US is a historical fact. Interesting here is Philip Roth's 'The Plot Against America' (2004) – the dystopia of Charles Lindbergh, supporting Hitler and Nazi Germany, having won the American presidency in the 1930s. In this novel, Roth shows the contingency of history. Only in retrospect can we say that the US was a clear opponent of the Nazis, but this opposition was the result of a political struggle within the US, the outcome of which was not self-evident at the time. Nor does this line of argument imply determinism – that the German situation had to lead to the Holocaust. There were other possibilities, but they did not prevail over Nazism. Antisemitism and capitalism are not the same thing. But antisemitism certainly serves to legitimise capitalist exploitation. Postone's analysis helps to understand what it was that broke through in Nazi Germany, and that this was something that was a danger in all capitalist societies. The German specificity was first and foremost its late nation-building and that nationalism existed before Germany was unified into a nation-state, which is why nationalism was always much more mythologically charged and linked to a blood-and-soil ideology, compared to France, Britain or the US, where nationalism and national identity were more linked to citizenship and a corresponding political commitment to civil rights and duties (see also Brubaker, 1992; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1994).
2. The difference between racism and antisemitism, racism being linked to the personalisation of domination while antisemitism represents the abstractness of modern domination, is also mirrored in the ways racism and antisemitism can be represented in film. Take, for example, Nate Parker's 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation*, the story of the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner, depicting the absolute, horrific, inhuman and insane violence against slaves in the American planter colonies. It is striking how directly the violence could be shown. In the same way, Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) shows the violence directly and openly. Immediate, insane, inhuman, mad violence is presented here as an authentic expression of what slavery was and what it meant, and one does not get the impression of not fully grasping the slave owners' racist ideology. Perhaps this is because slavery was the epitome of direct, immediate, absolute but personal domination of men and women over other men and women. With the Shoa it was different, it was the epitome of absolute, abstract, supra-personal domination of man over man, much less personal or immediate, but bureaucratic, planned on a large scale, not for the benefit of individuals, but rather for the *völkisch* ingroup (at least in its ideology). It is not possible to film this abstraction, and the way in which the Jews are seen by

- the Nazis as an embodiment of this abstraction, directly. Claude Lantzmann tried to metonymise it in his epochal work *Shoah* (1985). Likewise, Jonathan Glazer's *Zone of Interest* (2023) represented the industrial extermination of the Jews only indirectly, through the soundscape behind the walls of the extermination camp, smoke, ashes and allusions. The process of extinction cannot be represented in a concrete way without losing authenticity. And I think this difference in how violence can be represented in film is also a reference to the difference between the antisemitism of the Nazis and the racism of the slave owners, even though the horror and the desperation for the individual victims may have been similar.
3. This shows an overlap with the fate of women in the patriarchal order, which views women as being closer to nature and thus denies them self-determination and the status of autonomous subjectivity. It was only in the 1970s that women in Germany were formally given the right to sign employment contracts independently and autonomously. Prior to that, the law required the consent of the husband. The feminist critical theorist Regina Becker-Schmidt (2017) has shown how women were subject to a double domination: the patriarchal and the capitalist. As a result, women's work was and is appropriated by others in two ways: in the sphere of production under contractual conditions, and in the private sphere as unpaid reproductive work outside of contractual relations.
  4. For a detailed historical discussion of how antisemitism operates with sexist moments see Stögner (2014).
  5. Here too we see an affinity with right-wing extremist gender discourse, which considers the two sexes (nothing beyond the binary is recognised anyway) to be equivalent but fundamentally different. The focus here is obviously on preventing the gender binary from being blurred and the boundaries between the sexes remaining untouched (Möser et al., 2022).
  6. It is precisely in this ideology of ethnopluralism and the associated conspiracy theory of the 'Great Replacement' that antisemitism and racism are intertwined, but each continues to fulfil a specific function: migratory movements from Africa and the Middle East to Europe are supposed to be controlled by Jews or Israel in order to destroy Western culture. This means that in this racist-antisemitic ideology, Blacks and Muslims are seen as incapable of really threatening European culture. In this ideology, Jewish or Israeli evil is required – a spirit of decomposition and conspiracy purportedly characteristic of Jews and their state, but not of Black and Muslim migrants, who become merely the instrument of Jewish evil. The infamous slogan of the American ultra-right in Charlottesville 'Jews will not replace us' meant that Jews would deliberately transfer migrants to the USA to replace the 'white race' (Baddiel, 2021, p. 133). This implies that racism does not operate with conspiracy ideologies, such as that African, Arab or Muslim immigrants or descendants of African slaves are taking over the world and have too much influence in politics, business and the media. However, such conspiracy myths are a core component of antisemitism. This ideological entanglement is not new. Omer Bartov (2024) points out as core element of Nazi ideology 'especially the view that the subhuman Slav masses, led by insidious Bolshevik Jews, were threatening Germany and the rest of the civilised world with destruction, and that therefore Germany had the right and duty to create for itself a "living space" in the east and to decimate or enslave that region's population'.
  7. The IHRA working definition is often criticised for its vagueness. From the perspective of critical theory, the urge to avoid vagueness in definitions is problematic, since such a definition would necessarily reduce ideology to just one form of its manifestation. The fact that the definition of antisemitism remains somewhat vague is therefore rooted in the phenomenon itself which has a history of 2000 years. According to Nietzsche, only that which has no history can be clearly defined. Critical theory has repeatedly defended itself against the attacks of positivism that its concepts are too open and too intangible. According to Adorno, the openness and

adaptability of a concept is precisely what a historical or social phenomenon requires (Adorno, 1993). What seems vague to some opens the possibility for others to look at a phenomenon from more than one angle, thus illuminating different, sometimes contradictory layers of meaning in a historical-social phenomenon. The definition of antisemitism in the Jerusalem Declaration cannot achieve this. Due to its lack of openness to historical changes and the different layers of meaning of antisemitism, it ignores the history of antisemitism since 1945. Rather, it freezes antisemitism in a particular form of prejudice and resentment directed directly against 'Jews as Jews' (Klug, 2013). This means that forms of secondary antisemitism, antisemitism as a defence against guilt, and Israel-related antisemitism that make use of indirect communication cannot be captured. Thus, the JDA is not a definition based on empirical and historical research on antisemitism, but rather on political considerations that aim to 'protect a space for an open debate about the vexed question of the future of Israel/Palestine' (JDA, 2021). This is a political issue, not a scholarly one. Even if the question of antisemitism is always political, a definition of antisemitism should be tied to the peculiarities of the phenomenon in all its facets and not to what is politically desirable.

8. As Camila Bassi (2023) points out, the demand for a one-state solution ignores 'support inside Israel and occupied Palestine for two states. Moreover, the external pressure from leftists for one-state, from the river to the sea, serves mostly to benefit the right-wing in Israel and its discourse of one Greater Israel'. There are, however, also strong voices for whom the presence of the Jewish people in a one-state is still a sign of colonialism and thus 'an anathema to genuine decolonization' (Bashir & Busbridge, 2019, p. 389).
9. The problem seems to get more complicated when we consider that prominent Jewish voices, for example Judith Butler, are also calling for the abolition of Israel. On the one hand, ideology critique does not assume a privileged position of knowledge based on identities, but rather locates the problem of antisemitism in the social and political structures themselves. On the other hand, there is not *the* Jewish position either. Take, for example Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jew and resistance fighter involved in the decolonisation of Tunisia, who described how Tunisian Jews were excluded from the national Arab project of Tunisian liberation. 'It is in the way that Tunisia became a nation like other nations that we [the Tunisian Jews] became, as we were everywhere else, a civic and national negativity' (Memmi, quoted in Frosh, 2023, p. 160). According to this line of argument, it is only in Israel as a Jewish nation-state that Jews are neither a civic nor a national negativity. For Horkheimer, giving up this negativity and becoming positive through the state of Israel means that Jews adapt 'to the state of the world' (cited in Jacobs, 2015, p. 140). However, this did not imply that he was against the Jewish state. To the contrary, he described Israel as a place of refuge from antisemitism (Jacobs, 2015, p. 142). What he deplored was an antisemitic world that made Jewish negativity a death threat for Jews. By contrast, Judith Butler, in whose understanding ethical Judaism can only flourish in the Diaspora as a negation of the principle of identity, sees in Zionism a barrier to humanity's progress (cf. Butler, 2012; critical on this see Benhabib, 2013). This, however, is a negative 'exceptionalisation of Zionism and Israel' (Bassi, 2023) and the expectation that Jews be 'exceptional specimens of humanity' (Arendt, 1976, p. 58).
10. The UN partition plan also envisaged the creation of a Palestinian state. This plan was not implemented because the Arab states did not recognise a Jewish state and instead wanted to see only a Palestinian state in the area designated for partition (Morris, 1990, 1999). The defense of the newly created state of Israel against attacks from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Trans-Jordan and Palestinian militias during the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948 resulted in 750,000 Palestinians fleeing or being expelled from the future territory of Israel, while about 160,000 Palestinians remained. As a result of the 1948 war, approximately 900,000 Jews fled or were expelled from Arab countries (Bensoussan, 2019; Morris, 1990).

- This also led to the diverse character of Israeli society today: about 21% of Israeli citizens are Muslim, Druze and Christian Arabs, 73.5% are Jewish, among whom about 50% are Mizrahi (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Mazzig, 2019).
11. David Seymour convincingly distinguishes between *anti-Zionism* as an inner-Jewish debate on Jewish ethics, sovereignty and nation-building and *antizionism* which does not respond to Zionism, neither politically nor ideologically, but which is an ideology of its own and that way a new expression of antisemitism resulting from hostility to Jewish national emancipation: ‘As Jewish emancipation takes on new forms, so does the ideological form of the Jewish question change’ (Seymour, 2019, p. 22).
  12. A look at history also shows that Israel-related antisemitism in the Arab world is not just a reaction to the founding of Israel. Rather, this form of antisemitism preceded the Holocaust and the flight of survivors to local Jewish communities in the Middle East (see Brunner, 2023; Grigat, 2021). The influence of National Socialism in the 1930s on leaders in the Arab world, such as the Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al Husseini, and on organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood is now very well researched (Becker, 2024; Herf, 2009; Küntzel, 2024; Motadel, 2014).

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