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# Antisemitism and Sexism

## Ideological Constellations Before and After 7 October

Karin Stögner

London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism

ROUTLEDGE

# ANTISEMITISM AND SEXISM

*Antisemitism and Sexism: Ideological Constellations Before and After 7 October* analyses the manifold ways in which antisemitism and sexism appear not as isolated ideologies but as intersecting ones, exploring their historical, social, political, economic, and psychological constellations. Drawing on Critical Theory, the book offers a comparative historical analysis of these entanglements from nineteenth-century Europe – particularly Germany and Austria – through National Socialism and its preconditions, to the historical and contemporary formations of Islamism. The sexist antisemitism of 7 October and its aftermath are examined as a contemporary eruption of these enduring ideological patterns, while Critical Theory itself is sharpened in light of these events.

Structured around distinct analytical dimensions, the book opens with a theoretically dense examination of the damaged relationship between human beings and nature under modern labour society, identified by Critical Theory as a key source of both antisemitism and sexism. Subsequent chapters analyse the contradictory constructions of Judaism and femininity, the relation between body and mind, and socially regulated forms of sexuality. Conspiracy myths linking weakness and omnipotence, the psychosocial roots of authoritarian dispositions, and the embedding of these ideologies in specific formations of capitalist modernity and repressive communities are examined in turn. The book also offers a critical examination of intersectional feminist antisemitism in the aftermath of 7 October and advances a proposal to reformulate intersectionality as an ideology-critical framework for a feminist critique of antisemitism.

This book will be of interest to scholars of gender studies, feminism, Critical Theory, history, and antisemitism studies.

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# ANTISEMITISM AND SEXISM

## Ideological Constellations Before and After 7 October

*Karin Stögner*

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# 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Critical Theory, 7 October, and the Critique of Antisemitism and Sexism

7 October 2023 marks a civilisational rupture that makes the critique of antisemitism and sexism imperative. The massacres committed by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist groups were so monstrous that time itself seemed briefly to stand still. They constituted the deadliest outbreak of antisemitic violence since the Shoah. They were also an expression of an extreme misogyny, manifested in the coordinated mass sexual violence against women. After 7 October, no critique of antisemitism or sexism can retreat behind this experience.

This abyss of horror underscores the contemporary relevance of this book's subject: the mutual entanglements of antisemitism and sexism that form an ideological constellation. Yet it is not only the immediate monstrosity of 7 October that has occupied attention since then. Striking has also been the dramatic global rise in antisemitism and the denial of the sexism inherent within it. This confirms a well-established insight: antisemitic acts unleash antisemitism as an ideology, just as antisemitic ideology incites violent action. Antisemitism is therefore always both ideology and murderous practice. More precisely, antisemitic ideology already contains the antisemitic act in virtual form.

I began working on the entanglement of antisemitism and sexism more than two decades ago, a line of inquiry that resulted in a book published in 2014 in German (Stögner 2014). The events of 7 October prompted me to return to this topic with renewed attention to its contemporary significance. Initially, I had intended simply to translate the 2014 book into English; however, this soon proved impossible, first because of the fundamentally changed situation after 7 October, and second because the focus of my thinking on the problem has shifted considerably in the intervening years. As a result, I wrote this new book.

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Then as now, however, my thinking is guided by Critical Theory in the tradition of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. For the authors, who both fled from National Socialism into exile in America, antisemitism became a central axis of social theory. In 1940, in the face of Nazi barbarism and the looming "Final Solution of the Jewish Question", Adorno articulated the pressing significance of antisemitism in a letter to Horkheimer: "It often seems to me as though everything we were accustomed to viewing under the aspect of the proletariat has today, in dreadful concentration, shifted onto the Jews" (Horkheimer 1995, 764).[1]

This remark points to the foundational genealogy of Critical Theory in Marx's critique of society and political economy. Yet whereas Marxist theory identifies class struggle as the motor of history, National Socialism forced Critical Theory to confront a new configuration: the ideological suspension of class struggle in antisemitism, in which the Jews became a substitute object for social contradictions. For this reason, social theory can no longer be anchored in the proletariat and its struggle, but must take antisemitism as its main point of reference, in which the totality of society converges in a negative form. This found expression in Adorno's formulation of a "new categorical imperative" that "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, 365).

The centrality of antisemitism within the social critique of Critical Theory was fully elaborated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, arguably the most important and influential work of the tradition, written in the early 1940s and first published in hectographed form in 1944. Horkheimer and Adorno were acutely aware that an understanding of modern society required the explanatory power of Freudian psychoanalysis, which from the early 1930s onward was systematically linked with the materialist explanatory models of materialist social theory. This synthesis rendered antisemitism comprehensible both in its socioeconomic and political dimensions and in its subjective and libidinal formations. Crucially, this was not an additive approach. It was a dialectical one.

This analysis culminated in the chapter "Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment", not coincidentally the final chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and thus a paradigmatic demonstration of how Enlightenment turns into barbarism (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 137–172). In it, Horkheimer and Adorno decipher antisemitism as a complex and shifting constellation: the modern relation to nature and the compulsion to labour play as significant a role in its ideological construction as does the projection of disavowed impulses onto Jews within conspiratorial mentalities. The authors locate these dynamics consistently within the constraints of capitalist society, in which commodity fetishism sets the tone and in which the binding force of religion, once eroded, is increasingly replaced by surrogates such as nationalism and repressive community ideologies. This constellation enhances the loss of experience in mass society, where thought ossifies into stereotype and self-reflection is dissolved.

In this way, the critique of antisemitism becomes a genealogy of modern society itself, of a society that promises freedom and equality to its subjects yet, owing to its intrinsic inequalities, blocks these promises so systematically that Enlightenment ideals are inverted into their opposite. This is neither an automatism nor a deterministic process; it could always have taken a different course. To understand why it unfolded as it did requires sustained engagement with the dynamic and dialectical relationship between society and the individual.

I follow this trajectory in my analysis of the relationship between antisemitism and sexism. I argue that across all the dimensions described by Horkheimer and Adorno, antisemitism refers, more or less explicitly, to unequal gender relations and operates through contradictory images of gender. Early indications of such a reading can already be found in Critical Theory itself. Although not developed in detail, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains several passages in which antisemitism is historically embedded in unequal gender relations. This interpretation is also supported by the empirical studies on *The Authoritarian Personality,* conducted by Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and other scholars in the 1940s in American exile, aimed at assessing authoritarian dispositions within the US population. Frenkel-Brunswik arrived at the empirically grounded insight that antisemitism and the rigid division of the world into a heteronormative gender binary that allows no transitions share a common psychosocial root.

In analysing the connections between antisemitism and sexism, I do not, however, claim that the two ideologies are analogous, interchangeable, or equivalent. Rather, my aim is to identify structural affinities, functional similarities, and motivational entanglements, while also attending to differences, oppositions, and discontinuities. While similarities emerge on the ideological level, decisive differences become evident in practice, above all in the extermination of Jews under National Socialism. Jewish women were not murdered because they were women, but because they were Jewish. After the Shoah, forms of feminist displacement of guilt occasionally appeared in Germany, framing women as victims of National Socialism by virtue of their gender, on the grounds that Nazism was a patriarchal and misogynistic system. The feminist critical theorist Karin Windhaus-Walser critically and polemically described this as the "grace of female birth" (Windhaus-Walser 1988) in analogy to the notion of the "grace of late birth", introduced by German Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the 1980s, which claims that later generations bear no responsibility for National Socialism. The feminist historian Susannah Heschel likewise pointed to a specifically German feminist reversal of victim and perpetrator. She observed that some German feminists

> drew the singular conclusion that the morality of Jewish patriarchy was analogous to the moral order of National Socialism. German women were thus cast not as responsible for Nazism, but as its victims, and even as victims of Judaism itself. By implication, Jewish victims of Nazism appeared as victims of their own religion. *(Heschel 1994, 161)*

The aim of the following analysis is therefore not to dissolve the critique of antisemitism into an undifferentiated critique of patriarchy. Rather, it seeks to identify the specific historical, social, political, economic, and psychological constellations in which patriarchal structures give rise to both misogyny and hostility toward Jews. It is widely recognised that such hostility is not triggered by actual qualities of women or Jews. Instead, it is rooted in the psychosocial and political economic conditions of antisemites and misogynists themselves. Misogyny targets women of diverse backgrounds just as antisemitism targets all Jews, regardless of their religious beliefs or their relationship to Israel.

Given the heterogeneity of those affected, the question arises as to what antisemitism and sexism are in fact directed against. What do they seek to ward off or prevent? From which social structures, unresolved conflicts, unconscious motives, and suppressed desires do they emerge? What is meant by the very 'Jewishness' and the very 'femininity' that are constructed as enemy images in shifting forms? These questions guide the following chapters and are addressed from different perspectives, focussing on modern forms of antisemitism and sexism.

Historical contextualisation is central to this inquiry. Antisemitic and sexist stereotypes have proven remarkably persistent throughout history and present themselves as eternal or natural. But critique must break through this appearance by identifying naturalisation as a moment of social reification. There is no eternal antisemitism, just as there is no 'eternal Jew'. In this sense, the critical theorist Detlev Claussen rightly emphasised that the decisive factor is the social context in which antisemitism becomes effective, a context that can be grasped only by analysing historical differences (Claussen 2000, 66). Critical Theory conceptualises the development from traditional to modern antisemitism as a trajectory of abstraction. Traditional anti-Judaism is predominantly concrete in its hostility and targets Jews as a group, while still regarding them as individuals who can, at least in principle, be integrated into the non-Jewish in-group through conversion, as in Christian and Islamic anti-Judaism. Modern antisemitism, by contrast, is increasingly abstract. It no longer aims at assimilation but at the stigmatisation of Jews as fundamentally different and at turning them into screens onto which abstract social processes – mediated by money or law – are projected. This abstraction in the object of antisemitism corresponds to an abstraction in the antisemitic subject. After Auschwitz, antisemitism is no longer primarily characterised by an immediate feeling of hatred, but by indifference and coldness toward those who are reduced to projection screens of domination (Adorno 2007, 362). While the function of antisemitism in stabilising domination may have remained broadly unchanged, fulfilling this function has required its adaptation to changing conditions of power. In the twentieth century, and even more so in the twenty-first, these conditions involved a profound erosion of experience and judgement on the part of subjects.

Mutability combined with the tenacity of stereotypy applies to sexism as well. Depending on the historical and social constellation in which it is embedded,

sexism takes on different, though related, meanings. Around the turn of the twentieth century, under the headings of misogyny and antifeminism, it referred to a defensive and hostile reaction to women's emancipation. In this sense, antifeminism can be understood as a post-emancipatory phenomenon, much like modern antisemitism.

Sexism operates through contradictory constructions of the feminine, which does not exist as a natural given but is produced within specific social constellations. It is then either identified with nature or denounced as entirely anti-natural. Accordingly, I do not understand sexism merely as actions and practices directed against women by virtue of their gender. Rather, I conceive of it more broadly as a socially institutionalised, devaluing, and defensive stance toward the wide range of traits and practices that are stigmatised as female or feminine. Particular attention must therefore be paid to the shifting interpretations of what counts as feminine and to the rigidity with which it is demarcated from the masculine. Central to this analysis is the examination of prevailing gender norms, the intensity with which they are socially enforced and performatively reproduced and the function they serve in sustaining existing power relations.

While the critique of antisemitism developed by early Critical Theory is central to this book, my aim is not its reconstruction but its actualisation in light of contemporary society. If we take seriously Critical Theory's claim to grasp antisemitism as the point at which social critique becomes decisive, then its conceptual framework must be adequate to present conditions. This requires an expansion of focus to include forms of antisemitism that were not, or not yet, addressed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but which today rank among the most pressing. These include, first, Islamic antisemitism, which has gained prominence since the Islamic Revolution in Iran and particularly since 9/11, yet has a much longer history and demonstrable links to Nazi antisemitism. Second, there is antisemitism directed against Israel, which takes the form of a "projective antizionism" (Grigat and Stögner 2025), in which antisemitic traditions are transposed into antizionism and antisemitic stereotypes projected onto the Jewish nation-state. On and after 7 October, these two forms of antisemitism converged with specific manifestations of sexism and antifeminism.

The aim of this book is to situate the misogynistic antisemitism of 7 October within a genealogy of a modernity – and its defence – that unfolded unevenly yet similarly in Europe and the Middle East. My objective is twofold. I seek to understand the sexist antisemitism of 7 October and its aftermath through the lens of Critical Theory, while at the same time sharpening Critical Theory itself in response to these developments.

Accordingly, this book adopts a comparative focus on several historical and social constellations: the European fin de siècle, particularly in Germany and Austria; National Socialism and its preconditions; and the historical and contemporary formations of Islamism. These constellations provide the framework for analysing the specific interrelations of antisemitism and sexism and their

respective social functions. In the fin de siècle, antisemitism and sexism operated in tandem as mechanisms of resistance to emancipation. Under National Socialism, antisemitism moved to the centre and escalated into a project of annihilation. Sexism, by contrast, no longer entirely excluded so-called Aryan women from participation in the *völkisch* community but targeted specifically so-called non-Aryan women and demonised the idea of gender equality. In Islamism, antisemitism and sexism function as core ideological pillars. Nazi exterminatory antisemitism finds its echo in the Iranian regime's annihilatory threats against Israel and those of its proxies, while a strict regime of gender apartheid is regarded as foundational for the Islamic theocratic state.

The book is structured around a set of distinct dimensions through which the interrelation of antisemitism and sexism is developed. It opens with a theoretically dense chapter on the fraught relationship between human beings and nature under the conditions of modern labour society, which Critical Theory has identified as a key factor in both antisemitism and sexism. This chapter provides the conceptual groundwork for the analyses that follow. The subsequent chapters build on this foundation and turn more concretely and accessibly to the contradictory constructions of Judaism and femininity. They examine the relation between body and mind, as well as socially regulated forms of sexuality. Motifs of weakness and omnipotence intersect in conspiracy myths that link both ideologies. From a social-psychological perspective, these contradictions are traced back to unresolved conflicts of ambivalence, which foster authoritarian dispositions. A sociological context is introduced by situating the entanglement of sexism and antisemitism within specific formations of capitalist modernity, each of which is accompanied by particular repressive forms of community.

While Chapters 2 through 8 focus on the manifold interrelations of antisemitism and misogyny as they appear in different forms of patriarchally organised socialisation, Chapters 9 and 10 shift the focus to antisemitism and sexism within certain strands of feminism, a phenomenon that has become particularly evident since 7 October. That Jews themselves may also adopt antisemitic stereotypes was articulated by Hannah Arendt, who argued that assimilation into non-Jewish society always also entails, to some extent, assimilation to antisemitism (Arendt 1981, 233). The same holds true for women in sexist and antifeminist societies.

The fact that women and Jews sometimes support and actively reproduce the structures that oppress them testifies to the social and psychological power of integration exerted by these constellations. As early as the 1940s, Else Frenkel-Brunswik observed that women bound to authority tended to fetishise stereotypical notions of femininity and to rigidly disavow traits coded as masculine. At the same time, they demanded that men fully conform to masculinist ideals. Frenkel-Brunswik identified the cause of this dynamic in intolerance of ambiguity, understood as a general drive to impose clear distinctions on the world and to reject all forms of mixture (Frenkel-Brunswik 1974). Today, this dynamic becomes particularly visible in radical Islamism or political Islam, which offers

many young men a means of repressively compensating for conflicts and contradictions produced by modern society. Yet, just as National Socialism relied on the cooperation of 'Aryan' women, movements such as the so-called Islamic State also depend on the active ideological participation of a significant number of women, while others resist.

In such forms of female complicity, unconscious mechanisms play a role, including what Anna Freud described as identification with the aggressor (Freud 1973). These are accompanied by more conscious strategies of self-preservation, reflected in the bourgeois principle of protection through obedience. Through the internalisation of sexist stereotypes, subjects may come to perceive themselves as the degraded beings they are taken to be, or they may displace this self-contempt by projecting it onto Jewish or unruly women.

This dynamic is not limited to explicitly authoritarian societies or milieus but is also present in contemporary Western societies. Since 7 October, it has become clear that women and Jews do not simply stand outside the relations that disadvantage, denigrate, and oppress them, but are often entangled in them and may even reproduce them. Numerous Western feminists legitimised Hamas as a resistance movement, while ignoring or denying both its antisemitism and its sexism. I therefore conclude my analyses by seeking to explain why left-wing queer and intersectional feminists in particular form alliances with Islamism and withhold solidarity from Israeli victims of rape, kidnapping, and murder. In these cases, loss of experience, self-hatred, and narcissism form a peculiar alliance, especially among cultural relativist feminists. Because they regard the Enlightenment as only oppressive, they reject it entirely. In doing so, they morally elevate themselves through their rejection of those who continue to insist on Enlightenment principles and view their realisation as a task of feminist emancipation. Feminist identity is thus mobilised for anti-emancipatory ends. A similar pattern can be observed among some antizionist Jews, who affirm themselves by rejecting the large majority of Jews for whom Israel forms part of their identity as a potential refuge from global antisemitism.

By contrast, this book is grounded in a critical feminist commitment to the achievements of the Enlightenment and modernity, without ignoring their immanent deficits and moments of violence. Today, this constitutes a particular theoretical and political challenge. At a time when authoritarian, fundamentalist, and openly reactionary movements, exemplified by Islamism but also by other antimodern ideologies, attack the normative foundations of universalism, individual freedom, and rational critique, the defence of modernity acquires a new and nonrestorative meaning. In view of the nihilistic depths into which large segments of the progressive academic avant-garde have descended by legitimising terror, antisemitism, and sexism after 7 October, feminist Critical Theory paradoxically finds itself pushed into the role of a rear guard. It insists on a double movement that defends the emancipatory promises of the Enlightenment against their regressive enemies, while refusing to deny the Enlightenment's historical entanglements

with domination, exploitation, and exclusion. Unlike poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, which often operate with a radical scepticism toward universalist concepts, such a feminist Critical Theory defends them both against affirmative hardening and against wholesale deconstruction, in order to preserve them as indispensable tools of social critique and emancipatory practice.

## Note

1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German are my own.

# 2

# NATURE AS IDEOLOGY

In modern society, the image of nature is bound in many ways to gender, nation, and class position – categories that mark social inequality. In this framework, nature functions as an ideology that conceals the social origins of inequality, legitimising it as something natural. In this sense, nature fills the ideological void left by the secularisation of Western modern societies: social order no longer justifies itself as divinely ordained but as naturally given. Concepts of evolutionary biology reach deeply into the way society understands itself and help to shape it. It therefore matters who is associated with nature, and in what way, since nature itself is not a clear or extra-social entity but reflects social contradictions. In modern society, nature is imagined both as strong and powerful and as weak and to be dominated – a split that reappears in gendered attributions: women are commonly associated with a nature to be controlled by men, while male nature is imagined as strong and assertive. Gender relations are embedded in the social processes of mastering and appropriating nature.

In the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, the relationship between society and nature occupies a central place. Drawing on both Freud and Marx, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse see civilisation as a process of active engagement with nature that involves its appropriation, domination, and transformation for the purposes of human social life. This also includes the domination of human nature itself (what they call inner nature) in the sense of controlling, deferring, and channelling drives as an essential part of socialising individuals into modern society.

Civilisation transforms nature into material to be mastered and superimposes itself over nature in the form of second nature: culture and society as an emancipatory elevation of humanity above immediate natural conditions. Hegel already described second nature as mediated immediacy. Accordingly, dialectical social theory understands second nature, i.e., society, as a form of emancipation entangled

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in domination and therefore deeply contradictory. It allows freedom from immediate natural compulsion, while at the same time reifying in the form of social norms and institutions so rigidly that these appear even more coercive and unchangeable than first nature itself (Schmid Noerr 1997).

Within this constellation of first and second nature, of necessity and freedom, of emancipation and control, Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, locate both antisemitism and misogyny. They trace how the consistent domination of nature in civilisation is bound up with domination within society. They also show how rebellion against domination can take the form of an authoritarian revolt – a revolt that does not challenge domination itself but remains trapped within its logic by displacing opposition onto surrogate targets, like in antisemitism and sexism. Critical Theorists interpret antisemitism and misogyny as expressions of a damaged social relation to nature. In this chapter, I follow them along the path of this false relation to nature that serves as a mediating moment between antisemitism and sexism, two ideologies which we encounter in hardened discursive strategies, ingrained stereotypes, and deeply rooted habitual patterns. The stereotypes of Jew and woman connected to these ideologies occur as ambivalently identified with nature and its seeming antithesis: anti-nature or second nature.

## Nature and Anti-Nature: Ambivalent Identifications

Modern antisemitic imaginaries predominantly associate Jews with modernity: urbanity, intellectuality, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism. Jews are stereotyped as rootless, bloodless, and lacking authenticity and identity, as overcivilised and therefore utterly unnatural. The antisemitic figure of the Jew appears as one who lacks bonds and transgresses established borders. Accordingly, modern antisemitism casts Jews as ambiguous in at least three respects: class position, gender, and national belonging. In late nineteenth-century ideologies of authenticity (Pulliero 2005), these dimensions were central to a supposedly natural social order (Stögner 2013). Jews were constructed as alien to the nation (Mosse 2020; Salzborn 2010a), accused of undermining bourgeois sexual and gender norms (Boyarin 1997; Gilman 1993), and associated with women's emancipation (Volkov 2001). Together, these attributions positioned Jews as representatives of anti-nature rather than nature.

By contrast, patriarchal societies, particularly bourgeois ones, have long bluntly identified women with nature. Reduced to reproduction and care, women were naturalised as bodily beings devoid of intellect. This identification is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it is overtly derogatory, framing the female body as filthy, sick, or inferior; on the other, it assumes a paternalistic form, idealising women as pure, innocent nature in need of protection. This latter form characterises benevolent sexism (Fiske and Norris 2009), which venerates only those women who belong to the in-group and conform to patriarchal gender norms, while devaluing women who deviate from prescribed roles or are associated with race, sexuality,

disability, illness, or poverty. Such protection presupposes subordination: women are recognised as worthy only insofar as they submit to male authority. Femininity is thus split into 'pure' and 'impure', higher and lower nature. While 'pure' women are mobilised for the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997), 'deviant' women are accused of disintegrating the unity, identity, and cohesion of national, religious or cultural communities. They are associated with sexual excess, disease, filth, and 'race defilement'. As Shulamit Volkov has shown, this constellation formed a central cultural code of fin de siècle antisemitic and misogynist discourse rather than a marginal phenomenon (Volkov 2006, 129–144). Today, it remains present in both the extreme right and Islamism.

At first glance, sexism identifies women with nature, while antisemitism associates Jews with anti-nature: women represent first nature – appropriated, exploited, and dominated – whereas Jews are cast as abstract, rootless, and unnatural, embodying second nature. Yet this opposition is deceptive. A closer look reveals that both antisemitism and misogyny operate through deeply ambivalent and contradictory notions of nature.

Although antisemitism frames Jews as anti-natural, it simultaneously ascribes to them forms of 'deficient' or distorted nature, most visibly through contradictory gender stereotypes. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, antisemitic constructions of Jewish sexuality oscillate between nature and anti-nature. Jewish men are portrayed as simultaneously hypersexual *and* impotent, hypermasculine *and* effeminate, lustful *and* weak. They are imagined as sexually predatory and capable of seducing women, yet also as effeminate and homosexual, thus failing to embody the predominant notion of ideal masculinity (Boyarin 1997; Gilman 1993). Jewish women, in turn, are denied ideal femininity and masculinised as cold, rational, and materialistic, while simultaneously feared for excessive sexual desire and supposed hyperfertility (A.G. Gender-Killer 2005). They represent an untamed, dangerous, and subversive nature. Antisemitism thus imagines Jews as gender-benders and situates them outside the heteronormative gender order, which enables antisemites to project their own unresolved ambivalences regarding gender identity.

At the same time, Jews are repeatedly identified with animality, and thus with a lower order of nature. Christian, Islamic, and National Socialist antisemitism depict Jews as pigs, monkeys, dogs, octopi, spiders, snakes, parasites, or vermin, and Jewish bodies as filthy (Gilman 1993, 1998). As Adorno observed, "the social schematization of perception in anti-Semites is such that they do not see Jews as human beings at all" (Adorno 2005, 105), adding that the identification of humans with animals "is the key to the pogrom" (Adorno 2005, 105). These animal metaphors figure nature as a threat to civilisation: the devouring octopus or spider; the seductive and constricting snake; the pig embodying "impulses tended toward other pleasures than those sanctioned by society for its purposes" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 56); the monkey appearing as the 'missing link' between nature and civilisation; parasites infiltrating and destroying communities from within. Such threatening imagery, projected onto Jews, marks them as targets for extermination.

These processes of identification with and defence of nature become even more complex when read through *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno describe civilisation as a process of separation from nature, through which subjectivity emerges via boundaries – between self and other, inward and outward, culture and nature, masculine and feminine. Modern antisemitism casts Jews as the negation of these boundaries and thus of subject formation: they appear as non-identical. Similarly, misogynist ideology denies women full subjectivity, framing them as nature-bound.

Otto Weininger's influential 1903 book *Geschlecht und Charakter* ("Sex and Character") exemplifies this topos. For Weininger, women and Jews alike are incapable of developing an identity that seeks unity and suppresses ambivalence and inner conflict: "the real Jew," he claimed, "like woman, has no ego and therefore lacks any intrinsic value" (Weininger 1920, 418; see also Harrowitz and Hyams 1995). Women and Jews represent the undifferentiated manifold of unrestrained drives, opposed to "the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 26). The devaluation of Jews thus operates centrally through feminisation and the denial of identity and subjectivity.

Modern antisemitism and misogyny are therefore inseparable from the emergence of the bourgeois subject. In bourgeois society, subjectivity presupposes autonomy and contractual capacity – conditions long denied to women. Bourgeois self-discipline replaces external domination with internalised control over one's own nature, a prerequisite for survival under capitalist commodity production (Allen 2018; Roepert 2022, 269). Sexism and antifeminism function as its counterpart by denying women reason and autonomy and confining them to reproduction, thereby justifying their external control. As the feminist Critical Theorist Ute Gerhard observes:

> Whether gender difference is justified as divinely ordained or grounded in human nature, in either case it serves as the reason and pretext for women's inferior legal status – indeed, for their exclusion from rights altogether, or more fundamentally, for the claim that they are incapable of being bearers of rights, incapable of being legal subjects at all.
>
> *(Gerhard 2003, 91)*

Identification with nature entails dehumanisation. Those reduced to nature are treated as material to be administered and exploited. As Horkheimer wrote:

> When man is assured that he is nature and nothing but nature, he is at best pitied. Passive, like everything that is only nature, he is supposed to be an object of 'treatment', finally a being dependent on more or less benevolent leadership.
>
> *(Horkheimer 1947, 170)*

Adorno similarly noted in *Minima Moralia*: "Whatever is in the context of bourgeois delusion called nature, is merely the scar of social mutilation" (Adorno 2005, 95).

Nature thus appears as a split ideology. On the one hand, it is imagined as omnipotent and superior, legitimising privilege as natural; on the other, it is despised

as uncivilised and repellent. Antisemites reduce Jews to this latter form of nature, but only after first identifying them with abstraction, modernity, intellect, urbanity, mediation, or law – features of bourgeois society which they fear and resent. As Postone (1980) argued, the Nazi extermination camps epitomised this violent reduction: Jews were transported like cattle, shorn like sheep, and gassed like parasites. Postwar accusations that Jews 'went to the slaughter like sheep' reproduce this same antisemitic logic (Lustiger 1994).

Yet Jews are reduced to nature not because they are perceived as natural but because they appear as the opposite: as representatives of modernity, abstraction and individualism. Antisemitism does not construct Jews as inferior but as dangerously superior. The antisemites fear what they do not know or understand: the power of abstractness which they view as represented in the Jews. They profoundly detest civilisation and intellectuality, individuality and subjectivity, along with abstract rights and civil society, precisely for their ambiguities and intrinsic contradictions. Antisemitism rids itself of the notion of individual freedom and equality, which, though immanent to bourgeois society, remains unrealised. It instead invents the idea of the *völkisch* community, regarded as something that has grown naturally. The idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, in which people allegedly find warmth and a sense of belonging, is a reaction to objectively dominant, reified social processes that confront the subject as second nature. In antisemitism, these alienated processes and social relationships undergo a personalisation and renaturalisation: the Jews are said to be behind them. This is why antisemitism identifies Jews with civilisation and individualism, while simultaneously reducing them to mere nature: its unconscious aim is the violent negation of civilisation, individualism, autonomy, and freedom.

This reversal is especially evident in antisemitic hostility towards women's emancipation. National Socialist ideologues explicitly linked feminism to Judaism. Gottfried Feder claimed: "By means of sexual democracy, the Jew has stolen our women. Our youth must stand up and kill this dragon so that we are able to recover the holiest thing on earth, the woman as virgin and handmaid" (quoted in Mitscherlich-Nielsen 1990, 28). Alfred Rosenberg likewise associated women's emancipation with Judaism, claiming that both led a "parasitic life at the expense of male strength" and thus corroded the *völkisch* community from within (quoted in Sauer-Burghard 2008, 36). Similar constellations appear beyond National Socialism: the Algerian Islamist thinker Malek Bennabi described the twentieth century as the "century of the woman, the Jew, and the dollar" (quoted in Bensoussan 2019, 87), while Ali Khamenei framed gender justice as part of a "Zionist plot to destroy human society" (quoted in Magid 2017).

Emancipation is thus feared as a violation of a 'natural' order, patriarchal traditions being reimagined as eternal, natural, or divine. Second nature is recoded as first nature, and emancipated women come to embody anti-nature (Dijkstra 1986; Mayer 2001). Figures like the 'gunwoman' during the First World War, what is pejoratively called 'Emanze' in German used to delegitimise feminist claims, prostitutes, intellectual women who demanded access to universities, women taking

part in revolutionary uprisings or highly educated Jewish women are just a few examples of the unwomanly character ascribed to emancipation. Later misogynistic-antisemitic denigrations of emancipated women include 'man-hating bra-burners', 'Feminazis', or 'Zio-bitches' ('Ziofotze' in German). In the view of antisemitic antifeminists, they all lack a natural feeling of true womanhood, they are artificial, unauthentic, intellectual, unruly, exaggerated, and dangerous.

In this way, nature and anti-nature converge. The antipodes touch: both Jews and emancipated women are simultaneously constructed as excessively natural and radically unnatural, embodying the contradictions of modern society itself.

## Mastery of Nature: Why Jews and Women Are Identified with Nature and Anti-Nature

How can nature and anti-nature converge in one and the same figure? Analysing antisemitic and sexist images separately cannot explain this entanglement. Rather, these contradictions must be read as symptoms of a broader antagonism in modern society: social domination is essentialised as natural and ideologically veiled in antisemitism and antifeminism. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno link antisemitism and antifeminism through the social concept of nature. With perhaps disconcerting bluntness, they argue that women and Jews are hated for the same motives: their prescribed social weakness, produced by domination, appears as affinity to nature:

> The explanation for the hatred of woman as the weaker in mental and physical power, who bears the mark of domination on her brow, is the same as for the hatred of the Jews. Women and Jews show visible evidence of not having ruled for thousands of years. They live, although they could be eliminated, and their fear and weakness, the greater affinity to nature produced in them by perennial oppression, is the element in which they live. In the strong, who pay for their strength with their strained remoteness from nature and must forever forbid themselves fear, this incites blind fury. They identify themselves with nature by calling forth from their victims, multiplied a thousandfold, the cry they may not utter themselves.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 88)*

This purported affinity to nature is not 'natural' but the ideological after-image of exclusion and discrimination: women and Jews were denied social and political participation and thus subject status. Antisemites and antifeminists nonetheless treat this exclusion as grounded in nature – legitimate, static, eternal. Horkheimer and Adorno showed that in both antisemitism and misogyny, social power relations are viewed as primordial and turned into static nature. Beneath the manifest hatred against Jews and women, there is the more unconscious hatred against weakness in general, the self-hate against one's own suppressed inner nature (i.e., against one's

own wishes, fears, desires, drives) and the projective envy that imagines the 'weak' as indulging sexual impulses one must deny oneself.

When Horkheimer and Adorno write about nature, they do not invoke 'primal nature', but the social meaning of nature: bodily nature shaped, adapted, and exploited by civilisation. Nature in society appears as a product of mastery of nature, inward and outward. Their analysis of antisemitism and misogyny centres on sublimation, renunciation, and drive repression, following Freud's thesis that civilisation requires the permanent subjugation and canalisation of inner nature, especially sexuality (cf. Marcuse 1969, 23). Nature is thus never immediate, but historically and socially mediated through labour, science, language, religion, and culture. Even the idea of first nature functions ideologically, disguising social relations as natural and shielding them from change.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, nature is produced through human praxis, above all socially organised labour. They make this explicit in relation to the gender regime and the naturalisation of women: "Woman as an allegedly natural being is a product of history, which denatures her" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 87).

This line has prompted feminist critique that the authors tacitly reiterate the identification of women with nature (e.g., Becker-Schmidt 1989; Kulke 1989). Yet the passage names the identification as historical, i.e., as domination sedimented into appearance. The image of women as nature is a symptom of a distorted relationship to nature, foundational for civilisation in its dominating form. Nature is bound to the social organisation of labour, and that organisation is gendered:

> The division of labor imposed on her by the man was unfavorable. She became an embodiment of biological function, an image of nature, in the suppression of which this civilization's claim to glory lay. To dominate nature boundlessly, to turn the cosmos into an endless hunting ground, has been the dream of millennia. It shaped the idea of man in a male society.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 206)*

The gendered division of labour restricts women to reproduction and care-work, which are not socially recognised as productive labour: they are unpaid, not contractually mediated, and therefore do not ground subjectivity. Women are denied "the self – the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 26). Male and female characters are not natural essences tied exclusively to bodies, a point underscored by antisemitic feminisation of Jewish men and masculinisation of Jewish or emancipated women. Where women are admitted to the sphere of production, they are required to acquire the corresponding traits: "In the form of skilled work the autonomy

of the entrepreneur, which is over, is spreading to all those admitted as producers, including the 'working' woman, and is becoming their character. Their self-respect grows in proportion to their fungibility" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 84). Following this, the integration of women into society results in different ideals of femininity and notions of nature, depending on the roles women play in maintaining society.

The social organisation of labour shapes inner nature itself: instincts, desires, anxieties, and the socially permitted forms of sexuality and gender. Inner nature is not pre-social, but largely historically and socially formed. Yet civilisation is not merely repression. Dialectically, it also enables freedom through domination. Herbert Marcuse describes this dialectical relationship, drawing on the theory Freud had developed in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1999a). Civilisation implies threefold domination:

> [F]irst, 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, 169)*

This mastery is also the condition of threefold freedom:

> [F]irst, 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, 169)*

This dialectical relationship between domination and freedom is intrinsic to any civilisation and culture hitherto and transforms the organism "from a subject-object of pleasure into a subject-object of work" and in this way overcomes "the pleasure principle through the reality principle" (Marcuse 2007, 164). Work, which in Marxian terms is always also an involvement with nature in the sense of dominating, utilising, and changing it in the interest of humanity, is the medium via which sociation, i.e., the process of integration of individual and society, takes place. This process, however, is intrinsically gendered. As will be analysed in more detail in Chapter 7, the unequal gender relations that we know in modern society are inseparable from gender-specific division of labour.

Marcuse's explanation that human freedom – the ability to realise and determine oneself – is not simply given by nature but is a sociohistorical achievement based on

the mastery of nature, however, does not end here. The dialectic shifts when the gains of freedom are unequally distributed and compensation for instinctual renunciation is withheld. In a society structured by inequality, renunciation and freedom diverge: some renounce while the freedom of others expands. Mimetic impulses are redirected into alienated labour, and the manifold demands of inward nature are quelled in the name of instrumental progress. The major aim of this form of progress deviates largely from the individuals' longing for happiness. Individuals must adjust to the labour market and experience themselves as interchangeable, stripped of particularity. Objects rather than subjects, they become assimilated to nature as material to be mastered and exchanged. The social dialectic between domination and freedom, as described by Marcuse, shifts such that domination multiplies while freedom contracts. The relentless domination of inner nature ultimately leads to the disappearance of its very product, the autonomous and free subject, as Horkheimer describes in *Eclipse of Reason*:

> As the end result 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, 97)*

In constituting itself through domination of nature, the subject loses itself, because mastery extends to the subject's own inner nature. The subject experiences itself as dead material. Here Horkheimer locates the conversion of nature domination into authoritarianism – "the revolt of nature" (Horkheimer 1947, 92–127).

### The Revolt of Nature: The Promise of Happiness Reversed

Certainly, labour as active involvement with nature is a precondition for civilisation and cultural development. According to Freud, civilisation is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts (Freud 1999a, 1999b). But, and this point is a prerequisite for understanding the dialectic of mastery of nature, if labour is organised under the alienating conditions of the capitalist performance principle, the mimetic impulse is neither reconciled nor pacified. It reemerges as the "mimesis of death" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 44): individuals experience themselves and others increasingly as dead and interchangeable things into which nature has been transformed. Efficiency criteria colonise subjectivity: "The self […] learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 10). Human beings increasingly encounter the world, including others, under the aspect of manipulation. Entangled in domination, they assimilate to the nature they dominate.

That way, alienation proliferates: from the product of one's work; from the manifold demands of one's drives, wishes, and desires; from other people and thus from

intersubjectivity; and, eventually, from the idea that the world could be different, that is, from the possibilities for real change that society simultaneously produces and blocks. The status quo is reified, experienced not as historically made but as static nature. Individuals are reduced to functions in the reproduction of the whole – mere material to be administered, like alienated nature.

Controlling the mimetic impulse means banning the desire, amidst progressive civilisation, to purposeless satisfaction. It is repeatedly naturalised as an archaic remainder to be tamed, but this naturalisation is ideological. The mimetic impulse is not pre-social; it intensifies precisely when technical and institutional advances could reduce hardship for all, yet this possibility is blocked by the society that produces it. The resulting dialectic – ever more domination of inner and outer nature and ever greater assimilation of subjects to dead material – is decisive for antisemitism and sexism: Jews and women become projection screens for desires and fears that must be suppressed. Horkheimer names this complex "The Revolt of Nature" (Horkheimer 1947, 92–127).

Even though misogyny and antisemitism are historically persistent, they tend to intensify when domination could and should be reduced – a central thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno. Individuals develop loathing towards what they have learned to suppress, while remaining secretly attracted to it as the bearer of happiness. Nature, processed through civilisation, becomes contradictory: it is reduced to dead material, yet it also harbours a hidden "promise of happiness" and can appear as powerless happiness (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 141). This promise may easily be projected onto particular figures and groups who historically and socially stand apart due to their exclusion from social and political participation: Jews and women, along other groups like Roma and Sinti, have traditionally served this function. To those who constantly suppress their wishes, these groups appear spared the burdens of civilisation, doing no work but merely living. The stereotype that Jews and women do not work remains powerful. Derek Hook reads racism

> 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 social level (as an attempt to account for the multiple contingencies, conflicts, and deadlocks of a given society).
>
> *(Quoted in Frosh 2023, 139)*

This interpretation can also be applied to antisemitism and sexism. The hidden promise of happiness that secretly underlies misogyny and antisemitism is not limited to the subjective level but operates in society as a denied possibility of ending hardship and misery. But instead of seeking enjoyment in this life, the yearning for it is split off and projected onto others as fulfilled. Misogyny and antisemitism are "characterised by a perceived 'theft of enjoyment'" (Frosh 2023, 140).

## Antisemitism and Sexism as False Cure

As this chapter has shown, the complex relationship among nature, society, and subjectivation is important for the functioning of antisemitism and misogyny. Antisemitism not only legitimates the domination of first nature but also delegitimises and rejects second nature as embodied in reason, civilisation, mediation, and abstract social relations. Antisemites project onto Jews everything they experience as a supra-personal social system. What they fundamentally reject is the abstract bourgeois law and intellectualism symbolised by the so-called 'Jewish elite' – a representation of individuality and subjectivity grounded in universal rights. The image of the Jew, simultaneously embodying nature and anti-nature, serves a distinct function in modern society. It fights off a nature that must be suppressed and a civilisation that remains contradictory and only partially integrated into the self. This fusion of opposites reflects Freud's notion of discomfort in culture (Freud 1999a).

The portrayal of women differs from the ambiguous association of Jews with nature. Femininity is straightforwardly cast as close to nature, while deviations from this norm are displaced onto images of 'deviant' femininity – figures that merge nature and anti-nature. Jewish femininity, in particular, is consistently framed as deviant, while the 'racially pure' woman is idealised as natural.

Antisemitic imagery thrives on ambiguity. By blending opposites, these representations become more effective. They channel fears of untamed nature alongside discomfort with civilisation. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno identify a structural and motivational link between antisemitism and sexism: both mediate the relation between nature and society so as to stabilise domination. Social discontent is redirected towards those who 'have never ruled' and therefore appear to stand paradoxically outside society and closer to nature. In modernity, domination renders inner and outer nature into objects of control; individuals no longer relate sensuously to nature but manage it mechanically, including themselves and others. In being used and only used, nature becomes abstract and emptied of intrinsic meaning beyond utilisation. This abstract nature crystallises into a falsely concrete form in the figures of the Jew and the woman. Those associated with nature appear ideologically as deviations from progress, where progress centres on organising the body for alienated labour. In a distorted and negative form, antisemitism and sexism register – while simultaneously disavowing – the overdue necessity of reducing domination.

This raises the question of the role of sexuality and in what way the body is being idealised and abhorred, questions which will be addressed in the next chapter.

# 3

# HOSTILITY TOWARDS THE BODY

## Ambivalent Images of Sexuality and Corporeality in Antisemitism and Sexism

Antisemitism reveals its sexist elements through specific gender stereotypes and fantasies of deviant sexuality projected on the Jews. One recurring theme in antisemitic ideology is the belief that Jews undermine the binary order of gender. As Susannah Heschel points out, at the heart of antisemitic conspiracy narratives that "Jews promote civil rights, immigration, abortion rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and other liberties is the claim that Jews undermine the social fabric of gender and sexual norms" (Heschel 2024, 56). Thus, antisemitism encompasses a wide array of sex-related issues including feminism, LGBTQI+ movements, interracial sexual relationships, pornography, and sex work, portraying them as instruments of subversion supposedly employed by Jews to undermine the 'White race' and secure their alleged social dominance (Augustin et al. 2024).

Already in 1930, Hans F. K. Günther made this claim explicit in his book *Rassenkunde des jüdischen Volkes* ("The Racial Science of the Jewish People"):

> Among Jews, a relatively frequent degeneration phenomenon occurs, which has been called "sexual applanation".[1] It manifests in a certain blurring of physical and mental secondary sexual characteristics: among Jews one finds particularly often effeminate men and masculine women. The sexual dimorphism appears, overall, to be weakly developed in Judaism.
>
> *(Günther 1930, 272)*

This statement expresses a broad ideological phenomenon: modernity's visual archive overflows with images of feminised Jewish men and masculinised Jewish women (A.G. Gender-Killer 2005). These depictions share a common trait: they cross the boundaries of heteronormativity and binary gender and view Jews as gender-benders. As shown in the previous chapter, antisemitism and sexism entangle

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through a set of contradictory associations concerning nature and anti-nature, which reveal something essential: antisemitic images of Jews always carry contradictory traits, making them ideal projection screens for unresolved social, political, economic, or psychological tensions. Antisemitic discourse not only paints Jews as excessively unnatural (modern, overcivilised, intellectual, cold, rootless), but also as close to a form of nature that stands for weakness, sickness, and filth and is therefore despised and denigrated. This contradictory character becomes clear in the various gender stereotypes assigned to Jews throughout antisemitic rhetoric. Discussions about Jewish sexuality and claims of deficient Jewish bodies and repugnant bodily attributes have always been part of antisemitism. The idea "that Jews are sexually abnormal and use sexuality as a weapon" belongs to what Susannah Heschel calls "the cauldron of antisemitic ideas functioning as a reservoir of antisemitic possibility to be revived when desired". Heschel calls this a "pornographic antisemitism", within which Jewish men are depicted as "crooked-nosed cowards, sexually perverse, deceitful, and rapacious in business". She emphasises that antisemites find Jews "repulsive not in the abstract, but in their concrete bodies" (Heschel 2024, 64).

This chapter focusses on such entanglements by tracing the ambivalent relationship to the body – desired yet hated and despised – in antisemitism and misogyny. I elaborate on this by showing continuities in the discourse throughout history, with particular emphasis on the fin de siècle, moving through National Socialism and finally to 7 October.

## Fin de Siècle Ambivalence

The purported Jewish affinity to nature implies a specific sexualisation: antisemites project an animalistic notion of sexuality onto Jews. It is an idea of perverse sexuality represented as disgusting and repulsive because it contradicts the normative primacy of procreation and labour and is instead secretly associated with pleasure and unrestrained sexual lust. The identification of Jews with 'abnormal' sexuality has a long history that already shows in the Roman historian Tacitus, who considered Jews to be "prone to lust" and open to "immoral" sexual practices (quoted in Drake 2013, 13). At the turn from BC to AD, the sophist Apion traced the Sabbath back to a venereal disease (Hartmann 2025, 76). In early Christian texts, the description of Jews as "carnal, sexual deviants had become a topos" (Drake 2013, 2). Leading Christians such as the archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, and Augustine accused Jews of being lascivious and immodest, and depicted synagogues as places of sexual immorality (Augustin et al. 2024, 91). In Germany, this idea persisted in the form of the antisemitic and sexist stereotype of the *Hexensabbath* ('Witches' Sabbath', the word Sabbath in German being used almost exclusively in the context of Judaism): the fantasy of witches having sex with satanic creatures that are half-man, half-animal. Sexual immorality was associated with sickness and death, hence Jews were blamed for the spread

of syphilis with the first appearance of the disease in Europe during the fifteenth century (Augustin et al. 2024, 96; Gilman 1991, 96).

The animalistic sexuality attributed to Jews is evident in the physical characteristics associated with them in antisemitic depictions, such as the oversized 'Jewish nose'. This attribution has contradictory meanings. On the one hand, the oversized nose implies indulgence in sexuality, while on the other hand, its curved shape suggests a sick and perverse nature. Throughout history, the nose has symbolised a connection to the earth, visualised in the pig digging in the earth with its snout. The nose symbolises sexual attraction and repulsion simultaneously: in this symbol, sexuality is both desired and rejected. The stereotypical 'Jewish nose' encapsulates the suppression of the senses, particularly the sense of smell, in the process of civilisation. Marcuse called smell and taste the senses of proximity, the tabooing of which coincided with the repression of intense physical pleasure (Marcuse 1990, 43). Over time, society marked them as primitive – something that blurred the boundaries between the self and the outer world, between subject and object, as Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out:

> In the ambiguous partialities of the sense of smell the old nostalgia for what is lower lives on, the longing for immediate union with surrounding nature, with earth and slime. Of all the senses the act of smelling, which is attracted without objectifying, reveals most sensuously the urge to lose oneself in identification with the Other. [...] In civilization, therefore, smell is regarded as a disgrace, a sign of the lower social orders, lesser races, and baser animals.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 151)*

The purpose of suppressing the senses of proximity is to maintain the isolation of the subject from the object and from other subjects. Modern mediated domination as well as modern work processes require the subject as a monad, as a closed totality, with abstract autonomy. An "uninhibited development" of the senses of proximity "would eroticise the organism to such an extent that it would be contrary to its social usefulness as a working instrument" (Marcuse 1990, 44).

The word 'smell' means both emitting and receiving odours, active and passive merge into a single process. The sense of proximity thus implies the possibility of breaking through the steel, monadic armour of the bourgeois subject and abandoning oneself to the surrounding nature, which, however, according to the prevailing dictates of labour society, is rejected and forbidden as a regression and a loss of civilisation and subjectivity. This illustrates the dilemma of modern civilisation, which seems to know only two extremes: an iron ego with rigid boundaries on the one hand, and the danger of reverting to a state of first nature on the other hand. It is important to understand the dialectic here: these two alternatives are two sides of the same coin. A return to nature in the sense of abandoning civilisation is just as problematic as the rigid form of civilisation that gives rise to the desire to return to nature in the first place.

The temptation to deviate from the path of instrumental reason is banished by projecting sexual desire onto someone else. For antisemitism, this is a particularly strong motive, evident, e.g., in the fixation on the 'Jewish nose'. In fin de siècle everyday culture in Germany and Austria, it was generally assumed that the shape and size of the olfactory organ allowed conclusions to be drawn about the penis (Gilman 1993). What people say about the nose in antisemitic discourse thus essentially refers to the male genital, so that the allegedly 'crooked Jewish nose' carries the meaning of damaged masculinity. It seems paradoxical that the 'Jewish nose' is portrayed as extremely large, long, and thick, a giant phallus, while at the same time Jews are denigrated as lacking potency. In this paradoxical image, the contradictory antisemitic identification of Jews with nature and anti-nature is mirrored.

The stereotype of the large and misshapen nose also applied to Jewish women and was not only associated with abnormal sexual organs but also with abnormal sexual practices. Antisemitism portrayed Jewish women as deviating from normative femininity and portrayed them as thoroughly masculinised. It was all about making the 'other' visible and palpable, with discourses about the 'racial', the sexually deviant, and the sick intertwining (von Braun 1992). In the late nineteenth century, surgical procedures on the noses of female patients were sometimes performed to cure hysteria. Wilhelm Fließ, a Berlin ear, nose, and throat (ENT) doctor who worked with Freud for a while, published an essay in 1897 entitled *Die Beziehungen zwischen Nase und weiblichen Geschlechtsorganen* ("The Relationship Between the Nose and the Female Genitals"). Fließ assumed that pains such as stomach or menstrual problems, which he believed were caused by masturbation, condom use, and coitus interruptus, were localised in the sexual organs but could be treated via the nose (Fraisl 2001). Emma Eckstein, a patient of Freud's, nearly bled to death during nose surgery performed by Fließ. In this period, it was also medical practice to 'cure' women of masturbation and hysteria by surgically removing their clitoris and outer labia, effectively 'castrating' them. Such practices targeted the "lewdness of women" (Roggenkamp 1996, 76). As Gilman explains, antisemitism and misogyny converged in the discourse on hysteria:

> At the end of the nineteenth century the idea of seeing the hysteric was tightly bound to the idea of seeing the Jew – specifically the male Jew. Indeed, if the visual representation of the hysteric in the nineteenth century was the image of the female, its subtext was that feminized males, such as Jews, were also hysterics, and they too could be "seen". The face of the Jew was as much a sign of the pathological as was the face of the hysteric. More significantly, the face of the Jew became the face of the hysteric.
>
> *(Gilman 1993, 116)*

It was against this background that cosmetic surgery developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the aim of standardising body parts and

eradicating everything that was supposedly 'Jewish' from the body. Nose operations were particularly common. Those who underwent these surgeries "no longer looked 'Jewish' (i.e. panicked for fear of being seen)", as Gilman (1998, 65) puts it pointedly. This surgical practice must be seen in the context of long-standing techniques for regulating women's bodies, such as the compressing or binding of feet, or tightly laced corsets – painful practices intended to make women appear more feminine. To these were now added procedures designed to make them appear less 'masculine' and less 'Jewish'. Antisemitic stereotypes based on a deviant conception of Jewish corporeality are emblematic of the trajectory of modernity. In Germany, they served to make visible and socially marginalise Jews who had become invisible through secularisation, assimilation, and emancipation (von Braun 1992).

Psychoanalysis, too, referring to common metaphors in everyday language, viewed the nose as a symbol of sexuality, particularly through the idea of 'smelling sex'. In *Der Antisemit und der Ödipuskomplex* ("The Antisemite and the Oedipus Complex"), the psychoanalyst Béla Grunberger (1962, 259f.) pointed to the regressive and archaic character of antisemitic stereotypes of Jewish odour and Jewish impurity, attributing them to the anal phase of the development of human sexual organisation (Salzborn 2010a, 130–146; Spörk 1996, 29). That is why antisemitic myths like the *foetor judaicus* – the idea that Jews carry a specific bodily smell – hold such power (Efron 1998; Geller 1992). Antisemites claim they can literally smell Jews (Gilman 1991). In sexological literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., Havelock Ellis), writers often linked the *foetor judaicus* to terms like *odor di femina* or *parfum de la femme* – euphemisms for the smell of menstruation (Geller 1992, 251).

In racism, sexism, and antisemitism, the habit of smelling the 'other' (and, idiosyncratically, 'not being able to stand their smell') serves as a substitute for the forbidden mixture with the other and worship of nature: one smells in order to absorb the smell of what is labelled as inferior, while at the same time branding it and thus maintaining the taboo. While pleasurable smelling heralds a conciliatory remembrance of one's origins in nature, mocking, malicious, and imitative sniffing turns this awareness into an acceptance that the satisfaction of instincts is not permitted and thus denigrated wherever it occurs (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 56). Schopenhauer called olfaction a sense of memory (cf. Geller 1992, 271), and for Freud, olfaction was related not only to gender but also to the memory of the past (Freud 1999a, 459). Indeed, in antisemitism Jews are viewed not only as 'bearers of smell', but also, especially in post-1945 secondary antisemitism, as bearers of a memory that had to be repressed and denied.

To suppress their own desires while secretly knowing that promised satisfaction will not arrive, antisemites need projection figures that seem external to the narrowly defined self – figures in which the drives are imagined as fully unleashed (cf. Frosh 2023). Jewish sexuality serves as one such projection screen: antisemitism consistently describes it as ambivalent and deviant, where hypersexuality and impotence collapse into a single, contradictory image. These fantasies paint the

Jewish body as deviant and threatening to the norm. The Jewish man appears both hypermasculine and seductive, yet also effeminate, weak, and castrated, in other words: unsoldierly, 'unmanly'. Freud connects this contradiction to a misreading of circumcision. In his view, the practice activates the castration complex:

> The deepest unconscious root of antisemitism lies here: for already in the nursery the boy hears that Jews have something cut off from the penis – he believes a piece of it is missing – and this gives him license to despise the Jew. Moreover, his superiority over women has no deeper unconscious foundation.
>
> *(Freud 1999d, 271)*

In addition to the misinterpretation of circumcision as castration, modern antisemitism ascribed to the male Jew effeminate bodily characteristics like smaller arm span, breasts, menstruation, wide hips, narrow shoulders (Gilman 1993, 57, 162). Gilman explains that against that background, "it is not surprising […] that the Jew is seen as overwhelmingly at risk for being (or becoming) a homosexual" (Gilman 1993, 162). Yet, the male Jew was seen as someone who is neither masculine nor feminine but positioned somewhere in-between or beyond the genders and was thus designed as a counterimage to a soldierly masculinity threatened by decadence. The ideal of the soldierly male, which for a long time was the dominant image of masculinity, remained inaccessible to Jews. Their exclusion from military service also after their political emancipation was legitimated by reference to flat feet, which were said to be more common among Jews than other population groups due to their generally assumed urban and nomadic lifestyle (Günther 2012, 184f; cf. Stichweh 1995, 165). Such antisemitic associations, focussing on feet, have a long historical tradition and can already be found in Christian antisemitism, where the so-called 'Jewish foot' was associated with the devil's foot.

The images of ideal masculinity from which Jews were excluded are shaped not only by Christianity but also by the bourgeois work ethic. As George Mosse (2020) argues, work assumed a central role in defining masculinity at the dawn of the twentieth century. For many nationalist movements, manual labour and physical effort were upheld as the ultimate expressions of manliness. Since Jews were not associated with manual labour, but with commerce and intellectuality – money and mind – they were regarded as unmanly. The Nazi distinction between 'productive' and 'rapacious' capital, associating Aryans with the former and Jews with the latter, also carried the connotation that Jewish masculinity was deficient (see Chapter 7).

Just as antisemitic discourse denied Jewish men hegemonic masculinity, it also portrayed Jewish women as failing to embody the 'natural' female gender character. Antisemites viewed them as materialistic, overly intellectual, cold and calculating, lacking the warmth and empathy they expected of women.

The epitome of this antisemitic and misogynistic conception of Jewish femininity were the images of Judith[2] and Salome,[3] popular in the late nineteenth century

(Brunotte 2014). Contemporary discourse depicted them as women with weapons, phallic women, as lustful, man-killing *femmes fatales* (Dijkstra 1986; Krobb 1993) – a threat to civilisation, unity, and masculinity, and therefore to be killed. The Austrian writer Karl Kraus judged this desire for killing women as follows: "The great revenge has begun, the revenge of a male world that dares to avenge its own guilt" (quoted in Mayer 2001, 141). While in the Old Testament tradition Judith was a model of self-sacrificing heroism, in the capitalist society of the fin de siècle she became a predator who draws her devouring sexual lust and energy from the severed head of her victim. Hans Mayer, Critical Theorist and member of the exiled *Institut für Sozialforschung* in the 1930s in Geneva and France, noted that depictions of Judith evoked

> not admiration for the female heroine, but horror at a monster. These are decidedly anti-female images, painted – depending on the period – as a warning, as a monstrous contrast between femininity and unfeminine qualities, and finally as a coquettish combination of lust and death, sensuality and bloodshed.
>
> *(Mayer 2001, 35)*

These images combine elements of eroticism and destruction, resulting in a profound sense of ambivalence. This ambivalence appears to be most evident in the way imagined Jewishness is projected onto the female figures.

## The Nazis' Sadistic Erasure of Gender

While these images of Jewish femininity, devouring sexuality, and ambiguous eroticism were very popular in Germany and Austria during the fin de siècle era into the 1920s, they did not play such a central role in Nazi propaganda, which concentrated on images of male Jews, particularly in the propaganda magazine *Der Stürmer*. Images of Jewish women and Jewish femininity receded into the background to a certain degree. This can be explained by the fact that femininity in Nazi ideology was reserved to fully represent the Nazi ideal of racial purity. It could thus no longer be connected to Jewishness. Nazi propaganda emphasised images of Aryan femininity as a foil of identification that could be instrumentalised for antisemitism and for the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the extermination of the Jews. Instead of ambiguity, alienness, and otherness, the Nazi image of the woman was characterised by her complete integration into the totalitarian project and mindset. The official image of femininity was correspondingly purged of contradictory elements. What remained was the unerotic, but fertile woman as the pure companion of the 'Aryan' man of steel. Femininity is placed fully under the sign of the obligatory unambiguity (Siegele-Wenschkewitz and Stucklik 1990). Deviant femininity is presented not so much as Jewish, but as seduced by the Jew – the fallen German girl or woman who falls victim to the 'greedy Jew' and becomes a prostitute infected with syphilis.

This erasure of Jewish femininity in propaganda can also be discerned in the Nazi project of extermination itself insofar as it included the erasure of Jewish feminine corporeality and sexuality. This does not mean that gender played no role under

National Socialism. In fact, one might argue that gender becomes particularly apparent in its eradication. The historians Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer elaborate on the specific desexualisation that took place in the Nazi concentration camps, where the bodies of the victims were transformed into amorphous masses. The bodies became gruesomely disfigured caricatures of what they represented to the Nazi regime: sexuality as a promise of happiness that existed beyond the binary principle of Aryan uniformity, and therefore, following this ideology, had to be erased. Through this destruction, the Nazi regime and its stooges celebrated the eradication of bodies and gender and with this also of the promised happiness:

> Shoah's numerous witnesses attest to the erasure of gender as one of the prime instruments of Nazi dehumanization and extermination. As victims are shaved, stripped down or clad in identical striped uniforms, starved, screamed at, beaten, tormented; as they are reduced by the thousands to bodies […]; as they are piled into wagons "like sardines", laid out in mass graves "like herrings"; as their flesh starts crumbling in the ground where they are dumped; as they fall out of gas vans and gas chambers "like potatoes"; as they become a "load", converted, within the space of hours, to ashes – gender, with humanity, gets erased.
>
> *(Hirsch and Spitzer 1993, 4)*

Concentration camp prisoners were counted by body parts and, as Gisèle Guillemot, survivor of Mauthausen concentration camp, recounts, were cynically referred to as "free pieces" by the guards.[4] This objectification reflects a grotesque understanding of freedom. In this context, 'free' means being expelled from the ruling collective. From the perspective of the Nazi ingroup – the 'insiders' and the 'uniformed' – freedom takes on the negative meaning of outlaw or 'fair game'. Concentration camp inmates become material and shapeless masses. The motto of rule, protection in exchange for obedience, no longer applies to them. The "free pieces" are both conspicuous and unprotected, on whom rage is vented without fear or inhibition (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 140).

The treatment of human beings as dead objects in concentration camps is the epitome of a pervasive horror in Nazi society. It is the cruel consequence of the geometric mass marches that were already characterised by mimicry of the dead, a protective shell against all living things (Kracauer 1998, 50–63). Elsewhere, Marianne Hirsch points out that, although rape and sexual abuse occurred in the ghettos and concentration camps, there is "no evidence that the murders [by the *Einsatzgruppen*, K.S.] had a sexual dimension or that the murderers attached any significance to the sexuality of their victims" (Hirsch 2002, 220). In Hirsch's view, rather the opposite was true: the victims were desexualised and degendered, which was a vehicle for dehumanisation. But contrary to Hirsch's interpretation, this violent desexualisation is itself an eminently sexual act. The enforced genderlessness of the victims, whose emaciated bodies reveal only the slightest hint of secondary sexual characteristics, is closely linked to the sexuality of the perpetrators. In a totalitarian system that reduces human beings to mere nature to be mastered and exploited,

sexuality plays an important role exactly in its erasure. Thus, neither the victims nor the perpetrators nor their atrocities can be considered asexual.

In National Socialist concentration camps, human beings are turned into filth, a cruel uniform mush of blood and feces. Jean Grey, a French survivor of the Mauthausen concentration camp, gave the following characterisation of the concentration camp system in an interview: "A concentration camp is shit and blood, that's what it was, and nothing else."[5] The Nazis produced filth, blood, and feces in order to provide a stage for their rejection of nature and of satisfying sexuality, and to portray the Aryan *Volkskörper* as pure and clean. Nothing 'natural' remained in the tormented and tortured human beings; even the boundaries between the sexes were blurred in their emaciated bodies (Zelizer 2001).

As shown in the previous chapter, antisemites always attributed a lack of naturalness to Jews. The Nazis reshaped the world according to their own images and ideologies: they remade the Jews in the likeness of their dehumanised ideal. The very inauthentic, unnatural, and impure state they first created in their victims then provoked, all the more, their rage and hatred. The sadism of those who installed and maintained this system is pre-conceptualised in Marquis de Sade, as Jessica Benjamin points out, as "an attempt to reduce the obstinate otherness of the body to excrement", which involves

> a rebellion against separation. […] De Sade's goal is to transform everything distinct and individual into a uniform heap. And this uniform mass, to which he wishes to reduce all of nature, finds its counterpart in the transformation of everything eaten into the homogeneous mass of feces in the great grinding machine of the intestines. *(Benjamin 1985, 18)*

In *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit examined the sadistic murder of Jewish and emancipated women by fascist and proto-Nazi *Freikorps*[6] soldiers during and after the First World War. The *Flintenweib* (shotgun woman), the armed female resistance fighter, was seen by the soldiers as a monster that had to be eliminated. These murders are linked to the desire to emasculate women and dematerialise them, turning them into a pulp of blood, which according to Theweleit, seems to deliver real satisfaction to the extreme misogynist:

> It's as if two male compulsions were tearing at the women with equal strength. One is trying to push them away, to keep them at arm's length (defense); the other wants to penetrate them, to have them very near. Both compulsions seem to find satisfaction in the act of killing, where the man pushes the woman far away (takes her life), and gets very close to her (penetrates her with a bullet, stab wound, club, etc.). The closeness is made possible by robbing the woman of her identity as an object with concrete dimensions and a unique name. Once she has lost all that and is reduced to a pulp, a shapeless, bloody mass, the man can breathe a sigh of relief. The wound in question here goes beyond castration, in which one can at least still identify the body to which the wound belongs. What

> we are dealing with here is the *dissolution* of the body itself, and of the woman as bodily entity as well as love object.
>
> *(Theweleit 1987, 196)*

As historian Marta Havryshko explains, "the sexual degradation of the Jewish body was an inevitable consequence of the Nazis' dehumanising racial theories" (Havryshko 2020). According to her research, gang rapes of women in front of their relatives and other bystanders were not uncommon during National Socialism, particularly in Ukraine and Russia, sometimes serving to strengthen 'military brotherhood' among Nazi soldiers. The bodies of some of the women who had been raped were also massacred (Havryshko 2020); in other words, their bodies were turned into a pulp that was undifferentiated and no longer provided any remembrance of the victim's gender, identity, or history.

Susannah Heschel also points out that the term sadism, which connects sexual lust and violence, rather than aggression, is appropriate for characterising misogynistic antisemitism:

> Whereas aggression occurs when people struggle to survive, sadism carries no rational (economic, political) goal but seeks pleasure by inflicting pain on others. In that way, sadism is a more appropriate designation than aggression for pogroms and other forms of antisemitic violence that destroy human lives, society, and property without bringing tangible benefit to perpetrators.
>
> *(Heschel 2024, 54)*

The gain that the perpetrators derive from the antisemitic pogrom is primarily of a drive-economic nature, and it increases the more ostentatiously the victim suffers. Therefore, the visible suffering of the victim does not curb the perpetrators' sadistic frenzy but instead intensifies it.

Antisemitic and misogynistic rape is about destroying Jews and women as human beings and as representatives of everything that antisemites hate: freedom, emancipation, and self-determination. "Rape is the essence of unfreedom" (Jamieson Webster, quoted in Heschel 2024, 66).

## 7 October

Numerous historians have compared the terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas and Islamic Jihad against Israel on 7 October 2023 with the National Socialist *Einsatzgruppen*. In Israel, the massacres, which converged antisemitism and misogyny into a murderous conflagration, evoked collective memories of the Holocaust. According to the film and media scholar Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann (2025), different to German collective memory, Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust is not so strictly shaped by the industrial extermination. Just as Auschwitz itself has been seared into memory, so too have the humiliations that preceded it as well as the direct and often sexualised violence. Hamas deliberately sought to evoke precisely this association with their attack on Israel on 7 October. Their masterminds, like Yahia

Sinwar, had studied Israeli society extensively during their time in Israeli prisons and were perfectly aware that Israeli memory, soul, and mind was structured like that.

The significance of the relationship to the body and sexuality cannot be overstated in this context. As numerous reports by investigative commissions have now confirmed, Palestinian terrorists committed multiple acts of Conflict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), primarily against women but also against men. The specificity of CRSV is that it "differs from everyday sexual violence in many aspects. The most important distinction is that it is first and foremost directed against the community as a whole, and not solely (or even necessarily) against the individual victim" (Halperin-Kaddari et al. 2025, 24). The crimes committed on 7 October and thereafter included sexual exposure, kicking the victims' genitals, burning their genital area, penetration with objects, mutilation of the victims' genitals and secondary sexual organs, rape (in some cases so brutal that the victims suffered pelvic bone fractures), gang rape, and murder before, during, and after the rape (Halperin-Kaddari et al. 2025, 24; Maimonides Society 2023). The victims' bodies were found bound, burned, and mutilated (All-Party Parliamentary Group for UK–Israel 2025; Patten 2024). These were not isolated incidents, rape having been "used strategically, executed militarily, and legitimised ideologically and religiously" (Lewitan 2024).

Some of the evidence for the crimes came from the murderers and rapists themselves, who filmed their atrocities with GoPro cameras and mobile phones (some of which belonged to their victims), live streamed them, and distributed the images and videos on social media channels or, in some cases, sent them directly to the victims' families. The historian Irina Astashkevich, who researches sexual violence in antisemitic pogroms, emphasises that turning mass rape into a public spectacle qualifies the intentions behind it as genocidal (Astashkevich 2018, 41; cf. Fuchshuber 2025, 11).

Critical masculinity researcher and social psychologist Rolf Pohl interprets the Hamas atrocities of 7 October as a "destruction of female life" and "the modern version of displaying war trophies to demonstrate one's own strength twice over" (Rolf Pohl 2023). Captured Hamas terrorists testified that they had explicit orders to rape and kill Israeli women (Gettleman et al. 2023; Maimonides Society 2023, 16–50). Videos of the holy warriors show them reciting the Shahada, the Islamic profession of faith, with fervour (Lewitan 2024).

However, according to Rolf Pohl, viewing rape as a weapon in a (holy) war and as the execution of an order does not suffice to explain the rapes of 7 October. This is because the idea that men can "do it" on command reflects a "distorted image of masculinity". For "sexual physiological processes to function", there must also be "a lust associated with fear and hatred" (Rolf Pohl 2023). He therefore places sexuality and gender relations at the centre of his analysis:

> The rapes committed by Hamas are a triple expression of hatred: the victim is Israeli, which represents hatred of the state; the victim is Jewish, which represents antisemitism. Thirdly, the victim is a woman. This third dimension would disappear if sexual violence were viewed solely as a question of power.
>
> *(Rolf Pohl 2023)*

Pohl thus exposes the civilisational entanglement of sexuality and power, showing how rape functions simultaneously as an assertion of dominance *and* a source of sexual gratification for the perpetrator. Similarly, Heschel points out that

> rape is the climax of pogroms, combining sexuality, violence and intimacy in a unique form of sadistic violence against the body and soul. Moreover, mass-perpetrator rape is an attack against women, against Judaism as a religion, and against the Jewish future.
>
> *(Heschel 2024, 66)*

Even if it is important to separate CRSV from individual sadistic sexual pleasure and view the Hamas attack as a concerted act of destruction directed against all Israelis, this distinction should not be absolute for analytical purposes. After all, the attack enabled the jihadists from Gaza to eruptively and legitimately live out their repressed sadistic male fantasies. The men turned their penises into weapons against Jewish and Israeli women, thus fulfilling three needs in an "unbridled lust for humiliating, subjugating and destroying the source of their own desires" (Lewitan 2024). It becomes evident that this has a great deal to do with the repressed sexuality of the rapists and murderers.

Psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi described the penis as "a kind of agent that takes care of the pleasure business for the entire organism" (quoted in Zahner 2024, 134). In a sense, the ego has duplicated itself in the penis, forming a new basis for narcissistic self-love. This fetishisation of the penis is prevalent in patriarchal societies with a strict gender hierarchy based largely on the threat of castration and castration anxiety – that is, on a division between the 'castrated' and the 'non-castrated'. This process involves the "genitalisation of the entire male" and the "impoverishment of all other (not only sexual) bodily processes" (Ferenczi, quoted in Zahner 2024, 135). The male subject's impoverished autonomy is mainly assured through the defence and demarcation of femininity, which classifies women as either pure or impure, mothers or whores. The bodies of both types of women are put at the disposal of men: pure women are veiled and made available solely to their husbands, while impure women are publicly displayed, humiliated, raped, and destroyed. Shani Louk's case is a prime example: Hamas terrorists kidnapped the young woman from the Nova Festival and took her to Gaza. "Louk's dead body was seen thrown onto the back of a van and paraded in Gaza, almost fully naked, surrounded by cheering terrorists" (Halperin-Kaddari et al. 2025, 41). At the time Hamas released the video in the morning of October 7, it was unclear whether she was still alive or had already been murdered.

In the pornographic gaze accompanying this brutal scene, an egregious display of contempt for women becomes visible. With an "obscenely intrusive camera" (Omer-Jackaman 2024), the photographer Ali Mahmud depicted Shani Louk lying on the back of a pickup truck in Gaza, surrounded by terrorists – presumably her murderers and rapists – who placed their boots on her back, spat on her, and clutched her hair. The photograph depicting this scene was named "Photo of the Year" by the Associated Press in 2024, without any acknowledgment of the antisemitic and sexist character

of the scene depicted. The decision to award the prize to this image exemplifies a moment of complicity, revealing an antisemitism and sexism of silence. In an act of profound moral failure, the award transforms a pornographic, sadistic gaze into an ostensibly journalistic achievement, legitimised by the Associated Press as "a recognition of the collaborative effort of a photography staff covering a single topic or news story. […] a narrative picture story that consists of images taken as part of a team effort to cover a single issue or news story" (quoted in Jerusalem Post Staff 2024).

According to Amy Elman, the widespread failure to treat pornography as evidence of harm reflects "the success that men have had in concealing sexual abuse by photographing it". Pornography, in this sense, transforms acts of violence into cultural artifacts, "decontextualizing sexual abuse as assaultive and reconstituting it as 'art', 'speech', 'sex work', and now the 'resistance' of 'freedom fighters'" (Elman 2024, 301). This disturbing nihilism appears in the fact that Hamas's supporters include the former porn actress Mia Khalifa, who, on 7 October, tweeted: "Can someone please tell the freedom fighters in Palestine to flip their phones and film horizontal" (quoted in Elman 2024, 301). As Phylis Chesler observed, feminists ought to have been the first to recognise and object this extreme form of misogyny (Chesler 2024, 293).

The significance of sexuality and the subjugation of women on 7 October becomes even clearer against the backdrop of Islamist ideology, which legitimises the enslavement of women as spoils of war. In 2014, Suad Saleh, an Islamic scholar, professor at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and prominent television preacher, said that Allah permits women to be taken as prisoners of war and humiliated in the fight against the enemies of Islam. They become the property of Muslim men, who are permitted to have sex with them against their will, just as they do with their wives (Saleh 2014). This was clearly demonstrated by ISIS's abduction of Yazidi women to be used as sex slaves. ISIS terrorists used the term *sabaya*, meaning 'female captive'. It can also denote sexual slavery, as in the case of the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls by the Islamic State terrorist organisation in Iraq (Halperin-Kaddari et al. 2025, 41). Audio files of a phone conversation, intercepted by IDF intelligence, between a Hamas officer and a Hamas terrorist (who was also an UNRWA worker), prove that this motive played a role in the Hamas terror attack on 7 October (Halperin-Kaddari et al. 2025, 41). The Hamas militant was recorded sitting in the occupied Nahal Oz military base referring to captured female Israeli soldiers as *sabaya*.

> As the captives were sitting bleeding, beaten, and surrounded by the bodies of their dead colleagues, a Hamas gunman was recorded telling his comrades: "These are the sabaya [...] these are the Zionists", before telling one of the captives in English "you are beautiful".
>
> *(Voller 2024; see also TOI Staff 2024)*

The use of the term *sabaya* reduces the woman to a wholly sexualised object, conveying that her body no longer belongs to her but is instead subject to men's lust, will, and control. However, this seems to be just the epitome of a much more widespread

and common practice of sexualising and subjugating women. As the psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama points out, radical Islamists view women as utterly sexualised objects. Everything about them is completely sexualised: "their bodies, their gaze, their voices, the sound of their footsteps, the clinking of their jewellery, their shadows" (Benslama 2017). Benslama goes on to explain that this imagination of sexuality "breaks the bond with the community" – sexuality being viewed as undermining social cohesion. The reason for this antinomy between sexuality and community might be that, ultimately, a form of sexuality that is not bound to procreation but to desire has an individualising effect that contradicts the idea of the individual dissolving into the community. This is why the woman must be desexualised "by becoming a mother, in other words by her assimilation into the Umma" (Benslama 2017). The desexualisation of women is maintained by splitting their image into two sides: mother and whore, which allows the worship of pure femininity in the form of motherhood and representation of the Muslim community – the Umma – while at the same time the non-procreative sexual desire is turned into brutal sexual violence against those women denigrated as whores. Dividing the image of women into mother and whore allows men a form of drive discharge whose sexual core remains unrecognisable and which does not endanger their belonging to the Umma.

As in the previous chapter on nature, we see here that what seems to bring women closer to nature – sexuality – is, in fact, a means of individualisation and, consequently, a departure from nature. Women as sexual objects are eventually the product of a projection of horror:

> The panic of Islamism in the face of the visibility of the female body in social spaces, coupled with the collapse of the principle of the community of believers at the beginning of the 20th century, led to women being reduced to sexual horror.
> *(Benslama 2017)*

Female sexuality becomes truly terrifying, however, when women desire emancipation and resist the constraining corsets of patriarchal control over their sexuality. This process for which, in antisemitic discourse, Jews and Zionism are consistently held responsible, threatens to undermine Islamic community and is therefore feared and experienced as disempowering – not only by Islamists but also by a significant number of traditional Muslims. Consequently, this sexual anxiety is externalised in order to ensure that women remain available for the maintenance of the Umma. This finds expression in Sayyid Qutb, one of the masterminds of the Muslim Brotherhood, who wrote that "The Jews liberate sensual desires from their restrictions and destroy the moral foundation on which pure faith is based. They do this in order to drag the faith into the filth that they spread in abundance in this world" (quoted in Fuchshuber 2025, 17).

Islamists' ambivalent hatred towards women's bodies is so enormous that they need either to be veiled or destroyed. Veiling is essentially a precautionary measure to avoid destruction. Islamists view women as creatures from hell, as the Abul Baraa, preacher on TikTok and in German mosques, states explicitly: "Most of the inhabitants of hell

are women" (quoted in Kaltenbrunner and Neuhold 2025). He takes his cue from Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph and, in the eyes of Shiites, the legitimate successor to the Prophet, who reportedly said that "woman is entirely evil, but the worst thing about her is that she is absolutely necessary" (quoted in Zahner 2024, 134).

7 October saw a particularly Islamist-misogynistic manifestation of hatred towards women's self-determined sexuality. In Islamic antisemitism, Israeli women in particular serve as a sexual projection screen: "Because they are considered unclean and immoral, it is right for Hamas fighters to rape and murder them" (Lewitan 2024). This essentially reflects the antisemitic and misogynistic trope of the sinful, threatening, emancipated Jewish woman who has the capacity to castrate men, a trope familiar from nineteenth-century European antisemitism.

Hamas's hatred of Jews contains significant sexual elements. Even before the founding of Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine claimed to sense unrestrained sexual orgies in Jewish settlements and carried out attacks on nightclubs, brothels, and cinemas, as these were considered places of "Jewish influence" (Pieczewski-Freimuth 2025, 10). These attacks combined a sexually repressive interpretation of the Qur'an with virulent antisemitism and anti-Western sentiment, thereby exhibiting a connection with "forbidden desire and the desired forbidden" (Küntzel 2003a, 20). In the 7 October rapes, the terrorists sought forbidden satisfaction and at the same time destructive purification. These atrocities "can be understood as a war against the 'doctrine of animalistic sexuality', which Muslim Brotherhood mastermind Qutb agitated against in his pamphlet *Our Struggle with the Jews*" (Fuchshuber 2025, 21) and which he attributed to Freud's psychoanalysis.

The fusion of sexuality and death, also known as "necrophilic sexual lust" (Lewitan 2024), is a central sociopsychological pattern in Islamist antisemitism that is inextricably linked to an Islamist cult of masculinity and death, manifested particularly in hatred of a certain image of the West and its ideals. These ideals include (the desire for) individual freedom, sexual self-determination, gender equality, and the pursuit of personal emancipation and happiness. Hatred of these ideals finds an outlet in the murder of both Jews and emancipated, self-determined women because, in this ideology, they represent the ideals of freedom and happiness that are so loathed. Hamas's antisemitic and misogynistic terror seeks to eradicate the desire for life, freedom, and emancipation. This murderous triumph over life also affects the Islamists themselves, who must use brutal violence against others to reassure themselves of their beliefs.

According to Benslama (2017), jihadism's "thanatopolitics" gears towards the triumph of death, promising a higher life and putting narcissism and the instinct for self-preservation at the service of death. "In jihadist discourse", he observes, "the desire to die or already be dead is a constant theme. After all, if someone is convinced that they are already dead, nothing can happen to them except life in today's world, which they consider shameful".

Hamas's particular concept of death that elevates death to martyrdom not only despises one's own life, but those who live the despised life here and now, who wish to enjoy it and therefore every moment call into question the jihadists' very existence,

are to be destroyed en masse. "That is why even the manner in which the women were raped and mutilated on October 7 seems to correspond closely to the perpetrators' respective antisemitic fantasies, fears, and feelings of hatred" (Fuchshuber 2025, 21). To turn those who don't comply with their restrictive orders, especially the 'shameful' Western 'whores' and their backers, the Jews and Zionists, into a bloody pulp, was also the goal of suicide bombers, who blew themselves up on buses, in cafés, or in nightclubs during the Second Intifada in Israel and in Islamist terror attacks in Europe like the one against the Bataclan in Paris in 2015. They wanted to destroy their victims' existence and identity, corresponding to their own emptiness and meaninglessness. For Islamists, the "imaginary death" they have been ideologically trained to believe in "is so pervasive that real death loses its meaning" (Benslama 2017). This nihilistic apotheosis of death, which is directed against one's own life and that of others, is described by Benslama (2017) as a "melancholic, nihilistic delusion in which the sick person searches for a saving death while simultaneously feeling disembodied, infinite, immortal and superhuman".

As Horkheimer and Adorno have shown in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, antisemitism is not about exploiting Jews for whatever purpose, but eventually about exterminating them. That also showed on 7 October in the murderous attacks on Jewish and female lives. That is why Hamas's sexual atrocities are not only a weapon of war, but an antisemitic and misogynistic act of extermination. They displayed a particular joy of killing, destroying female bodies and turning them into a 'bloody mess', accompanied by the laughter of the killers. That is a common feature to Hamas and the Nazis.

This chapter has traced the constitutive role of sexuality within the intertwined logics of antisemitism and sexism as they unfold across very different historical and social constellations. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the nexus of nature and corporeality remains decisive; here, it reappears as the expression of a necrophilic ideology that underlies the misogynist antisemitism of both Nazi and Islamist formations. Within this ideological constellation, rape and violence against women assume a paradigmatic function: they transform the destruction of the living – especially the female body – into a perverse act of self-affirmation for a subject nihilistically oriented towards death and stripped of life-affirming meaning. What thus emerges is a psychic and ideological economy in which domination culminates in annihilation. The following chapter turns to the contradictory amalgamation of weakness and superiority that simultaneously structures antisemitism and antifeminism and sustains the paranoid irrationality of conspiracy thought.

## Notes

1 The German term "sexuelle Applanation" is uncommon and means a loss of sexual difference, depth, and passion.

2 Judith, a character from the Book of Judith in the Old Testament, was a widow from Bethulia, a Jewish city occupied by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian troops. Judith – fabulously beautiful – goes to the Babylonian camp, seduces the army commander Holofernes, gets him drunk, and beheads him. The Babylonian soldiers flee and the Jewish settlement of Bethulia is saved.

3 Salome's story is based on a legend that is alluded to in the New Testament, but not elaborated upon. She was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. According to the legend, her dancing so enchanted her father (Herod Antipas) that he granted her a wish. Her mother Herodias whispered to Salome that she should ask for the head of John the Baptist. Herod granted her wish and presented her with the Baptist's head on a platter.
4 Bundesministerium für Inneres, Mauthausen Memorial – KZ Gedenkstätte Mauthausen, ZeitzeugInnenprojekt Mauthausen, OH/ZP1/331 Gisèle Guillemot.
5 Bundesministerium für Inneres, Mauthausen Memorial – KZ Gedenkstätte Mauthausen, ZeitzeugInnenprojekt Mauthausen, OH/ZP1/835 Jean Grey.
6 The *Freikorps* was a private paramilitary group which first appeared in the wake of Germany's defeat in the First World War. Many *Freikorps* members later became key functionaries for Hitler's SA and the Nazi regime. In 1919, *Freikorps* members murdered the co-founders of the German Communist Party, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, in Berlin (Theweleit et al. 2025, 68).

# 4

# CONSPIRACY MYTHS IN ANTISEMITISM AND SEXISM

Conspiracy myths have always played a central role in antisemitism throughout its history. They constitute a specific way of explaining the world by reducing the complexity of social relations through personalisation. The 'Jewish world conspiracy' is the archetype of conspiracy ideology, claiming that Jews pull the strings behind the scenes. This chapter analyses antisemitism and misogyny as interlocking forms of conspiratorial thinking that organise modern experiences of crisis through projection and personification. It argues that conspiracy narratives construct Jews and women as paradoxical figures who are imagined as simultaneously weak and omnipotent, vulnerable and dangerously powerful. These contradictions are not accidental but central to the logic of conspiracy ideology: they allow diffuse anxieties about social change, gender relations, sovereignty, and authority to be externalised and channelled into a compensatory pseudo-resolution. The chapter traces how conspiratorial fantasies transform structural conflicts into personalised enemies, from National Socialism to contemporary Islamism. In doing so, it shows how antisemitic and misogynistic conspiracy narratives stabilise authoritarian worldviews by converting social contradictions into myths of hidden domination – culminating in their violent enactment, most starkly visible in the events of 7 October.

## Weak and Omnipotent: Antisemitism, Misogyny, and the Paradox of Power

Antisemitic ideology creates contradictions that seem absurd at first glance. Jews appear as both powerless and all-powerful, foreign and invasive, feminised and hypermasculine. These contradictions are neither accidental nor trivial but serve a psychological and ideological purpose by externalising and displacing the internal

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conflicts and crises of modern subjectivity. Antisemitism takes feelings of powerlessness, guilt, inadequacy or failure and projects them onto a fantasised enemy in a contradictory manner.

Conspiracy narratives sense in both Jews and women a secret power that undermines the unity of the nation, community, religion, and culture. In doing so, they produce a paradoxical overlap of weakness and power – another ambiguity characteristic of both antisemitism and sexism. Modern antisemitism portrays Jews as both weak (mainly because they are said to have a feeble build and therefore do not conform to the ideal of soldierly masculinity and furthermore are allegedly unable to build a nation[1]) and powerful, supposedly conspiring on an international level against national, religious, or cultural communities and undermining them from within. But even though antisemites imagine Jews as omnipotent, they unconsciously know that Jews are not powerful and that one can strike out at them at any time. Only towards the truly powerful do antisemites behave with authoritarian submission and repress rather than manifest their hostility against them (Adorno et al. 2019, 485). This is why the Jews are such a fitting projection screen for the authoritarian personality: feelings of resentment towards the authorities can be acted out in conspiracy myths without consequence, leaving the real authorities untouched. According to Detlev Claussen, "the satisfying aspect of antisemitism lies in its successful combination of rebellion against domination and identification with domination" (Claussen 2000, 47).

The secret but ubiquitous power attributed to Jews does not signify brutal first nature, or strong and authentic nature, but second nature – one that is corrupted by a subversive mind. This is also reflected in antisemitic sexual images: in modern antisemitism from the nineteenth century onwards, Jewish men were imagined not in the first place as brutal rapists, but, due to the bodily weakness and lack of real masculinity ascribed to them, as insidious seducers who buy the favours of 'Aryan' women with money and plunge them into the abyss, thus destroying the 'purity of the people' from within. The power attributed to Jews is not natural, not authentic or legitimate, but subversive and deeply evil. This is why the strange blending of omnipotence and weakness exists in the very same stereotype.

We find a similar overlap in sexism: in the ideology of purity of the blood, women serve as the gateway for contamination – their presumed closeness to nature, sexualised character, and lacking subjectivity makes them weak. They appear unreliable and unsteady, and easily seduced by so-called racially foreign elements. In combination with their reproductive abilities, this gives them a secret power over the racist collective. The image of the 'Jewish white slave trader', who would rob the Aryan people of their women, was a common motif in antisemitic discourse in the 1920s and in National Socialism, particularly in the Nazi propaganda outlet *Der Stürmer*. It contains numerous stories of women and girls who, through 'racial defilement', supposedly plunged themselves and the entire nation into the abyss. Unruly female sexuality played a major role

in this respect – it had to be contained within the National Socialist ideology. In practice, this took the form of forced sterilisation, forced abortion, forced work service, or homes for single mothers. The regulation of female sexuality contradicts the Nazi ideology of sexual permissiveness to a certain extent. Many sex workers and other 'sexual deviants', as well as single, poor, and unemployed mothers, were sent to concentration camps as so-called 'anti-socials' (Rajal 2025a).

That antisemitism intersects with misogyny through the paradoxical attribution of weakness and power was already shown by Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they pointed to the particularly ambiguous character of modern antisemitism (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 88). The most recent and glaring example of this mixing of weakness and superiority in antisemitism and misogyny may arguably be found in its Islamist expression.

Purity associated with femininity is a prominent motif in Islamism. In Articles 17 and 18 of its 1988 charter (Hamas Covenant 1988),[2] the Palestinian terror organisation Hamas emphasises the importance of women in jihad, as they are made responsible for the birth and ideological socialisation of new jihadists. However, Hamas views women as weak and easily influenced. According to the charter, Zionist organisations and their proxies, such as the Freemasons, must be eradicated because they exploit their substantial resources and media influence to manipulate Muslim women through education and information campaigns, films, and school curricula, with the aim of turning them away from Islam. Sayyid Qutb, a major ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas later emerged, also portrayed Judaism as a powerful and cunning sexual aggressor, intent on destroying all boundaries established by Islam. He speaks of a "world Jewry whose purpose is to eliminate all limitations, especially the limitations imposed by faith and religion, so that the Jews may penetrate into body politic of the whole world and then may be free to perpetuate their evil designs" (quoted in Gerdes 2025, 209). The intertwining of antisemitism and sexism, and the combination of threatening scenarios with sexual undertones, is what makes Qutb's conspiracy ideology so appealing.

According to this antisemitic and misogynistic ideology that is also shared by the Iranian Islamist regime, the survival of the Islamic community, the Umma, depends on the destruction of Israel and so-called world Jewry as well as on the strict control of women's sexuality and their lives (Maani 2024; Naghibzadeh 2008). This in turn implies that women are secretly endowed with immense power: as they are the "makers of men" (Hamas Covenant 1988), they are the bearers of the Umma; and they have the power to destroy the Umma through their sexuality and an unislamic way of life. As Benslama (2017) explains, "in these archaic notions of 'we', women represent the intimacy of the community, the point of its vulnerability, the element through which outsiders can penetrate the community and the source of internal disruption that destroys the unity of the body. That is why women are forbidden: they are called harîm".

## From Dhimmitude to Conspiracy

The weakness attributed to the Jews stemmed in particular from the religious dimension of Islamic antisemitism. As the Islamic studies scholar Abdel-Hakim Ourghi (2023) points out, Jews, as followers of an Abrahamic religion, were allowed to practise their religion in Islamic territories of the Ottoman Empire, but only on condition that they accepted *dhimmi* status, i.e., the status of protected monotheist minority. This status meant that they had fewer rights than Muslims, were not allowed to bear arms to defend themselves and their families, had to live in separate districts, were subject to corporal punishment, and had to pay protection money. Jews were second-class citizens, generally treated with contempt and humiliation. They were considered weak and inferior to Muslims, based on the narrative that Muhammad defeated the Jews at the Battle of Medina in 627, killing thousands and enslaving the survivors (Küntzel 2024, 10–13). This tradition is the basis for the assumed superiority over the Jews that characterises Islamic antisemitism. But that also means that early Islamic Jew-hatred lacks the idea of Jewish omnipotence. According to Matthias Küntzel (2024, 12), this is a fundamental difference to Christian antisemitism, which had a basis in the idea that the Jews had murdered Jesus, vic. God, and therefore imagined them to be incredibly powerful. The legend of the murder of God, combined with medieval ritual murder legends, is the Christian forerunner of the secularised antisemitic conspiracy myths of Jewish superpower that flourished in Europe in the nineteenth century and viewed Jews as all-powerful string pullers behind the scenes.

While conspiracy myths were not so prominent in Islamic anti-Judaism, they began to develop by the end of the nineteenth century in the context of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the associated modernisation processes. They fell on fertile ground, for already before modernisation processes took place, significant versions of Islam had associated Jews with all sorts of supposedly evil behaviour: envy, treachery, greed, cowardice, materialism, unrestrained sexuality, and the preference for life in this world to life after death (Becker 2020, 77). With the decline of the Ottoman Empire and its end in 1922, Islamic antisemitism began to identify Jews with the transformations of modernity that were rejected: abstract law, urbanisation, emancipation, and the weakening of the patriarchal gender order (Küntzel 2024). In contemporary Islamism, Israel and Zionism are rejected because they imply individualism, secularism, the emancipation of women and Jews, and the demand for sexual self-determination. These signify modern developments that also took place within the Islamic world but were opposed as un-Islamic and as the result of a Westernisation that must be undone. Emblematic of this is Mohammad Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who in 1936 complained to a journalist about the Jews undermining the Islamic culture:

> The Jews have changed the life of Palestine in such a way that it must inevitably lead to the destruction of our race. […] They have also spread here their customs and usages which are opposed to our religion and to our whole way

> of life. Above all, our youth is being morally shattered. The Jewish girls who run around in shorts demoralize our youths by their mere presence. […] This is foreign to our tradition. And it is dangerous, so radical, almost revolutionary to bring 'the other world' before the eyes of the youth.
>
> *(Quoted in Elbe 2024, 323)*

Historian Ulrike Becker traces how the specifically Islamic variant of conspiracy thinking revolves around a perceived threat to Islamic identity: "A spiritual war by the Jews against Islam was imagined, an undermining of the spiritual and moral foundations of Muslim society" (Becker 2020, 79). Referring to David Nirenberg (2013), she points out that Islam's relationship to Judaism was ambivalent from the beginning: according to Islamic belief, the Jewish Covenant with God contained prophecies about the later appearance of Muhammad. Jews and Christians are accused of falsifying their own scriptures to suppress references to the Prophet Muhammad. In Islamic theology, these accusations are referred to as 'tahrif' (falsification) (Becker 2020, 77; cf. Elbe 2024, 316f.). While the Christian form of supersessionism claims that the new Covenant in Christ had replaced or superseded the Old Covenant with the Jewish people, radical Islamic forms of supersessionism claim that the Jews falsified their own holy scriptures from the beginning in order to erase Islam before it even came into existence. Both forms of appropriation of Judaism's Hebrew Bible need to be viewed as "theological colonialism" (Heschel 2024, 58). The claim that Jews falsify tradition also extends to Jewish history, as seen in the campaign of 'Temple denial', which constitutes an attempt to deny any historical and theological connection between Judaism and Jerusalem. Mohammed Waheeb Al-Husseini, a professor of archaeology from Jordan, claims that: "The Israelis cannot prove to anyone anywhere in the world that they have a historical right to this blessed land. They did not exist in the history of Palestine, and especially not in Jerusalem" (quoted in Küntzel 2023b, 96).

While Islamists accuse Jews of falsifying religion and history, falsification of history entrenched with conspiracy myths is a prominent tool in various forms of Islamism. In his seminal book *Islamism and Islam* (Tibi 2012), the Syrian-German political scientist Bassam Tibi depicts primarily two themes operating in conspiracist modern Islamist antisemitism: the idea of "Islam under siege" and the "idea of a competition over the political order of the world". Islamists claim that Islam is being targeted by a conspiracy orchestrated by Jews and Crusaders. They distort historical events to falsely portray Jews as the initiators of the Crusades, even though Jews, like Muslims, were themselves victims of those invasions. The second idea focusses on the Islamist ambition to establish a new global political system. "Islamists see themselves as competing against the Jews, who they believe are equally poised to shape the world order around Jewish beliefs" (Tibi 2012, 58). Together, these two narratives fuel the perception of a vast, evil force, "the vision of 'cosmic, satanic evil' that underlies Islamist antisemitism" (Tibi 2012, 59).

As in Europe, in the Islamic world the development and adoption of antisemitic conspiracy ideologies coincided with processes of political, economic, and social modernisation. Traditional and religious ways of life became increasingly uncertain due to economic transformation, the growth of urban metropolises, the breakdown of traditional family relations, the beginning of women's emancipation, and the associated weakening of traditional patriarchal gender relations and personal dependencies. An egalitarian, universalist, individualist, and secular spirit also began to develop in the Islamic world at the beginning of the twentieth century, as can be seen in the Persian Constitutional Revolution from 1906 to 1911 (Sanasarian 1982) – and Islamists blamed the Jews. As in Europe, conspiracy myths are therefore an indicator of the transformation of traditional dependencies towards individualism, egalitarianism, secularism, and universal law, a transformation that was not understood by large sections of the Muslim population and not desired by the Islamic rulers. The Jews and Zionism serve as a projection screen.

This is also relevant to the link between antisemitism and misogyny in Islamism. Because Jews and Zionists represent the transformations of modernity, they are also blamed for the dissolution of traditional gender relations, women's emancipation, and the pursuit of individual sexual self-determination. In his 1950 antisemitic propaganda pamphlet *Our Struggle with the Jews*, Sayyid Qutb gives evidence for this link of modern antisemitism and sexism in Islamist ideology: "Behind the doctrine of atheistic materialism was a 'Jew'; behind the doctrine of animalistic sexuality was a Jew; and behind the destruction of the family and the shattering of sacred relationships in society […] was a Jew" (quoted in Bostom 2008, 739). In its charter, Hamas refers to this pamphlet as "very great and very serious" (Hamas Covenant 1988).

In Iran, gender apartheid and the eliminationist hatred of Israel, expressed in the compulsory wearing of the headscarf, form two core pillars of the Islamist Iranian regime's ideology. It is just as unthinkable that the Islamic Republic would recognise Israel as it is that it would abandon the compulsory headscarf (Maani 2024). Islamism categorises emancipation as a Western and Zionist evil that violates the God-given nature of sexuality and gender relations. Its fundamentalist gender regime includes a culture of honour and shame, radically patriarchal family relations, systematic discrimination against women in legal matters, the demonisation of non-heteronormative sexualities, the general subordination of women to men, and strictly gender-segregated social spheres (Alinejad 2018; Benslama 2017; Charlier 2017; Gerdes 2025; Mernissi 1987; Moghissi 1999; Naghibzadeh 2008).

### Reinstating Weakness: Gender, Antisemitism, and 7 October

As in Europe, so too in the Islamic world were Jews for centuries forced into a subordinate status and not permitted to bear arms. They shared this subordinate status with women, who were also forcefully kept in a defenceless position. According

to the basic structure of any patriarchal warrior culture, those who do not fight are not men. The soldierly ideal of masculinity – for centuries the image of hegemonic masculinity – was denied to Jews, and Jewish gender relations seemed to confirm this judgement: Orthodox Jewish men studied the Talmud at home or in the yeshiva, while women ran businesses and were in the public eye (Hartmann 2025). In modernity, particularly with the emergence of the Jewish labour movement and Zionism, these gender images proved to be wrong. Literature scholar Tina Hartmann even argues that it was precisely the lack of a military tradition in Judaism that enabled the early, relatively smooth, and unquestioned integration of women into the Israeli army (Hartmann 2023). Israeli gender relations, with armed women, are an explicit negation of the very weakness that was ascribed to Jews and women alike through centuries. Jewish women as soldiers are therefore a double provocation for Islamists, a narcissistic affront to male supremacy.[3] Within the tradition of domination, whether Christian or Islamic, women who fight are cast only as monsters – figures whose terror is linked to the fear of castration – echoing the already-mentioned nineteenth-century depictions of Judith and Salome (Dijkstra 1986; Mayer 2001) or the *Flintenweib* and Partisan woman (Theweleit 1987). Like fighting Jews, they contradict the supposedly natural order of things (Claussen 1994; Stichweh 1995).

The alleged Jewish-Israeli gender confusion, with women and Jews capable of self-defence, is also an integral part of the Islamist ideology of the Iranian mullahs and Hamas. They therefore see in Jews, and more specifically in Israel, a very concrete danger: the dissolution of traditional Islamic gender relations, which exclude women from public life, confine them to the home, and subject them to the arbitrariness of patriarchal rule. Accordingly, the Iranian mullah regime denigrates the feminist uprising *Woman Life Freedom* in Iran as a Zionist conspiracy against Islamic values and accuses Iranian women fighting for freedom of promoting Western Islamophobia and of being agents of Israel's and the West's conspiracy against Islam (Sahebi 2023). To deviate from the fundamentalist gender apartheid is considered satanic. Hence, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, General Hossein Salami, specifically identified the United States and Israel as the "masterminds behind the unrest" and referred to them as "Satans". The satanic act they committed was the reversal of gender apartheid. Salami explained: "They want to take the hijab away from our women – but the hijab is our trench" (quoted in Hermann 2022). The Islamist ideological foundation of antifeminism and misogyny is at work in antisemitism, when Jews or Israelis are viewed as instigators of unveiling Muslim women. That Israel is denounced as an artificial 'entity' by Islamists, or as a 'cancerous tumour' in the midst of Islamic lands, must also be interpreted against the background of the gender relations that in most parts of Israeli society differ significantly from those in most parts of the surrounding Muslim countries. When Ali Erbaş, president of the Turkish religious authority Diyanet, wrote on X in 2023 that "Israel is a rusty dagger stuck in the heart of the Muslim world" (Güvercin 2023), the image also invokes anxieties about the destabilisation of traditional gender hierarchies, imagined as being endangered by Israel's cultural and political presence in the region.

Generally, antisemitism works with ideas of contamination, with the strength of the Umma depending on not being infiltrated by Jews or Zionists. If the Jews succeed in infiltrating, the result would be cultural, religious, or national downfall. According to this ideology, therefore, Jews must be kept weak so that they cannot use their alleged subversive power against the Islamic Umma or the nationalist ethnic community. This context is essential against the background of the 7 October massacre.

Hamas deliberately targeted civilians with the massacre, aiming to demonstrate ostentatiously that there is nothing and no one capable of protecting them, that they are helplessly exposed to raw violence. The perceived weakness of the Jews had to be reinstated, which helps explain the extreme brutality with which Hamas terrorists acted, including torture, mutilation, and sexual violence. Most effective for the purpose of constructing Jews and women as weak was targeting female soldiers at the Nahal Oz military base through murder, rape, and abduction. And to demonstrate to the world that Jews and women are weak and defenceless, the perpetrators themselves documented and disseminated the atrocities. The genocidal character of these massacres also shows in the multiple traumatisation: to the primary traumatisation of the victims and their family members is added the effect of secondary traumatisation, which can affect all those who belong to the targeted victim group.

> Just as Yazidi women reported after the attacks of the so-called Islamic State, Jewish women worldwide reported shock and anxiety, out-of-body experiences, aversion to physical contact, and a profound sense of insecurity following the Hamas massacre – symptoms characteristic of secondary traumatisation. These effects may result in a lasting disruption of the social structure of the attacked community. *(Schönenbach 2025, 43f.)*

The desire to see Israel and Israelis, and Israeli women in particular, weak, powerless, and helpless became evident not only in the horrible massacre itself but was also apparent in those in the West who have supported Hamas after 7 October. Israeli women as soldiers are seen as a specific narcissistic insult to masculinists. Islamists around the world were thrilled to see that they had been defeated, raped, murdered, and kidnapped by Hamas. Columbia University professor Joseph Massad glorified Hamas for having demonstrated the weakness of Israel. On October 8 he wrote on *Electronic Intifada*:

> The sight of the Palestinian resistance fighters storming Israeli checkpoints separating Gaza from Israel was astounding. Perhaps the major achievement of the resistance in the temporary takeover of these settler-colonies is the death blow to any confidence that Israeli colonists had in their military and its ability to protect them. *(Massad 2023)*

Another example is Bob Vylan, who together with the crowd chanted "Death to the IDF" at the Glastonbury Festival in 2025 (Osuh 2025). This goes far beyond a critique of Israeli warfare in Gaza and seeks to render Israel defenceless. What happens in

the absence of the IDF became obvious on 7 October. Antisemites and sexists want to see Jews and women defenceless, another reason the existence of the State of Israel so infuriates them.

### Antisemitism, Gender, and the Scandal of Israeli Sovereignty

In many antisemitic environments – whether in the West or the Global South – there remains an underlying belief that Jews should be subordinate and powerless, an assumption that often persists beneath the level of conscious awareness. This helps to explain why Jewish rule over Muslims provokes so much more attention and outrage in many parts of academic and public discourse in the West than Muslim rule over Muslims. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims have died at the hands of the Syrian ruler Assad, yet this has provoked just as little protest in the West from academics, activists, and cultural professionals as the rule of the Houthis in Yemen that brutally terrorises Yemenites, Hamas massacring Palestinians in Gaza, or the Islamist regime in Iran oppressing and massacring the Iranian population. Almost no outcry was heard from pro-Palestinian activists over Hamas's killing of political opponents and its terrorising of the Palestinian population after the ceasefire in October 2025. Many would respond to raising these issues that this was Whataboutism. Disguised beneath this combat term lies the attitude that Jewish rule is particularly outrageous and illegitimate: "When Jews want to rule, they are accused of seeking world domination or colonialism", aptly writes Tina Hartmann (2023). Judith Butler takes issue with Jewish rule, which they believe contradicts the Jewish ethic of the diaspora. In contrast, they leave Hamas's rule and claim to power unchallenged and, while criticising the form of violence used, legitimise the claim through one-sided contextualisation (Butler 2023). By doing so, Butler implicitly endorses Hamas's misogynistic and antisemitic death cult. As a pioneer of queer studies and intersectional feminism, their words carry particular weight in the West.

These developments mirror the change of antisemitic stereotypy after the founding of Israel as a nation-state. The image of the weak, effeminate, unsoldierly Jew became less easily deployable considering Israel's military power, particularly after the Six Day War in 1967. Already in the 1948 independence war, when the newly founded state was attacked by neighbouring Arab countries, it became clear that Israel, the nation-state created and defended by Holocaust survivors as well as by Jews who fled pogroms and subordination in the Arab world (Bensoussan 2019; Grigat 2025, 123–132), was not a powerless collective of defenceless weaklings. Hence, alongside and supplementing the stereotype of Jewish unmanly weakness that was effective in antisemitism for centuries, a new image evolved: that of the Israeli male and female soldiers and Zionist pioneers, who undermine the heteronormative gender order. Until the Six Day War of 1967, this new image was also used primarily to serve the defence of guilt after the Shoah in Germany. This narrative suggests that the Israeli as the 'new Jew' emerged from the Shoah as a purified

figure, who had overcome feminisation and weakness, was able to connect with land and soil, and thereby positioned himself for integration into a *völkisch* collective. By drawing a sharp line between the figures of the strong Israeli fighter and the weak diaspora Jew, post-National Socialist societies created a framework that allowed them to identify with the Jew and at the same time not have to fully abandon Nazi ideology. In doing so, they elevated this new figure of the armed Jew to the status of an "exaggerated Aryan", as Frank Stern points out: German mainstream tabloid newspapers like the *Bild-Zeitung*

> celebrated the 1967 Israeli victory over the Egyptian army by referring only to "our boys" in the Middle East. General Moshe Dayan, in effect, fought and won a desert war on behalf of General Rommel. The guilty conscience of the German public gave rise to powerful media imagery – images that did not escape the legacy of National Socialism. These images cast Jews as post-Nazi stereotypes: military heroes, masculine "muscle Jews" guiding the plow, alongside dark-haired beauties with glowing eyes and rifles in hand. These physical ideals echoed and reinforced racialised notions from other long-standing racist traditions. *(Stern 2002, 195)*

Through the celebration of a new, muscular, and self-defending Jewishness, old antisemitic gender stereotypes subtly resurface in a negative form, as if from behind the scenes. The *belle juive* reemerges in an 'Oriental' guise, reimagined within the kibbutz, while the female Israeli soldier is cast as a modern incarnation of Judith bearing arms. This representation of the Jewish woman after Auschwitz turned the notion of monstrous femininity, which artists and writers at the fin de siècle still associated with Jewishness, into something purified from old weak Jewishness.

After the Six Day War, however, this superficially admiring view on Israel increasingly gave way to a form of antizionism[4] which Jean Améry already in 1969 termed "virtuous antisemitism" (Améry 2022). This form of antisemitism became prominent particularly on the left and differed from traditional left antisemitism (which viewed Jews as representatives of global capitalism) in denying the legitimacy of Jewish statehood (Kistenmacher 2025) and sometimes demonising it explicitly or implicitly as reincarnation of National Socialism. The old antisemitic stereotype that Jews were incapable of building a nation and instead embodied a thoroughly anti-national element was transformed into the idea that Jewish statehood was utterly illegitimate, which took place discursively by labelling Israel as a brutal settler colonial state that would illegitimately dispute the territory of an 'authentic' Palestinian people (Bassi 2023). Israel appears as a deficient and illegitimate body politic that does not fit into an emerging postmodern and postnational world (Fine 2009; Fine and Spencer 2018, 111–129). The post-Nazi generations of the German and Austrian left used the image of Israel as a projection screen (Embacher and Reiter 1998; Kistenmacher 2025; Kloke 1992; Kraushaar 2005), allowing them to view themselves as having been purified of brutal nationalism

and the cruel ideal of soldierly masculinity, which had served as a means of identification for hundreds of years. These traits are now projected onto Israel and the Israelis. Once more, Jewish men do not conform to hegemonic masculinity. While Jewish men were considered unsoldierly at a time when military masculinity was the dominant form of masculinity, they are now associated with this very concept of brutal manliness, which no longer represents the normative standard of identification in an era that is supposedly postnational and postmilitary. Female Israeli soldiers, by contrast, are once more cast in the image of the militant Judith armed for battle.

In postcolonial theory, soldierly masculinity has become increasingly associated with the toxic ideals of racism and imperialism (Davis 2016), represented in the Zionist and Israeli soldier, who, through superior weaponry technology, victimised and weakened the Arab man and allegedly stripped him of his authentic masculinity. According to Jasbir Puar, Zionist toxic masculinity turns Palestinians into queer objects of a sexualised, hypernationalist occupation policy (Puar 2007, 1–36; Puar 2013; see also Biskamp 2010; Dhawan 2015; and Hoffner 2025 for critiques). Still, Jews remain coded as both hypersexual and lascivious. The liberal, extravagant lifestyle in Tel Aviv becomes a target for criticism that frames sexual self-determination and individualism as decadent and corrosive. While right-wing extremists and religious fundamentalists (both outside and within Israel) blame Tel Aviv for perversity, moral decay, for dissolving the community, and for a hedonism that centres the individual over the collective, many postcolonial theorists and queer activists in the West denounce Israel's LGBTIQ* culture as hypocritical and inauthentic. Israel's liberal LGBTIQ* policy is not in the first place regarded as a progress for which Israeli LGBTIQ* activists have fought for decades, but rather as a deceiving strategy with which Israel is trying to exploit the homosexual community for its purportedly racist, imperialist, and Islamophobic purposes. Such pinkwashing allegations claim that racist nationalism would seize upon a liberal image and queer discourse and lifestyle, transforming it thus into a homonationalism that portrays Palestinian sexuality as backward (Massad 2007; Puar 2007), or into a femonationalism (Farris 2017) that would falsely portray Islamic gender relations as sexist. Jasbir Puar goes as far as to describe jihadists and suicide bombers as the new queers. Floris Biskamp points out that according to Puar's logic, "the word 'queer' does not refer to individuals who are homosexual, bisexual, transgender or intersex. To be considered as queer, one must be portrayed by the prevailing discourse as sexually intolerable and perverse" (Biskamp 2010). Puar analyses representations of Muslims and radical Islamist terrorists in US media since 9/11 and concludes that Muslims were subjected to the same stereotypes that were previously applied to queer people (see Puar 2007, XII, 14, 76). In her view, the Muslim man in particular was portrayed as the nightmare of sexual deviance, threat, and abnormality. Puar thus profoundly sexualises suicide terrorists, portraying them as a kind of sexual resistance fighters, while claiming that homonationalist discourse portrays jihadists and suicide bombers as being motivated by

perverse sexualities characterised by attributes such as 'contagious', 'associated with death', and 'pathological' – attributes that were commonly used to describe queer people. Hence, the conclusion of Puar's book, *Terrorist Assemblages*, is that Islamist terrorists play the role of queers today (Biskamp 2010). They should therefore be viewed as victims of a Westernised discourse that, in a neocolonial manner, forced gender equality and LGBTIQ* rights upon them, accusing them of sexual backwardness if they did not comply. This victim-perpetrator reversal portrays the Islamist terrorist as infantile and weak, and the Israeli as overpowering through cunning. As Ana Hoffner points out, "the non-discursive sexualisation of the suicide bombers as queer has certainly contributed to misjudging the sexualised violence of Hamas as an act of liberation" (Hoffner 2025, 169).

The picture becomes even more complex when considering that in Islamism, the ideal of brutal and soldierly masculinity remains hegemonic, coupled with a particular ideal of martyrdom, which also has implications for the Islamist construction of Jewish masculinity. Within the Islamist ideal of the male fighter, physical weakness must be projectively denied, and this dynamic shapes the image of the Jew as well. As in National Socialism, the association of Jewishness with bodily weakness appears to play an even more central role here than it does in contemporary Western antisemitic imaginaries. One of the key aims of the 7 October attacks was therefore to 'demonstrate' the supposed defencelessness of Israeli men and their inability to protect their families. These assaults also sought to dismantle notions of gender equality, as armed women are, from an Islamist perspective, seen as a corrupting result of Westernisation and Judaisation: a sign of the feminisation and decline of heroic masculinity. From these perspectives, Jewish weakness serves as a basis for the paranoid imagination of Jewish world conspiracy – because Jews are weak, they incite women's opposition to a patriarchal gender order which Hamas and other Islamist organisations view as a fundamental pillar of the Islamic community – the Umma.[5] In this ideology, Jews turn their weakness into secret power and use, for this aim, their subversive mind, a complex that will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 6. The next chapter will delve more deeply into the subjective and psychic dynamics that sustain the intertwining of weakness and superiority in the figures of Jews and women, who function as particular projection screens through which an otherwise forbidden ambivalence can be lived out.

## Notes

1 For more details, see Chapter 8.

2 Articles 17 and 18 read as follows: "Article Seventeen: The Moslem woman has a role no less important than that of the Moslem man in the battle of liberation. She is the maker of men. Her role in guiding and educating the new generations is great. The enemies have realised the importance of her role. They consider that if they are able to direct and bring her up the way they wish, far from Islam, they would have won the battle. That is why you find them giving these attempts constant attention through information campaigns, films, and the school curriculum, using for that purpose their lackeys who are infiltrated through Zionist organizations under various names and shapes, such

as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, espionage groups and others, which are all nothing more than cells of subversion and saboteurs. These organizations have ample resources that enable them to play their role in societies for the purpose of achieving the Zionist targets and to deepen the concepts that would serve the enemy. These organizations operate in the absence of Islam and its estrangement among its people. The Islamic peoples should perform their role in confronting the conspiracies of these saboteurs. The day Islam is in control of guiding the affairs of life, these organizations, hostile to humanity and Islam, will be obliterated.

"Article Eighteen: Woman in the home of the fighting family, whether she is a mother or a sister, plays the most important role in looking after the family, rearing the children and embuing them with moral values and thoughts derived from Islam. She has to teach them to perform the religious duties in preparation for the role of fighting awaiting them. That is why it is necessary to pay great attention to schools and the curriculum followed in educating Moslem girls, so that they would grow up to be good mothers, aware of their role in the battle of liberation.

"She has to be of sufficient knowledge and understanding where the performance of housekeeping matters are concerned, because economy and avoidance of waste of the family budget, is one of the requirements for the ability to continue moving forward in the difficult conditions surrounding us. She should put before her eyes the fact that the money available to her is just like blood which should never flow except through the veins so that both children and grown-ups could continue to live" (Hamas Covenant 1988).

In the revised version of the Hamas Charter from 2017, the role of women is still mentioned but the details are left out. Article 34 says "The role of Palestinian women is fundamental in the process of building the present and the future, just as it has always been in the process of making Palestinian history. It is a pivotal role in the project of resistance, liberation and building the political system" (Center for Israel Education 2017).

3 Already in the fight against the Islamic State, it became clear that Islamist terrorists were afraid of being defeated by Kurdish female fighters, since death at the hands of women would deny them martyr status (Dirik 2015; Tank 2017).

4 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, 22).

5 For more details, see the section "Antinationalism and Gender: Islamic Umma and National Socialist Volksgemeinschaft" in Chapter 8.

# 5

# INTOLERANCE OF AMBIGUITY

## A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

As shown in the previous chapter, the ideological entanglement of weakness and superiority in images of Jews and women functions as a key device within conspiracy narratives. Against that background, this chapter turns to the psychodynamics that make these narratives emotionally compelling. It argues that antisemitism and misogyny do not merely add ideological content to political movements, but beyond that provide a distorted mechanism of psychic regulation in contexts where authority relations, family structures, and sexual norms generate unresolved ambivalence. Building on the empirical studies *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 2019) and on psychoanalytic work on patriarchal and Islamist socialisation, this chapter traces how conflicts around paternal authority, maternal power, and the ambivalence conflict are managed through splitting, projection, and authoritarian rebellion. These mechanisms help to explain why authoritarian subjects oscillate between worship of strength and hatred of weakness, why rigid gender binarism becomes a privileged defence against doubt and complexity, and why the 'Jew' can function as a uniquely overdetermined projection screen onto which otherwise prohibited hostility towards authority – and towards women – can be redirected.

### Authority, Family, and the Ambivalence Conflict

According to German-Iranian psychoanalyst Mahrokh Charlier, strict gender segregation in patriarchal societies creates an environment in which associations of weakness and superiority are intertwined and projected onto women in contradictory ways. She sees this relationship as being particularly pronounced in Islamist communities, where there is a strict division of living space into a public world for men and a private world for women, which results in a devaluation of women

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and the massive restriction of their autonomy and agency. Due to the segregation of spaces, however, "the culturally devalued woman becomes a powerful, almost sole object of the child's primary socialisation" (Charlier 2017, 43). The father's authority is absolute but remains abstract and unattainable due to his absence during the child's early years. This may lead the man to develop a hatred of women in adulthood, a phenomenon that Charlier considers to be "a reversal of the early childhood experience of an omnipresent and domineering mother" (Charlier 2017, 43). Since the mother's power is restricted to the private sphere and has no counterpart in the world outside the family, the child may consider it a lie, artificial, and presumptuous. This constellation of weakness and dominance becomes particularly significant for the boy. The contradiction of the mother asserting power over him while being utterly powerless outside of their mother-child relationship stems from social gender relations. The adolescent boy may draw a pernicious logic from this contradiction and think that "only in the world of men can he find protection from the devalued woman as mother on the one hand, and from the intrusive-seductive mother as woman on the other" (Charlier 2017, 47). Within this dynamic, the contradictory figure of the Jew as weak and omnipotent becomes a particularly useful projection screen. As will be shown in this chapter, the hatred of women and Jews involves a displaced rebellion against the father, who stays abstract. Repressed feelings of hatred towards the father are redirected onto Jews as substitute figures.

In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and Else Frenkel-Brunswik (Adorno et al. 2019) highlighted the significance of the contradictory blending of weakness and superiority in antisemitism and sexism. This combination gives rise to ambivalence – the simultaneous experience of attraction and repulsion, love and hate – which is not permitted in relation to paternal authority. In the authoritarian character, the admiration of power and the contempt of helplessness are mutually dependent (Fromm 1987, 116). The attitude towards weakness proved to be a significant marker of authoritarianism and antisemitism: while weakness became the focus of hatred for those who were prejudiced, study participants who identified as Jewish or were less prejudiced were largely unmoved by or even open to weakness. Explicit opposition to antisemitism could even lead to identification with weakness. People with strong prejudices tended to refer to supposed Jewish superiority, influence, and wealth in their antisemitic statements; however, on an unconscious level, they were motivated by a hatred of weakness (Adorno et al. 2019, 639). Their desperate identification with strength and power goes hand in hand with anger towards anything that appears weak and cannot defend itself. Weakness and suffering appear as an insult to the ideal of strength. During the early years of National Socialism in Germany, young Nazis beat up Jews in the street, claiming that their victims' lack of resistance was provocative (Berliner 1993, 102). Attacking defenceless people is taboo in civilised society, and breaking this taboo arouses lust (Freud 1999e, 43). "A creature which has fallen attracts predators", write Horkheimer and Adorno on sadism, "humiliation of those already visited by

misfortune brings the keenest pleasure" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 88). The dominance and superiority that in different ways is ascribed to Jews and women, while still portraying them as weak, serve as a pretext for launching attacks against them – the assault becomes a psychological outlet through which the aggression built up by an unresolved conflict of ambivalence can be released.

The 1930s studies on *Authority and the Family* (Horkheimer et al. 1987) and the 1940s *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 2019) highlighted the significance of unresolved ambivalence conflicts from childhood for the development of authoritarianism. These works identify the outcome of the Oedipus complex as a key intrapsychic component in the emergence of antisemitism and authoritarianism. The difficult task for the individual in early childhood, to transform hatred of the father into love and reverence, is never fully successful. Adorno explains that "in the psychodynamics of the 'authoritarian character', part of the preceding aggressiveness is absorbed and turned into masochism, while another part is left over as sadism, which seeks an outlet" (Adorno et al. 2019, 759). The early childhood ambivalence conflict does not take place in a social and cultural vacuum but is situated within an antisemitic and sexist society. Hence, due to the long-standing tradition of antisemitism, "The Jew frequently becomes a substitute for the hated father, often assuming, on a fantasy level, the very same qualities against which the subject revolted in the father, such as being practical, cold, domineering, and even a sexual rival" (Adorno et al. 2019, 759).

This allows for far-reaching conclusions about the constitution of the ego and the superego taking place in the dynamic of identification and introjection in the relevant authoritarian personalities. As Erich Fromm elaborated, the Oedipal conflict between affection and rivalry remains unresolved, and the child does not assimilate paternal commands and prohibitions through identification, but only through introjection (Fromm 1987, 82). As a result, the child does not assimilate them as personal convictions open to reflection, reinterpretation, or rejection, but instead endures and experiences them as an alien authority. The ego remains weak, passive, and separated from the superego, which in turn takes on a rigid and inflexible form and strongly asserts itself over the ego; nevertheless, it does so on the basis of weakness and through its necessary linkage to external authorities. This dynamic obstructs the development of an independent capacity for moral judgement, as well as the formation of ideals and values. According to Fromm, this constitutes the psychic foundation of the authoritarian personality, which continually searches for external authorities and for those to blame. This is where the significance of the Jews, and later of Israel as a symbol for the 'collective Jew', emerges as the projection surface upon which the Oedipus conflict is endlessly repeated but never resolved. As Rudolph Loewenstein put it in 1952: "The Jews become the unconscious symbol of the Oedipus complex" (quoted in Fuchshuber 2025, 17).

Thus, antisemitism specifically allows ambivalence towards the father to remain unreflected. The subject splits this ambivalence in two: the hatred and feelings of displeasure are redirected to an external object in order to preserve the global,

unexamined introjection of the father's authority. Prejudiced individuals lack adequate strategies for consciously confronting or tolerating ambivalence. They remain trapped in infantile dependence on primary authority figures, failing to resolve this dependency through identification and reflection. Instead, they project what should be internalised onto the outside world (Grunberger 1962, 268).

The displacement of feelings of displeasure and hatred from their original source onto socially accepted substitute figures, such as the Jew, allows the antisemites to revere their parents, towards whom they actually harbour ambivalent feelings of hate and love, as 'wonderful people', without needing to engage in critical reflection either on the power imbalance between them and their parents or on the social structures of authority. *The Authoritarian Personality* describes this character disposition as "authoritarian submissiveness" (Adorno et al. 2019, 675) – a psychological strategy to manage ambivalent feelings towards authority figures. Consequently, in the famous F-Scale developed in *The Authoritarian Personality,*[1] the statements that proved especially accurate were those that revealed the inability to reflect on ambivalence towards one's parents or to integrate it into one's own attitude towards them, for example: "There is hardly anything lower than a person who does not feel great love, gratitude, and respect for his parents" (Adorno et al. 2019, 248). Fromm (1987) described the authoritarian character as a sadomasochistically structured type who not only submits to powerful authorities out of fear, but also experiences this submission as gratifying. The rigid defensive structure of this character drives them both towards aggressive conformity and towards passive self-abnegation. The remaining and resulting discomfort is discharged through authoritarian rebellion – a rebellion directed against surrogates while leaving authority itself intact. For this reason, *The Authoritarian Personality* speaks of a dynamic interrelation between authoritarian rebellion and authoritarian submissiveness.

The rigid resistance to criticising authority figures, or to acknowledging their contradictions, proves to be both persistent and cross-cultural. Islamism constitutes a contemporary form of authoritarianism in which the interweaving of self-victimisation and self-heroisation becomes especially pronounced. It also operates consistently through antisemitism and misogyny. Psychoanalytic research on Islamism as a particular form of authoritarianism has focussed primarily on male development (Benslama 2017; Charlier 2017; Jiko 2007). Psychoanalyst Charlier reports from her clinical experience: "In my clinical work with men from Islamic cultural backgrounds, I encountered explicit criticism of fathers extremely rarely. In most cases, they were shrouded in empty idealisations and treated as untouchable" (Charlier 2017, 75). According to Charlier, the underlying motivation for avoiding confrontation with the ambivalent and conflict-laden relationship with the father lies in the impulse to escape acting on death wishes towards the father and to preserve his love (Charlier 2017, 73). This leads to a defence mechanism she calls "global identification", i.e., an uncritical and total identification with the father, who is imagined as free from all contradiction. As a result, the father no longer serves as a frictional figure necessary for the development of individual identity. Instead of developing

genuine intersubjectivity, the (adolescent) boy's identification with the father remains superficial and abstract and cannot be integrated into the self.

The Oedipal dynamic refers not only to paternal authority but also to the role of the mother and the early childhood relationship with her. The Oedipus conflict unfolds within a patriarchally structured society and is rooted in the contradiction between the father's two Oedipal commands to the child (in Freud, primarily the son): on the one hand, the command *not to be* like the father who asserts his sexual monopoly and forbids the son from desiring the mother sexually, i.e., the incest taboo; on the other hand, the command *to be* like the father, which installs him as the primary figure of identification in the son's emotional life and encourages the child to maintain his fantasy of the father's omnipotence (Freud 1999g, 264). Jessica Benjamin emphasises that, under these patriarchal conditions, in which women are constantly denigrated, the son clings only to the father's omnipotence, while he must give up that of the mother (Benjamin 1982, 435f.).

To give up the identification with the mother's omnipotence occurs through disappointment, namely, the recognition of her societal inferiority. The mother, who had until then been perceived as omnipotent, is now 'recognised' as someone stripped of power, marked by weakness, and (symbolically) castrated. If the Oedipus complex is not adequately processed but instead repressed, the deeply painful ambivalence towards the mother, who is experienced as overpowering yet occupying a much more powerless position, can grow into anger, hatred, and contempt. As Max Horkheimer writes in *Authoritarianism and the Family Today*, the son "senses the ambivalence in her official exaltation and looks upon her as a member of an inferior race" (Horkheimer 1949, 370).

This contempt for the mother remains just as unconscious as the hatred towards the father and must therefore be acted out in generalised form, by extending the rejection to all women, attributing to them, by virtue of their gender, a devouring, destructive power while simultaneously casting them as inferior. In patriarchal societies, woman becomes the object onto which the unresolved ambivalence conflict can be acted out without punishment and with social sanction. She is made to suffer once again for her subordinate status in society.

According to Charlier, this dynamic intensifies in Islamic societies, where strict gender segregation into sealed-off spheres is particularly pronounced and has profound effects on the ability, or inability, to tolerate ambivalence rather than split it off. In these societies, early-childhood splitting of the mother into an idealised and a devouring object is reinforced and solidified by socio-religious mechanisms such as strict gender segregation. As a result, ambivalent feelings towards women remain unprocessed and dissociated (Charlier 2017, 47). As the father plays a minimal role in the mother-dominated early childhood education, he is perceived as largely absent from the early mother-son relationship (Mernissi 1994). He therefore does not function as a prohibiting or regulating figure, which, in turn, prevents the very Oedipal confrontation which Freud had seen as precondition for a mature ego development. As a result, the development of an internalised superego

is weakened. Instead, the paternal image remains abstract and idealised, stabilised through a patriarchal bond that promises power and belonging based on masculinistic gender identity (Charlier 2017, 48).

The lingering incestuous desires are collectively rejected by projecting them outward. For this purpose, the construction of the Umma, conceived as the worldwide community of Muslims, serves a functional role. Like a family, all Muslims worldwide are supposed to view one another as brothers, sisters, mothers, or fathers. This structure entails "a socialisation of the incest taboo", as Charlier (2017, 49) puts it. One could also say that the incest taboo is turned towards all Muslims worldwide, so it is universalised, in order to maintain the Umma. In this dynamic lies, in a sense, the repressed desire directed towards the mother or other family members, though the incestuous nature of this desire can be rendered unrecognisable. The incestuous and erotic elements thus disappear from conscious experience and are no longer projected onto others, yet they persist unconsciously within the notion of love for all Muslim brothers and sisters. Within this framework, even looking at a woman already violates the universalised incest taboo. "This suggests that individuals do not internalise the incest taboo; instead, they rely on a social defence mechanism to regulate these desires" (Charlier, 2017, 49). One of these defence mechanisms that help to maintain a coercive unambiguity is the strict gender segregation, both ideologically and in practice, and the veiling of women in public (Mernissi 1994). Any softening of the strictly binary gender principle would imply a threat to the Umma. The extreme sexualisation of the female body, coupled with an inability to address sexuality based on mutual respect and self-determination, results in the relationships to women being compulsively desexualised and reduced to the role of mother. According to Benslama (2017), this restrictive gender regime is a prerequisite for maintaining the Umma, which makes an autonomous female identity impossible:

> The principle of the community assumes that within it, the sexual relationship does not exist. As long as the woman is not a mother, the circle of the community is in danger of falling apart. Through motherhood, it stitches itself back together or seals itself off again. Femininity is therefore heterogeneous to the community; it is the site of its abyss.
>
> *(Benslama 2017)*

Psychoanalyst Jad Jiko describes how fundamentalist but also traditional forms of Islam idealise genital sexuality and understand it as a reflection of divine sexuality. This notion appears most clearly in the fantasies of paradise, which centrally feature the idea of union with heavenly virgins (*houris*). According to Jiko's interpretation, such idealisations psychologically serve to compensate for a gap in identification with the real father, to maintain a narcissistic attachment to the mother, and to deny sexual reality (Jiko 2007, 1146). This denial of sexual reality particularly affects sexualities that deviate from the heteronormative and genital ideal, as well as female self-determined sexuality. The idealisation of instinctual drive, Jiko argues, impairs

the extent to which the incest taboo is internalised and the drives are sublimated. This dynamic leads to "the promise of a divine sex" and to "the instrumentalisation of individual desire" (Jiko 2007, 1147). Real sex experienced here and now can never live up to this divine ideal. It is therefore devalued. So are women and homosexuals.

For Jiko, this has far-reaching political implications:

> I would like, with all due caution, to raise the question of whether this unconscious process of idealisation, which restricts the development of sexual identity and thereby the emergence of subjectivity, might be one of the reasons why Islamic societies have not yet succeeded in achieving a paradigmatic separation between human and God, or between state and religion.
>
> *(Jiko 2007, 1152)*[2]

Given that countries such as Turkey after the First World War, Egypt under Nasser, or Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 had developed secular forms of statehood, Jiko's assessment appears somewhat sweeping and lacking in historical nuance. While the psychological elements are undoubtedly important, Islamism is still to a significant extent an invented tradition formulated in reaction to modernity, and one that remains politically contested.

It is true, however, that these invented traditions of Islamism strongly rely on a strict societal regulation of sexuality, including gender segregation, male bonding, homophobia, and misogyny – a complex that offers a distorted resolution to the ambivalence conflict. So does antisemitism. Within this dynamic, the 'Jew' serves not only as a substitute for the Oedipal father but also as a projection surface for the broader issues of the Oedipus complex, including the power of the mother that is denied, regarded illegitimate and a lie. The figure of the Jew thus becomes a personalised abstraction of this multilayered and contradictory process. As a result, the Jew symbolically takes on not only paternal traits but also maternal aspects of this constellation, including the fantasy of the phallic mother – hence the inherently contradictory nature of the antisemitic image of the Jew as hypermasculine and yet effeminate, as represented in the image of the Jew as seducer.

Alongside traits typically associated with the father, such as detachment, realism, rationality, and domination, the Jew also embodies qualities conventionally and negatively associated with femininity and motherhood, such as weakness, dependency, passivity, and submission. This contradiction is evident in the antisemitic belief that circumcision leaves Jews castrated and phallic at the same time (cf. Grunberger 1962, 270). The fusion of paternal and maternal imagos into a single substitute figure allows for a dual enactment of the unresolved Oedipal conflict. Hostile impulses towards both sides can be projected onto one figure, the Jew: against the paternal side for its insurmountable authority, which 'feminises' and leaves the child powerless, and against the maternal side for its weakness and submission to paternal command, which the child experiences as betrayal and deeply wounding.

The inability to tolerate ambivalence is central to antisemitism and sexism, and to the connection between the two ideologies. The repressive enactment of this

intolerable ambivalence in antisemitism is reinforced by the contradictory nature of the image of the Jew. As outlined in the preceding chapters, this image merges opposites: nature and anti-nature, masculinity and femininity, strength and weakness, foreignness and familiarity. Antisemitic imagery is thus constructed in a way that transgresses rigid dichotomies. These images contain a hidden, infantile fantasy of an undivided unity of opposites – yet they appear so distorted that the wish-image turns into a horror-image, into a monster.

## 'Patriarchy Without Father': From National Socialism to Islamism

The distorted 'resolution' of the ambivalence conflict has grave consequences. Charlier describes how the intense emotional tension between repressed aggressive impulses, which are caused by unreflected, global, and abstract processes of identification, on the one hand, and a deep need for love and recognition on the other, can lead a boy, in extreme cases, to a willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of his father or in hopes of earning his father's affection and pride. This dynamic is especially evident in the myth of martyrdom and heroic death as expressions of male identity, religious loyalty, and submissive devotion, which in the extreme can lead to self- or other-destruction, interpreted as a sign of love, honour, and pride (Charlier 2017, 74).

This became terribly clear during a phone call on 7 October, made by a terrorist who attacked Kibbutz Mefalsim to his parents in Gaza.[3] In sheer bloodlust, he boasted that he had killed ten Jews with his own hands, and that he was calling from the mobile phone of a Jewish woman he had killed alongside her family. He told his parents to open WhatsApp immediately and look at the pictures of the Jews he had murdered. "Mom, your son is a hero!", he screamed. The parents seemed confused and asked their son again and again where he was, repeatedly saying "Allahu Akbar" and "God protect you", while the son aggressively shouted that they should be proud of him, repeating that he had murdered ten Jews with his bare hands and ordering them to look at WhatsApp immediately. When his father told him to return to Gaza and said that it was enough, he shouted into the phone: "What do you mean come back? There is no going back? It's either death or victory. My mother gave birth to me for the religion, Allah. What's wrong with you, Allah? How will I return?" We can hear the mother crying in the background and asking the son to come back (Jerusalem Post Staff 2023).

The son's reaction of outright rage when urged by his father to return can be used as a starting point for further reflection on the development of extreme authoritarianism. At this point, one must question whether the father's authority still operates, or whether the Islamist collective has absorbed it in order to exercise it directly. Adorno already described this shift of authority from the father to the collective as characteristic of the authoritarian personality in late modernity, and especially of the fascist type: the "replacement of father and mother imagos by the immediate power of society" (Adorno 2004, 454).

Where the collective asserts direct authority, even the father must cede to the son, provided the son fully identifies with the collective in power. And the son reveres the father only insofar as the latter conforms the abstract ideal of authority. Under National Socialism, patriarchal power was questioned to the extent that National Socialist organisations, such as the Hitler Youth, circumvented paternal authority and exercised direct authority over boys and girls. This constituted a profound weakening of the father's position within the family. Against that background, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm argued in their 1936 studies on *Authority and the Family* (Horkheimer et al. 1987) that the erosion of paternal authority did not diminish authoritarianism; rather, it intensified authoritarian tendencies at the collective level. A central function of the Hitler Youth was to bind children and adolescents irrevocably to the National Socialist collective and to shape them in such a way that they would surveil and potentially denounce their own parents. The Islamist community, in which everyone shall be brother or sister, mirrors the fascist collective in that it dissolves the immediate authority relationship between father and son. This void is replaced by an abstract yet intensely felt authoritarianism of the collective over individuals, who may fail to find personal fulfilment in it but nonetheless join with heightened enthusiasm.

While the individual as central concept of Western bourgeois psychology lost validity in National Socialism, the Islamist collective has never accepted this concept and rejected it right away, viewing individualism as a Western threat to Islamic ways of life. What Adorno wrote about the new authoritarian type applies fully to the Islamist: "The unity, continuity, and substance of the individual have been dissolved. […] The current type is truly regressive in the sense of a depersonalization that falls far behind the stage of Western history" (Adorno 2004, 453). The Oedipus complex no longer develops, yet the underlying ambivalence persists and continues to exert its influence unconsciously and without inhibition. Intolerant towards inner contradictions, this type never achieves a unified self. Stability comes only from external authorities, not from within. These ego-lacking individuals can no longer be understood through traditional psychology. According to Adorno, the psychoanalytical concept of repression no longer applies. What he observed in the individual shaped by the mass society of his time appears in fully developed form in the National Socialist, and later in the Islamist: within the crowd, individuals abandon personal repression, and the unconscious is effectively suspended, as people are fully aware of their actions and display their sadism openly and without inhibition. Both Nazi perpetrators and Hamas terrorists documented themselves committing atrocities and boasted about them.

In place of repression and its censoring function, Adorno identified "defiance and universal hostility" (Adorno 2004, 454), or "loving to hate" (Rensmann 2017, 65; Ourghi 2025). The defiance targets old authorities that might still set limits – as seen in the son's triumphant defiance of his father in the phone call referenced above. The universal hostility is directed at Jews, onto whom the son's defiance of the father or of authority in general can also be projected. The resolution of the

ambivalence conflict remains bound to the ideal of a coherent ego, which, however, has always been a normative ideal rather than reality, an ideal that bourgeois society develops and blocks at the same time through manifold inequalities and exclusions. The further society weakens or fails to form the structures needed for a coherent ego, the more distant any resolution becomes (Fuchshuber 2024, 101f.).

This shows that the authoritarian character does not emerge exclusively from patriarchal forms of socialisation defined by the ideal of paternal power and violence. Today, the authoritarian character does not primarily idolise the father as a person but rather glorifies strength and violence as such – qualities historically embodied by the father. An openly rejecting attitude towards the father does not contradict the authoritarian character; rather, it can reflect ambivalence towards weakness and strength, as illustrated by the reaction of the Islamist terrorist who reprimands his father, or in the Hitler Youth members who represented the National Socialist reality principle within many families.

In the studies in *Authority and the Family,* Horkheimer et al. (1987) elaborated on the paradox that after the First World War, vanishing paternal authority did not automatically lead to a surplus of freedom but, to the contrary, gave way to an escalation of authoritarianism on the social and political level, demonstrating that National Socialism did not rely on paternal authority, but rather on its decline. While the authority represented by the father was still tied to him as a concrete person with whom one could perhaps negotiate or even struggle, the authority that emanates from the collective is abstract, impenetrable, and leaves no way out. In response to this analysis, Alexander Mitscherlich spoke of a "fatherless society" (1971). However, this development did not dissolve the Oedipal conflict; on the contrary, it intensified its destructive aspects (cf. Marcuse 1990). This is why Jessica Benjamin (1978, 36) refers to a "patriarchy without the father": the superego no longer forms through a living, interpersonal relationship with a concrete father figure, but instead aligns itself directly with whichever societal authority appears strongest. In this process, the superego functions as the unmediated extension of the collective.

This dynamic corresponds to the psychosocial profiles of individuals who are particularly susceptible to Islamism in Western societies. Such individuals often have a highly fragile self-image, experience profound feelings of humiliation, and come from family environments marked by violence, rejection, or neglect. They exhibit a strong need to belong and are unable to separate from their parents in a healthy way – a sign of the unresolved ambivalence conflicts. This constellation of injury, insecurity, neglect, and the search for affiliation is not limited to Muslim families; it can also be found among individuals from non-Muslim backgrounds, which may explain the appeal of Islamism to non-Muslims and the high number of converted ISIS fighters from Europe. As the German author and journalist Sineb El-Masrar points out, these dynamics affect both women and men (Ströhlein and el-Masrar 2024, 5). She also describes the phenomenon that children, influenced by social media, explicitly reproach their parents for having failed to teach them the

'correct' religion. These reproaches concern prayer practices, forms of veiling, the growing of beards, and numerous other seemingly minor details.

> In this way, Islamism spreads within families. While much attention is paid to the legacy of colonialism, a form of colonisation takes place within families themselves, as Islamist ideology occupies family structures and dictates what is presented as the only legitimate interpretation of the Qur'an.
>
> *(Ströhlein and el-Masrar 2024, 5)*

The Frankfurt School theorists analysed the loss of paternal authority in the fascist brotherhood, where authority became generalised and absolute, no longer subject to the humanising limits of interpersonal relationships. Only after the decline of strict patriarchal power could the totalitarian fascist collective assert itself, demanding unconditional obedience (Benjamin 1978, 36; Horkheimer 2014, 342). According to Jessica Benjamin, this "patriarchy without a father" represents a "new form of rationality" and must be understood as a historical continuation of male domination, even in its depersonalised and opaque form (Benjamin 1982, 430f.).

This fatherless form of patriarchy also implies the weakening of the family. National Socialism demonstrated this clearly: it redirected the Oedipal revolt against the mediating institution of the family, which had previously offered subjects a (limited) space for individual development and protection from the direct grip of societal authorities (cf. Freud Loewenstein 1993, 83).

In *Authoritarianism and the Family Today* (1949), Max Horkheimer described the family's contradictory role in National Socialism as follows:

> Whereas the family, as an ideology, works in favor of repressive authoritarianism, it becomes manifest that the family, as a reality, is also the most profound and effective counter-agency against that relapse into barbarism. […] Although they [National Socialists, K.S.] exalted the family in ideology as indispensable to a society based on the 'blood' principle, in reality they suspected and attacked the family as a shelter against mass society. They looked on it as a virtual conspiracy against the totalitarian state.
>
> *(Horkheimer 1949, 373f.)*

The instrumentalisation of the family for ideological reasons is also evident in Islamism, where the family is neither an end in itself nor meant as a resource for individualisation, but primarily serves the Umma or caliphate. Neither National Socialism nor Islamism can be fully understood without considering the contradictory role of the family: its collapse in the authoritarian collective with simultaneous ideological exaltation.

## Pseudomasculinity and Pseudofemininity: The Defence of Ambivalence and Doubt

The *strict* binary division of the genders, which allows for no transitions and reduces male and female to two clearly opposed poles that are rigidly separated from each other, reflects a Manichean mode of thinking – one that divides the world into

unequivocal categories of good and evil and finds security in this rigid order. As has already become clear, this heteronormative gender order plays a crucial role in both National Socialist and Islamist authoritarianism, as well as in the antisemitism associated with them. In both, strict gender binarity functions as a guarantor of repressive ambivalence denial and suffocates everything under the weight of unambiguity and definiteness.

Manichean thinking is the epitome of stereotypy, described in *The Authoritarian Personality* as "the tendency to subsume things under rigid categories" (Adorno et al. 2019, 44). One major characteristic of stereotypy is its artificial unambiguousness and denial of real contradictions. Before she co-authored *The Authoritarian Personality*, Else Frenkel-Brunswik had already elaborated on the authoritarian individual's inability to deal with the multifaceted ambiguities of the real world (Frenkel-Brunswik 1942). She collected evidence that people who are intolerant towards ambiguity also show "a reluctance to think in terms of probabilities and a preference to escape into whatever seems definite and therefore safe" (Frenkel-Brunswik 1974, 81). She viewed the denial of ambiguity within society as deeply connected with the suppression of emotional ambivalence: "Too much existing emotional ambiguity and ambivalence are counteracted by denial and intolerance of cognitive ambiguity. It is as if everything would go to pieces if the existing discrepancies were faced" (Frenkel-Brunswik 1974, 84). Hence, the way people deal with emotional and cognitive ambivalence turned out to be a strong indicator of authoritarianism.

Theweleit sees this as exemplified by the *Freikorps* soldiers, whose feelings of being lost in ambivalence were treated by military drill,

> where something like a "body armour" is placed on the soldier, and a special social body order in which every part – every person – knows his exact place in a formation, in groups, in society. […] People like that learn to trans-form every potentially "symbiotic" relation (of insecurity) into a hierarchical one (of security).
>
> *(Theweleit et al. 2025, 71)*

Individuals of this disposition tend to convert every potentially reciprocal or interdependent relationship – characterised by mutual vulnerability – into a hierarchical one that affords them a sense of stability and control. This transformation functions as a psychological mechanism for managing and containing their anxieties and insecurities. Consequently, in political terms, such individuals embody an inherently antidemocratic orientation: they recognise and accept only rigidly stratified orders, exhibit deference to authority, and display an affinity for authoritarian or dictatorial structures.

In her important contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality*, Frenkel-Brunswik pointed to the relevance of strictly binary gender relations for the repressive defence against ambiguity. One of the key findings of her research was that authoritarian personalities exhibit a strong tendency towards what she called "pseudo-masculinity" and "pseudo-femininity" (Adorno et al. 2019, 422). By this, she meant idealised notions of masculinity and femininity that are strictly separated from one another and defined by the intense denial of those traits in oneself that are

conventionally attributed to the opposite gender. It was precisely this compulsive purity of gender identity that constituted a falsification – a pseudo – whereas, from a Freudian perspective, she regarded the simultaneous presence of traits conventionally coded as male and female within a person as a normality, which, however, contradicts social normativity.

Among male study participants especially, there was a significant correlation between authoritarian character structures and rigid, heterosexist ideals of masculinity. According to Frenkel-Brunswik, these ideals are defined by an overvaluation of qualities such as decisiveness, energy, productivity, strength, independence, and willpower, and much less by the capacity to accept passivity and weakness, which are stereotypically associated with femininity (Adorno et al. 2019, 428). The most extreme form of this stereotypical dichotomy appeared in matters of sexuality and gender relations among those with explicitly fascist attitudes: "The fascists reveal a heterosexual orientation which is even more externalized, contemptuous, exploitative, and dichotomous than that of the other high scorers" (Adorno et al. 2019, 868). This heterosexist attitude implies an objectifying view of women as mere objects, as well as "an obsessive bitterness toward prostitutes and 'loose' women" (Adorno et al. 2019, 868). Frenkel-Brunswik noted that the general lack of individuation and of real object relationships in high scorers is also remarkable in the field of sexuality, expressed in "a relative isolation of sexual impulses from the rest of the personality, the paucity of affection" as well as "surface admiration, coupled with underlying resentment against the other sex" (Adorno et al. 2019, 404).

Low-scoring men, on the other hand, have fewer problems with accepting passivity and weakness and generally seem to be less afraid of losing their masculinity: "No compensation through pseudo-toughness and antiweakness attitudes is thus necessary" (Adorno et al. 2019, 388). What is striking about the personality of low-scoring men is that they are oriented towards their mother and have an image of their father as mild and relaxed. They display a caring, love-dependent attitude, which allows a certain degree of passivity to be included in their masculinity. An associated idea of autonomy does not exclude dependence on others, but lives in the interpersonal relationship where, according to Adorno, one is allowed to show weakness without provoking strength (Adorno 2005, 216).

Frenkel-Brunswik's research provided empirical evidence for the critique of the "identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings" that Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 26) identified as a fundamental pillar of civilisation and a key factor in its self-destructive tendencies. This masculine character is shaped through the rigid suppression of inner nature, desires, and drives. Fascist pseudo-masculinity is its exaggeration. In addition to strict repression, it rejects any form of doubt or ambiguity.

These tendencies also apply to high-scoring women, who present themselves as particularly feminine and reject characteristics connoted as masculine. "As is not surprising", writes Frenkel-Brunswik, "a rather crude aggression, directed especially against men, seems to go with this attitude" (Adorno et al. 2019, 428).

The submission to stereotypical notions of femininity must, of course, be seen in the context of the much more restrictive social situation of women at the time – the 1940s – which left them with hardly any opportunities for autonomous subjectivation. Even women with a low score on the authoritarianism scale were by no means unaffected by the difficult social situation, but, according to Frenkel-Brunswik's analyses, they were more inclined to accept the conflict and confront it openly (Adorno et al. 2019, 428).

The authoritarian personality's tendency to think in rigid binaries is also evident in how these individuals divide women into "pure" and "bad" (Adorno et al. 2019, 397, 868). Theweleit described this division using the *Freikorps* "men soldiers" as examples: they divided women into white (hospital nurses, their sisters, sometimes their mothers) and red women (mostly working-class women, sex-workers, Jewish women) (Theweleit et al. 2025, 70). This division is also prominent in Islamism in the dichotomy between "bahijab" (good, modest, and veiled according to Islamic rules) and "badhijab" (badly veiled, wearing tight clothing, and showing lots of hair): "These two images of women must be understood as the central dichotomy of the theocracy", writes Fathiyeh Naghibzadeh, concluding that "both types of woman are ideologically charged and embody all the social, religious, and political opposites that exist" (Naghibzadeh 2008, 106f.). Charlier also describes the Islamic veil as a symbolic separation of the moral woman from the impure or immoral one. It represents an attempt to objectify and privatise the woman (Charlier 2017, 48). As Fatima Mernissi points out, the veil functions as an extension of the harem into the public sphere and constitutes a means of excluding and containing women beyond the private realm (Mernissi 1994).

Such a binary division of good and evil, pure and filthy women can be interpreted as a compromise: antifeminism cannot reject all women, because they are still needed for reproduction. The ones marked for elimination are the deviant women – those who, whether real or imagined, do not conform to the prescribed gender roles: feminists, sex-workers, and other sexual women, racially marginalised women, and Jewish women. Not only are the 'bad' women devalued, but the 'pure' ones are also not loved, because the authoritarian character is incapable of love and emotional devotion (Adorno et al. 2019, 404). This corresponds to the categorisation of Jews in antisemitism into two groups, again the "good" and the "bad", or the "white Jews" and the "Kikes" (Adorno et al. 2019, 624). Today, this distinction between good and bad Jews reemerges in progressive milieus by portraying antizionist Jews as the good Jews, while Zionists are cast as the bad ones (Bassi 2023). In far-right circles, e.g., surrounding the German neo-Nazi Horst Mahler, on the other hand, Zionists are regarded as "not so bad" Jews for having accepted the national principle and now fitting into an ethnopluralist worldview (Schreiter 2022).

The relentlessness with which socially dominant ideals of pseudo-femininity and pseudo-masculinity are forcibly integrated into individual identities, overshadowing and suppressing other modes of identification, reveals the fear of blurring

the artificial unambiguity of gender identity. In the high scorers, it is again the intolerance of ambiguity that proves decisive, as Frenkel-Brunswik explains:

> In order to reduce conflict and anxiety and to maintain stereotyped patterns, certain aspects of experience have to be kept out of awareness. Assumptions once made, no matter how faulty and out of keeping with reality because of a neglect of relevant aspects, are repeated over and over again and not corrected in the face of new evidence.
>
> *(Frenkel-Brunswik 1974, 69)*

What later came to be known as the performative moment in the construction of gender identity already becomes clear: gender identity is essentially based on repetition and iteration. The strict gender binary is constantly practised through mixophobia in order to avoid facing the confusing diversity of life (Stögner 2022b).

Building on Frenkel-Brunswik's ideas, Horkheimer wrote in 1949:

> Anti-femininity based on rejection of the mother sets the pattern for the subsequent rejection of everything that is deemed "different". Out-groups rejected by fascists, particularly the Jews, are often fancied as showing traits of femininity, such as weakness, emotionalism, lack of self-discipline, and sensuality. Contempt for the traits of the opposite sex in one's own sex seems to be regularly connected with a highly generalised intolerance of what is different.
>
> *(Horkheimer 1949, 370)*

As we have seen hitherto, antisemitism splits off the real ambiguity and projects it onto the Jew in order to maintain the illusion that the world is not complicated. Antisemitism therefore serves as a defence against doubt in the unambiguity of the world. The figure of the Jew functions as a projection screen for those ambivalences that cannot be tolerated in one's own emotional world and social reality. Precisely for this reason, the image of the Jew is constructed in a deeply contradictory way, this very contradiction being a condition of the projection mechanism itself. The Jew is always positioned outside the hegemonic norms of masculinity of the respective time and environment. In far-right scenes, for example, he is depicted as a sexualised, unnatural 'horny bastard' who lacks Aryan manliness and compensates for this deficiency through cunning and money. This figure fuses weakness with overpowering dominance, an ambivalent superimposition that, as shown in the previous chapter, also shapes Islamic antisemitism. Doubt is repressively acted out.

In strictly patriarchal societies like those with a fundamentalist Islamic background, ambivalence, contradiction, and doubt are not only warded off, but systematically suppressed. Charlier describes how in such societies change and intellectual flexibility are not taken for granted but often seen as sinful. Tradition is not understood as a cultural heritage subject to transformation but rather preserved as an immutable norm (Charlier 2017, 67). Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to such societies as

"cold societies" (quoted in Charlier 2017, 67). With regard to the similar constitution of National Socialist society, Horkheimer and Adorno speak of a collective "mimesis of death" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 141). In this context, ambivalence, doubt, and change are regarded as demonic. The opposing principle is that of constancy, which dominates both the Christian and even more so the Islamic conception of paradise. This repression of ambivalence is central in patriarchal socialisation: It is an upbringing not aimed at the formation of an autonomous ego that is curious and open towards the unknown, but at collective identity and submission to the patriarchal tradition. Ambivalence is smothered by obedience (Charlier 2017, 72).

Charlier illustrates this rigid mechanism of ambivalence repression in relation to the *kāfir*, employing the term not only to denote a non-believer but also an apostate – that is, an individual who consciously and intentionally denies the principles of Islam. The *kāfir* questions the normative demand for unity through doubt or a striving for individual autonomy and is therefore cast out or even killed. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Charlier continues, the *kāfir* represents adolescent resistance to authority. The *kāfir's* persecution serves to strengthen group cohesion through projective mechanisms: repressed rebellious desire is projected onto them and destroyed through the act of expulsion (Charlier 2017, 75f.). Christian witch hunts went even further: they weren't just about heretics; they were also about eradicating female sexuality and autonomy. It is not by coincidence that the *kāfir* and the witch are closely connected to antisemitic imaginations of the Jew.

Antisemitism is also an expression of mixophobia – a fear or rejection of mixture – which prevents transitions across strictly drawn gender or other boundaries. Anyone who seriously undermines the irreconcilable opposition between male and female, and disrupts the principle of binary sex, inevitably becomes the target of hatred by those who have forced themselves, unhappily and compulsively, into the binary system. Even today, non-normative ways of life provoke fierce disgust. It is conspicuous that persons identifying themselves as non-binary become targets of massive aggression. Likewise, according to studies on sexism and heterosexism, bisexual people are the "most unloved" group of all (Fiske and Norris 2009). Again, the principle of unambiguity and absence of contradiction reigns.

This principle is also enforced by the Islamist regime in Iran, which criminalises homosexuality and severely punishes it, including by death. To reinforce the heteronormative regime and the separation of genders, homosexual men are sometimes forced to undergo sex reassignment surgery to be made female, regardless of whether they identify as transgender (Naghibzadeh 2008). The maintenance of order is demonstrated and enforced on those who seek to escape it. This applies both to religious order and to the order of gender and sexuality.

Strict heteronormativity and gender segregation replace the concept of equality with that of equal worth, a move visible, for example, in radical right-wing gender discourse. Such discourse claims that the two sexes – anything beyond that is dismissed as ideological devilry – are of equal worth but fundamentally different. While in Western societies this distinction between equality and equal worth

largely remains at the ideological level and does not (yet) affect women's equal treatment before the courts, the situation is different in many Islamic societies, where, under Sharia law, women do not enjoy equal rights. Islamic authorities in the West sometimes attempt to extend this unequal treatment to their communities by invoking the distinction between equality and equal worth, as Murad Wilfried Hofmann, a German lawyer who converted to Islam, has openly argued:

> With regard to women's rights, it must first be noted that the principle of equality requires only that like cases be treated alike. Unequal situations may therefore, in principle, be treated unequally. Whether fashionable or not, Muslim men and Muslim women nevertheless assume that women and men are not physically – and therefore not psychologically – identical, as Allah (exalted be He) so succinctly states in *Al-Imran* 3:36: "…a boy is not like a girl…". From an Islamic perspective, different regulations are therefore justified insofar as they arise from the biological difference between the sexes.
>
> *(Quoted in Gerhard 2003, 93)*

This insistence on clear boundaries and enforced unity, and the corresponding rejection of ambivalence and mediation, finds its most condensed expression in the figure of the Jew. The aim is to eradicate doubt – the very doubt embodied by those who represent mediation and occupy a space in between or beyond the genders, nations, classes. Such totalitarian structures despise doubt, because doubt has become, in modernity, a vehicle of self-reflection and a driving force of social change. From both fascist and Islamist perspectives, the Jew becomes a cipher for this very doubt: the abstract, the ambiguous, the unclassifiable, the one who escapes the narrow constraints of identitarian definiteness (von Braun 1992, 8).

The significance of pseudo-masculinity and pseudo-femininity, as well as the pseudo-toughness displayed by authoritarians to maintain their position, places the fake element at the centre of the analysis. The ideology of the strict binary between pure masculinity and pure femininity reveals "something fictitious", which Adorno also attributes to pathological nationalism (Adorno 2020, 14): The moment of abstraction in ideology, which indicates the detachment of ideology from the level of the subject's experience and its increasingly functional character, detached from lived experience. We are reminded of Adorno's statement that "convictions and ideologies take on their demonic, their genuinely destructive character precisely when the objective situation has deprived them of substance" (Adorno 2020, 13). He illustrates this with the witch trials that took place in Europe during the Counter-Reformation, when Christianity was in a deep crisis and used massive violence in order to reassure itself. At that time, Christianity already had "this aspect of selling something to people in which they themselves no longer believe" (Adorno 2020, 14). Today, strictly binary and hierarchical gender relations also have an outdated and no longer substantial character, particularly in Western societies, but

due to capitalist and digital globalisation increasingly also in non-Western societies. Yet they are increasingly instrumentalised ideologically by ultra-conservative actors to reassure a precarious patriarchal gender order in the Global South as well as within Western societies. At the same time, the traditional gender binary and the associated segregation of society, which limit women's participation in the workforce and their innovative potential, have become barriers to the demands of capital valorisation and societal progress.

The importance of fake- and pseudo-moments in antisemitism and sexism, therefore, demonstrates that the rejection of ambivalence, doubt, and complexity – common to both ideologies – leads to a different kind of reality, a fake reality, in which contradictions are repressively solved, women kept in their place, and the Jews annihilated.

## Notes

1 The F-Scale, short for Fascism-Scale, is a questionnaire developed for measuring typical attitudes and characteristics of the authoritarian personality, including antisemitism and attitudes towards sexuality and gender relations (Adorno et al. 2019, 222–280).
2 Differences in authoritarianism have very much to do with the respective conditions of subject formation in Western and Islamic societies. See the section "Anti-Intellectualism, Semi-Modernity, and 'Islam Under Siege'" in Chapter 6 of this book.
3 The phone call was taken from the phone of a murdered Israeli, which was recovered by the Israeli security forces. The conversation with English subtitles is available at Jersualem Post Staff 2023.

# 6

# LONGING FOR AUTHENTICITY

## Anti-Intellectualism as a Nexus of Antisemitism and Sexism

Building on the earlier analysis of body, sexuality, and their central role in the formation of antisemitism and sexism, attention now shifts to the mind as another point of intersection between the two ideologies. Just as anxieties about corporeality and desire are displaced onto Jews and women, so too are fears of thinking, reflection, and intellectual autonomy. Throughout the history of antisemitism, Jews have repeatedly been identified with the mind in the sense of abstraction, doubt, and intellectual activity as such. Modern anti-intellectualism, which crystallised at the end of the nineteenth century, emerged precisely at this juncture and was from the outset inseparably linked to both antisemitism and misogyny. Within this constellation, the 'Jew', the intellectual, and the emancipated woman come to personify a seemingly overdeveloped, restless capacity for reflection that unsettles authoritarian longings for identity, purity, immediacy, and fixed hierarchies. Anti-intellectualism takes shape where hostility to the body, anxiety about sexuality, and resentment towards excessive thinking converge. By tracing how the mind is alternately valued as instrumental, calculative rationality and denounced as corrosive abstraction, the analysis shows how anti-intellectualism operates as a false cure: it transforms crises of subjectivity and social change into personalised hostility against figures imagined as intellectually excessive, from fin de siècle cultural formations through National Socialism to contemporary Islamist and postcolonial antimodernisms.

### Mind and Body, Jew and Woman

Intellectuals, as representatives of complexity, become suspect: they seem to believe in nothing, question everything, and thereby threaten authoritarian structures. Antisemitism identifies the mind, the act of critical reflection, as 'Jewish' and

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hence as something fundamentally impure that corrupts the body of the people. Otto Weininger's claim that the Jew "believes in nothing, does not even believe in his belief, and doubts his doubt" (quoted in Schiedel 2006, 21) captures this pathologisation of doubt in a pointed way. The mind itself becomes a 'demon of change', attacked by authoritarianism just as much as the Jew or the emancipated woman – as a threat to a world that demands identity and fears ambiguity, difference, pluralism, and change.

It is important to note that antisemitism values rationality only in the form of calculative reason – understood here as purposive, rigidly categorical, and unimaginative thinking – and even idealises it as the only legitimate form of thought. At the same time, it continually reverses rationality into irrationality. Rationality in this sense, however, does not correspond to what Critical Theory understands as the mind and thinking in its emphatic sense. Properly understood, the mind refers to a mode of thinking and of relating to the world that does not suppress existing contradictions or resolve them in a one-sided manner. Instead, it remains attentive to the suffering of individuals within society and thereby sustains a fundamental doubt towards what is given. At the same time, such thinking directs critique towards the here and now, rather than placating individuals with notions of an afterlife. This kind of critical thinking is considered artificial and abstract, despite its determinate critique of the here and now, and ultimately despised as free-floating, corrosive, and 'Jewish'. It is the target of anti-intellectualism.

The hostility to the mind in anti-intellectualism is inseparable from the hostility to the body and is therefore also linked to the domination of nature and the associated pressure for unity and unambiguity, as described in the previous chapters. The ambivalence towards nature and the body makes the mind appear as something uncanny and demonic because it seems to be uncontrollable and free-floating, with the potential to break free from immediately given contexts of fixed purposes and ossified traditions. Hostility to the mind and to the body function like two sides of one coin: the control of the bodily instincts (i.e., of inner nature), which makes the development of the mind possible in the first place, tips into a negative effect on the mind, when control over the instincts becomes too rigid, as Adorno explains in *Minima Moralia*: "Because even the remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses, thought destroys in the latter the condition of its own existence. […] Is not indeed the simplest perception shaped by fear of the thing perceived, or desire for it?" (Adorno 2005, 122).

Adorno explains that our knowledge and understanding of the world have become detached from the "underlying impulses", which in fact is the essence of civilisation and the precondition of freedom of thought.[1] But the claim of the impulses – wishes, fears, desires – must be "preserved and surpassed in the thought which has escaped their sway" (Adorno 2005, 122), otherwise true and lively understanding cannot arise but rather stereotypy spreads. Cognition thus mediates nature and its opposite, the thought, in a process that Horkheimer and Adorno termed the "remembrance of nature within the subject" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 32).

In the process of cognition, thinking and feeling, mind and body are mediated. This is why hostility to the mind echoes hostility to the body.

Hatred of the mind finds expression in hatred of those who are the bearers of the mind: intellectuals. This hatred is initially based on the fear of being taken advantage of in everyday business and life: lack of knowledge creates mistrust. In the Christian Middle Ages in Europe, thought and mind did not enjoy a particularly high reputation (Le Goff 1986). In the early Middle Ages, an ordinary knight was mostly unable to read or write, and it was even considered inappropriate for kings to write and read – they relied on their scribes for that. Only in the late Middle Ages, with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, did this change. But it is interesting to note that literacy was more widespread among noble women, and of course nuns, than among noble men. Outside the Christian contexts, Jews in particular – men and women – were able to read and write. In medieval Germanic law, these three groups – monks and ecclesiastical scholars, women in general, and Jews – were legally dependent and did not have the right to bear arms, i.e., they were "bondmen and servants, completely dependent on their lord" (Kampmann 1979, 21). This may partly explain why intellectuality was initially associated with powerlessness, weakness, and dependency, hence with femininity rather than with soldierly or knightly masculinity, and thus held in low esteem. At the same time, the resistance potential of intellectuality and thinking, if not understood, was feared and fought against in the terror against so-called witches and wizards.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern science developed alongside capitalism and the nation-state, separating itself from philosophy and theology and relegating speculative thought to the status of an obstacle in the pursuit of facts. As disciplines professionalised and knowledge became fragmented, reflection beyond calculative reason was increasingly dismissed as outdated, later derided as mere "armchair thinking" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 167). Adorno's critique of positivism (Adorno et al. 1979) highlighted how this triumph of the sciences reduced thought to the repetition and absolutisation of facts, foreclosing recognition of the world as contingent and changeable. For him, genuine thinking requires a speculative moment – concepts kept open to the yet unknown, animated by doubt, and capable of questioning ossified traditions, dogmas, and the naturalisation of social conditions. Thinking, in this sense, is subversive and emancipatory, oriented towards change rather than conformity (Adorno 2011, 2012, 1993).[2]

At the turn of the nineteenth century, speculative thinking was already associated with deviance and projected onto specific figures, primarily Jews, but also emancipated women. Both the 'feminine' and the 'Jewish' mind were widely seen as subversive, destructive, and undermining the unity of the emerging national body. By breaking out of narrowly defined functional contexts and thus threatening the reproduction of the status quo, such a mind provided a target for attack. The derogatory stereotype of the "feminine Jewish spirit" (Luckhardt 1992, 112) emerged at this time and served as a projection screen for hatred of "strange and unusual thought, nay, even of thought itself when it follows truth beyond the boundaries

delimitated by the requirements of a given social order", as Horkheimer noted in *Eclipse of Reason* (Horkheimer 1947, 86). Through reflective thinking, people transcend totalitarian relations of domination and use doubt to break down oppressive unity and clarity. Hostility towards intellectuals is centrally motivated by a rejection of doubt, because it introduces uncertainty into clear structures of power and social relations. Doubt – an indicator of tolerance of ambiguity, i.e., the ability to recognise that a problem has several, contradictory aspects – points to the possibility of change within the existing order. Intellectuals symbolise the complexity of modern forms of social integration, which antisemitic and misogynistic ideology tries to translate back into simple relationships of immediate dependency in order to assign everyone their fixed place in a strict top-down hierarchy.

In anti-intellectualism, the figure of the Jew embodies the super-intellectual who resists the pressure of conformity, unambiguousness and false immediacy, and the limiting bonds of nature. For the antisemite, the Jew seems to believe in nothing, question everything, and indulge in universal doubt. Identifying the (limited) independence and autonomy of the mind and the freedom of thought as Jewish is an integral part of antisemitic ideology. From the antisemitic worldview, the Jewish mind contaminates the unitary vision of the *Volkskörper* (the ethnicised body of the people that is considered natural) with doubt and ambiguity and is therefore a permanent affront to the narcissism of purity presented as down-to-earth simplicity.

The concept of the intellectual was still relatively new at the fin de siècle. It developed in the wake of protests against antisemitism during the Dreyfus trial in France (cf. Habermas 1987, 28, 31) and became a term of abuse even before it was used as a self-description. Associated with notions of the abstract, antinational, subversive, decadent, emancipated, and Jewish, the pejorative sense of the term *intellectual* entered Germany in the context of media coverage of the Dreyfus trial (cf. Deuber-Mankowski 2000, 371). From then on, the intellectual served as a projection screen for antisemitism, antifeminism, anti-emancipatory attitudes, and anti-urbanism. The association of intellectuality with 'bloodlessness' characterises ethnonationalist anti-intellectualism and identifies it as a central element in the racist discourse of 'blood and soil'. A National Socialist calendar proverb sums up the hostility towards intellectuals and Jews: "Away with this word, this evil word/With its garish Jewish glow! No man of German character/Can ever be an intellectual" (quoted in Schiedel 2006, 21).

The idea that the 'Jewish spirit' is unproductive, barren, destructive, and cold is linked to the accusation that Jews, like intellectuals, would not work – summed up in the antisemitic stereotype that Jews represent "money and mind" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 141). Such 'carnal arguments' appeal especially to individuals and groups who are, or believe themselves to be, absorbed in the social production process, but who secretly know that hard physical labour has already been made superfluous by modern technology and machinery (Adorno 1997d, 369). The disappointment and anger at having to work hard themselves, or at having been 'liberated' from work by the machine without alternative or income, is vented on

those who are supposed to have it easier. The whole argument pitting hard physical labour against intellectual activity is directed against the "human right not to torture oneself physically but to develop oneself intellectually" (Adorno 1997d, 370). In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno characterises the specific nature of the intellectual that contradicts the prevailing bourgeois work ethic. The fact that intellectuals prefer their work to prescribed pleasures makes them suspect, and their intellectual effort seems to be a pleasure unattainable for others. In fact, however, the effort of thinking is a "cunning intertwining of pleasure and work" (Adorno 2005, 84), in which the intellectuals defy the separation of work and leisure, and in which the two become one again. Their work is thus less alienated. Such an intertwining of happiness and work is dangerous for the status quo of radicalised Protestant work ethics: "No fulfilment may be attached to work, which would otherwise lose its functional modesty in the totality of purposes" (Adorno 2005, 84).

The close connection between antisemitism and anti-intellectualism, however, does not imply that intellectuals themselves were immune to antisemitism. In fact, anti-intellectualism often gives itself the appearance of a down-to-earth intellectuality, as I will elaborate later using the philosophy of life and *Jugendstil* as an example. That intellectuals may be as prejudiced as anyone else shows in the fact that support for National Socialism was very strong among the liberal professions, including teachers, doctors, and lawyers. According to Shulamit Volkov, antisemitism and antifeminism were both "cultural codes" during the fin de siècle particularly among intellectuals (Volkov 2001). It was a particular image of the mind as decomposing and transgressing well-established borders that was abhorred as enemy to the *Volk* by many intellectuals themselves. This image of the mind was projected on Jews and emancipated women, so it was not the mind or intellectuals in general that were suspect, but the 'Jewish' and 'emancipated' mind. Therefore, antisemitism and antifeminism were also intellectual attempts to erase an emancipatory and egalitarian way of thinking about the world.

According to Adorno, the "critical element in the mind of the Jews" is linked to their social mobility (Adorno 1997d, 369),[3] and Heinrich Heine called the book the "portative fatherland" of the Jews. Thought is nomadic and fluid, and thinking people do not adhere to predetermined boundaries. This is also a motive for the rejection of the mind in women, which, as the German psychiatrist Paul Möbius wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, would lead to the "physiological imbecility of women": "Intellectuals are nervous, and their offspring even more so. An essential feature of this form of degeneration is the blurring of the sexes; effeminate men and masculine women" (quoted in Omran 2000, 98).

Hatred of the intellectual woman manifested itself above all in her pathologisation as mentally ill, in her disciplining through confinement in asylums, and in the torture inflicted on her there under the guise of treatment. In order to tame their intellect and drive towards emancipation, women were abused with electric shocks,

and their convulsively contorting bodies were put on display in the lecture theatres of the male medical establishment. According to Horkheimer, hatred of the Jews is

> identical to the murderous desire directed at the insane. The suspicion of madness is the inexhaustible source of persecution. It arises from mistrust in one's own purified reason, upon which rational civilisation itself is perishing. The means of calling humans back from those intelligible worlds into which Kant already forbade us to stray – is pain. Pain has always been the most reliable instructor of reason. It brings the resistant and the rambling, the fantasists and utopians, back to themselves: indeed, it reduces them to the body, to a part of the body.
>
> *(Horkheimer 2014, 347)*

From this, it becomes clear why psychoanalysis is so deeply resented within anti-intellectualism. The reason is that psychoanalysis no longer persecutes, disciplines, and maltreats the mad as mad, but instead recognises them as subjects endowed with their own agency, in response to a society that denies them agency. For this reason, psychoanalysis becomes a target of attack for antisemites and antifeminists, whose worldview rests on the conviction that the mind itself is pathological.

## Philosophy of Life and Jugendstil: Fin de Siècle Cultural Fatigue

Fin de siècle anti-intellectualism was closely linked to anti-urbanism, articulated in the claim that life in the big city stimulated "increased brain activity" while simultaneously diminishing the reproductive capacity of at that time so-called "brain ladies" (*Gehirndamen*) (Günther 2012, 168). The psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, who otherwise advocated a concept of the social acquisition of femininity and rejected ideas of an 'original' femininity, wrote: "All observations point to the fact that the intellectual woman has become masculine; she is the one who has replaced warm, feeling knowledge with cold, unproductive thinking" (quoted in Kaplan 1991, 217). For the Austrian writer and feminist Rosa Mayreder, such discourses reflected above all a crisis of masculinity triggered by the advance of gender equality in the big cities: "The office, the accounting firm, the law firm, the studio – all coffins of masculinity. But its monumental tomb is the city itself" (quoted in Le Rider 1990, 218).

However, in her "cold, unproductive thinking," the 'brain lady' did not approximate an ideal of masculinity but rather embodied, in the words of the German philosopher of life Ludwig Klages, the "corrosive Jewish element", "the downfall of the earth by the spirit", understood as "the victory of Semitism over the Aryan peoples" (quoted in Korotin 1994, 100). Such rhetoric casts words and writing as the displacement of life itself, while simultaneously idealising a pure and authentic existence cleansed of the perceived ballast of urban civilisation.

In this atmosphere of cultural fatigue at the beginning of the twentieth century, the mind was seen as opposed yet hostile to life. The longing for a 'return to

nature' characterised not only a *völkisch* worldview, but was also promoted by the philosophy of life, Art Nouveau, and the youth movement – all thoroughly intellectual attempts to break the alleged primacy of the mind (Stögner 2022a). What we see here is not simply non-intellectualism, but anti-intellectualism itself as an intellectual endeavour. The German philosopher of life Ludwig Klages, for example, operated with an intellectual anti-intellectualism when he proposed a specific combination of myth and rationality, arguing rationally against reason. This form of anti-intellectualism casts the responsibility for modern society's flaws onto the mind. The yearning for a position outside society, the desire for detachment, manifests a profound unease with modern social structures that increasingly envelop the individual and leave little room for independence. Adorno's notion of a radically socialised and integrated society (Adorno 1997e, 273), one that spares no one, absorbs all dimensions of life, and leaves no space, already finds an early resonance in the philosophy of life's negation of modernity. The manner in which this flight from modernity is to be realised – through the subsumption of the individual under the collective – already anticipates the transformation of modernity into barbarism that would later find full expression in National Socialism.

As a bourgeois form of antibourgeois ideology, both the philosophy of life and the fin de siècle youth movement expressed what Adorno (2012, 125) described as the "élan of the subject to try things out on one's own initiative", a quasi-heroic turn towards subjective autonomy that occurred at a time when the autonomy of the bourgeois subject had already become an anachronism, undermined by the development of the capitalist mode of production that rendered even the bourgeois a dependent rentier. Against this, the philosophy of life "promised to establish the spiritual world, and ultimately the real world, from consciousness" (Adorno 2012, 125). Hyperindividualistic idealism and antimaterialism thus gave way to a collectivism that was thoroughly driven by an unfulfilled longing for authenticity (Le Rider 1990; Pulliero 2005) in a world saturated by modern technology, where individuals increasingly perceived themselves as mere appendages of that technology.

These contemporary movements reflected an attempt by individuals to resist social pressures to conform and to resolve the "antagonism between individuality and the economic and social conditions of its existence" (Horkheimer 1947, 131). In this sense, the ideologies of the fin de siècle also expressed a search for substitutes for the social cohesion once provided by religion, now eroded through secularisation. The pursuit of freedom and autonomy – understood as a refusal to conform to the all-encompassing forms of socialisation and the fragmenting forms of perception characteristic of modern society in its transition to monopoly capitalism – ultimately found expression in a highly idealised image of nature, mobilised against modern urban life. Yet this image of nature itself emerged as a construct shaped by an urban-intellectual perspective.

The claim to autonomous subjectivity ultimately gives way to a return to a highly stylised image of nature, a merging into an ideal of wholeness and authenticity that facilitated collectivist identification. This revealed the Janus-faced character of fin de siècle bourgeois movements such as the philosophy

of life and the youth movement, both of which clearly showed affinities with antisemitic ideology: a misguided response to the disintegration of the subject that, in its quest for a 'new era', lapsed into resentment and turned against a 'false' enemy – namely the modern urban world and its intellectual potential – in favour of a supposedly pure nature. Concepts like subjectivity, individuality, and autonomy – i.e., the Enlightenment universals already increasingly eroded in the transition from liberalism to monopoly capitalism – were not subjected to immanent critique or determinate negation, but simply discarded: "The fight is waged against an enemy who has already been defeated, the thinking subject" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 120).

In this context, the extreme emphasis on eros and logos, which dominates the imagination of both the Jew and the emancipated woman in the fin de siècle, highlights the "torn and contingent subject of modernity" (Bruns 2003, 50). Jews and emancipated women were imagined as simultaneously intellectually driven, cold, and rationally calculating, yet excessively sensual, sexual, and physically determined. This contradictory characterisation stems from a closely intertwined hostility towards both mind and body, reflecting an ambivalent attitude: the rejection of all that is urban, modern, and civilised, alongside an idealisation of nature, which occurred amid profound alienation from nature. Within the ethnonationalistic German youth movement of the time, this dynamic escalated into an irrationalisation of culture, expressed in the cult of the irrational (Janz 1985, 310; Benjamin 1991b, 66), whose aim was to leave behind all restrictions of bourgeois normativity, including those regarding gender relations – which in this case meant the repression of sexuality and eroticism in an ascetic-athletic body cult. In the autobiography of a female member of the youth movement, we read: "Each hiker feels their body as a working part of the surrounding nature, and not as a one-sided sexual organ. In the fresh air and wind, no sensuality arises" (quoted in Linse 1985, 264).

While the young men trained themselves in sexual ascetism, the young women embodied the ideal of a "genderless worker bee", and the youth movement in general was seen as a "playground of the genderless", as Elisabeth Busse-Wilson, a German youth movement activist, put it (quoted in Linse 1985, 266; cf. Jungmann 1987, 670). Correspondingly, desexualised friendship-marriage became particularly popular among the educated youth of the day. The notions of purity associated with these practices indicate disgust for corporeality and bodily fluids and anxiety about transgressing the distinct boundaries of the body. Psychoanalyst Magnus Hirschfeld interpreted this as an expression of the separation of mind and body which the philosophy of life criticised and the youth movement actually wanted to overcome (cf. Linse 1985, 271).

Anti-urbanist ideologies and repressive back-to-nature movements actively targeted metropolitan lifestyles, which embodied modernity through social mobility and were consistently associated with Judaism and emancipation (Stögner 2022a). These movements explicitly rejected what Ludwig Klages called the "inhibiting

mental fetters" and the "long aberration of patriarchal oppression", summarised in his critique of "logocentrism", i.e., the presumed primacy of logos over life (quoted in Korotin 1994, 100). Klages conflated patriarchy, reason, and logos with Judaism, effectively collapsing all three into a single ideological category. His critique of patriarchy, however, did not positively refer to feminist demands for liberation from male domination. Rather, within this worldview, both the Jew and the feminist, by their very existence, disrupted a mythical vision of communion between humanity and the earth.

The fin de siècle open-air movements, particularly as reflected in *Jugendstil* and the youth movement, clearly illustrated the entanglement of hostility towards both body and mind. The figures depicted in *Jugendstil* appeared spiritually detached, their pale and translucent bodies blending seamlessly into floral ornamentation. This merging of body and decorative nature visually aligned with the stylised, life-philosophical image of a purified cosmic world. The slender, often androgynous figures suggested timelessness, genderlessness, and the absence of sexuality – attributes that evoked associations with light and purity. Yet nature is dissolved in the arabesque. The youth ideal, seemingly devoid of spirit, ironically took on an intensely spiritual quality.

Walter Benjamin critically elaborated on this tension in *The Arcades Project*, where he described *Jugendstil*'s aesthetic as marked by androgynous, even infertile female bodies. He observed how this bodily ideal conflated with sterility: "The fundamental motif of Jugendstil is the transfiguration of infertility. The body is portrayed, preferably, in the forms that precede sexual maturity" (Benjamin 1999, 558). "Procreation was felt to be the least worthy manner of subscribing to the animal side of creation" (Benjamin 1999, 560). This antimodern mythos, expressed in Art Nouveau and youth culture, fused with modernity's technical innovations. Even as they attempted to flee modernity, these movements remained part of it. As an art form, Art Nouveau left no place for the human subject. Benjamin quotes Dolf Sternberger to illustrate this: "But when they sought the body, they found nothing,/ Only a flower with a yellow centre/Surrounded with white petals." Man remained "caught within the interior of this plant life, himself rooted and attached to the soil – land or water" (cited in Benjamin 1999, 550).

The artificial rooting in the soil surreptitiously aligned with blood-and-soil mythology, making Art Nouveau a deeply intimate though ambivalent expression of that worldview. It followed an aesthetic tradition that took the commodification of the body seriously. Ulrike Scholvin (1991, 281) described the floral motifs of Art Nouveau as *nature morte*, still life as dead nature and thus as products of the commodity fetish that, through their flatness, eliminate depth and engagement. In this visual culture, living beings became reified emblems of commodities. The youth movement's disembodied body ideal must therefore be seen as the result of a synthesis between mysticism and technology – a stylised form of self-representation meant to oppose the anonymous and disintegrating mass phenomena of the urban world. In contrast to fascist aesthetics, which Walter Benjamin's elder mentor Siegfried Kracauer analysed as glorifying an ornamental mass body

(Kracauer 1998; see also Wildmann 1998), Art Nouveau centred on the isolated and lonely individual. Yet its highly decorative technical style conveyed a sense of finitude rather than renewal.

This contemporary ideal of a translucent, gender- and sexless body purified of both 'excessive' mind and 'excessive' corporeality serves as counterimage to the images of Jews and sexual women. In the antisemitic imagination, Jews and sexual women occupied a liminal, third space – neither pure body nor purified spirit – and hence escaped the mind-body dichotomy. As Zygmunt Bauman (1995, 73) argued, the Jews' ambiguous positioning in the antisemitic worldview disrupts any clear-cut Manichean classification – they thus serve as ideal projection screens for ambivalence, necessitated by modern, systemically differentiated societies which demand unambiguity and unity *because* they relentlessly produce contradictory structures, diversity, and ambiguity. The tension between imposed unambiguity and unity and the real ambiguity and complexity of social life generates ambivalence within individuals. Attempts to suppress this ambivalence reduce it to a single point and project it outward, much like mythical exorcism rituals, where what is to be expelled is imagined not merely as represented but as embodied in an object. This process produces an absolute counterposition, which seems to exist outside the self while embodying the excluded ambiguity and multiplicity – a distorted and unconsciously desired figure of the non-identical. As a result, individuals externalise ambivalence and experience it as an alien part of their social existence.

The 'feminine' is constructed in a similarly contradictory way as the 'Jewish' and also occupies a dual and intermediate position within the enmity towards both body and mind. It assumes a mediating role between the *völkisch* ingroup and the Other, the non-identical. Depending on whether femininity serves the construction of the ingroup or the banning of the alien, it either functions as a means of salvation from 'Jewish abstraction' or appears identical with 'Jewish sensuality'. Sociologist Eva-Maria Ziege identifies this dual function at the dawn of the twentieth century:

> Two new theories of redemption emerge at the beginning of the 20th century. They share the same point of reference, the same goal, yet they seem to contradict each other. Their common point of reference lies in the feminine, their shared goal in redemption from the Jewish. But whereas one seeks redemption from the Jewish through the *overcoming* of the feminine, the other envisions redemption from the Jewish *through* the feminine.
>
> *(quoted in Winter 2005, 17)*

Here, misogyny functions as a facet of antisemitism, yet its ultimate target is a shared third: ambivalence itself, most prominently projected onto the feminine and the Jewish. Otto Weininger, for instance, conceived of emancipation only as liberation from both femininity and Jewishness. He believed that only by eradicating the Jewish and the feminine – understood as mind and body, respectively – could one attain a pure spirit: inwardly coherent, untouched by either abstraction or concretion, and simply existent.

## The New Intellectual Anti-Intellectualism: Anti-Western Resentment and Postcolonial Antimodernism

In what ways do the antimodernism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-urbanism intrinsic to modernity at the fin de siècle translate into today's forms of antisemitism in connection with antifeminism and sexism? Adorno and Horkheimer provide us with a mediating thread in answering this question. As we have seen, the motifs that are central to modern antisemitism – the personalising retranslation of the modern and mediated rule of law that applies equally to all into personal, traditional, and direct relationships of hierarchical dependency, the worship of a supposedly pure nature, the longing for authenticity, and the rejection of rationality and universality as "logocentrism" (Klages) – are also the driving motifs of antifeminism that links everything that is seen as familiar, rooted, and natural to traditional heteronormative gender relations, in which women are relegated to their place and non-binary sexualities denigrated and erased. Any weakening of this fundamental and strictly hierarchical binary appears not only as a dissolution of gender identity, but also as a threat to the unity of the ethnonational or Islamist community as such. In this ideological mix, Jews as well as feminists or transgender people represent the danger of disintegration, and that means the danger of dissolving familiar bonds and certainties. This attitude abhors and demonises all that is alien, i.e., the world outside of what has always been known. It is an attitude that eagerly sets the familiar against the foreign, the established against the mobile, the natural against the artificial, ossified tradition against fluid modernity.

This attitude, which became popular in Germany after the First World War, was fully developed during National Socialism and is gaining traction again today, particularly on the far right and in right-wing populism. This can be seen in anti-gender ideologies that appear in various forms across Europe, the United States, and Russia. However, the combination of anti-intellectualism and antimodernism that results in antifeminism is not restricted to culturally conservative and far-right circles, but, as will be shown, is also increasingly widespread in so-called leftist progressivism, often in connection with radical Islamism; an alliance called "Islamogauchisme" in French (Taguieff 2021), i.e., an association or ideological convergence between certain segments of the political left and Islamist movements. The specific intertwining of antisemitism and antifeminism in antimodern and anti-urban anti-intellectualism results in an integrative umbrella ideology that transcends otherwise deeply held political differences. An impoverished capacity for experience, a lack of self-reflection, and a pronounced tendency towards authoritarianism play key roles in this attitude. In the mid-1960s, Adorno, then referring to right-wing extremism, delineated a provincialism that today can be traced in many aspects of leftist progressivism's identity politics that privileges authenticity and identity. For Adorno, this provincial mindset was not restricted to rural areas (Adorno 2020, 15). Rather, he explained how the prevailing forms of socialisation and ideologies tended to favour these deficits in the provinces more than in urban

areas (Belina 2021, 107). The global influence of capitalist exchange relations has led to a universal decline of the ability to truly experience, as famously analysed in the chapter on the "Culture Industry" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94–136).

According to Critical Theorists, this development is closely tied to the reification – or objectification – of work and leisure in industrialised mass society.[4] As early as the 1930s, Walter Benjamin emphasised a massive alienation from the capacity to experience as a characteristic of modern socialisation. He described how the social processes happened to the subjects much more than they consciously experienced them. According to Benjamin's diagnosis, experience itself increasingly disintegrated into single, unconnected moments – adventures (*Erlebnisse*) – and perception thus took on a shock character (Benjamin 2003). As a result, individuals were less and less able to integrate the scattered moments of their subjective perception into an experience of a coherent whole that would transgress false immediacy. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin saw in this profound alienation from experience a result of the dialectics of modernity. He analysed this ambiguous epoch as both the birthplace of the autonomous individual and simultaneously the obstacle to its full development. From the outset, Benjamin argued, bourgeois individuals carried within themselves their own negation as subjects and were condemned to be "solitary individuals" (Benjamin 1991a, 214), living an isolated life and increasingly unable to intersubjectively connect with others. Benjamin analysed these modern patterns of alienated experience as entangled in the commodity fetish and echoing industrial commodity production: social reality is experienced as a sequence of unconnected events, just as in the industrial production of commodities the individual steps of production appear isolated from one another. The fetish character of the commodity obscured production as a social relation just as it obscured the capacity to recognise capitalist society as an entanglement of functions and purposes that excludes and even neglects the needs of individuals. According to Benjamin, this development led to a "kind of new barbarism" (Benjamin 1991a, 215) in which individuals were less and less able to form a unity of life; instead, their lives disintegrated into a series of unconnected sequences. Long before digital mass culture, they learned to accept life as a contingent sequence of events that they simply lived through, without a prospect or desire of emancipation. Benjamin's bleak diagnosis did not, however, imply a wholly pessimistic outlook. As a materialist social critic, he was not in search of a supposedly lost authenticity, and his critique was thus not nostalgically directed against modernity per se, but against its divided nature.

What Benjamin described as the *Erlebnis* (immediate experience) that happens to the person rather than being consciously experienced may serve as a foundation for analysing and criticising the concept of lived experience that is in such high demand in today's identity politics and directed against the so-called "tyranny of the universal" (Davis 2016), i.e., against modes of perception that transcend the lived immediacy and authenticity of the particular and are thus rejected as oppressive

and colonial. Lived experience is taken as a guarantee for authenticity, so that those who express their lived experience are assigned a privileged speaker position. With Benjamin, however, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between lived experience and experience. The latter refers to the capacity to move beyond the isolated fragments of lived experience and to integrate them into a broader framework of social consciousness. This perspective avoids both the personalisation of social power structures and their reduction to a Manichean opposition between good and evil.

Alienated experience, in which the inability to transcend the immediacy of the lived experience prevails, often recurs in a belief in the directness of perception and experience, rejecting any form of mediating mental reflection as intrusive. This also manifests in the way nature and civilisation are conceptualised. For example, nature or culture are often expected to be experienced directly, without mediation or interpretation. However, this kind of immediacy isolates perception from experience. Genuine experience requires thoughtful reflection on what is perceived, under which circumstances and contexts, by whom, and in what way – in short, mediation. It thus involves creating a certain distance from one's immediate, subjective sensations. In essence, experience arises from the interplay or mediation between the perceiving subject and the external object. Hence, the alienation in experience stems from the false concretism, which does not perceive the concrete as something mediated, but as something immediately given, thus abstracting from the contexts within which something becomes concrete (Adorno 2010).

Reified consciousness rejects this idea of mediation and praises lived experience as a purportedly immediate impression of life. It assumes that perception is identical to the object itself, without the need for interpretation. This is a fundamentally anti-intellectual rejection of mediation that opposes both critical thinking beyond the immediately given and reflection on the contradictions of social relationships. As a result, people who perceive the world in a concretist, unmediated way are captivated by immediacy, lose their curiosity about what lies beyond the immediate particularity, are not interested in contradictions, and no longer ask how things could be different – they fetishise their lived experience as eternal, unambiguous, and beyond criticism. Consequently, they experience life as rigidly structured in simple hierarchies where everyone and everything is assigned fixed roles. The step to a Manichean worldview is not a big one.

This ideology of immediacy and authenticity – the resistance against modernisation in the social and cultural sense and the idealisation of tradition that is already shallow and not experienced in a lively manner anymore – connects well with culture industry: "The new ideology has the world as such as its object", wrote Horkheimer and Adorno on culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 119). Provincialism and mass culture alike worship "existence itself", which "becomes a surrogate for meaning and justice" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 119). The provincial cult of immediacy continues to mix with the cult of adventure in culture industry – the path to experience and self-reflection seems more cut off than ever.

Today, provincialism has gone global, spreading to the supposed progressives, who are no less fervent in their opposition to Western modernity than their reactionary predecessors. They have long since arrived at Western universities, where they celebrate their weariness with modernity in an anti-Western self-mirroring that lacks both self-reflection and empathy. Indeed, self-reflection and empathy are interconnected processes that both vanish in the fetishised authenticity of the non-West.

This became evident in the immediate aftermath of 7 October, when thousands of academics, mainly from Europe and the United States, signed one of many declarations "in solidarity with Palestine",[5] blaming Israel for genocide, while framing Hamas's actions as legitimate resistance. Omitted is not only knowledge about the situation in the Middle East, but also self-reflection and empathy for Israeli victims. This must be located in a broader academic trend to vilify Israel and to downplay or deny Hamas's antisemitic and misogynistic violence. This trend also includes a resurgence of campus antisemitism since the attacks (Freedman et al. 2024).

In this ideological framework, cultural relativism has supplanted the universal pursuit of emancipation. The new cultural particularists recast everything beyond themselves as the Other, often idealised and judged by separate standards, framing liberation neither as freedom from fundamentalist Islamist masculinist oppression nor as inclusion into Western ideals of freedom, equality, and individual autonomy. Instead, they present liberation as emancipation from these very ideas, rejecting what Susan Buck-Morss in 2003 already termed "Westoxification" (Buck-Morss 2006, 22), positively invoking a concept popularised by supporters of the Islamic Revolution in Iran to denounce what they saw as Western foreign infiltration and alienation from Islam (Debashi 1993). As Alain Finkielkraut noted, this form of 'altruism' reduces postcolonial subjects to a monolithic identity, sacrificing their individual realities to an abstract ideal (Elbe 2024, 269f.; Finkielkraut 1989). In doing so, it does not free them from domination but denies them access to democracy and emancipation.

After 9/11, a wave of new cultural fatigue and weariness with modernity became apparent that somehow replicates the fin de siècle's intellectual anti-intellectualism. While Ludwig Klages, in a desire for authenticity, opposed fin de siècle intellectualism as logocentrism, this motif recurred a hundred years later as a critique of so-called phallogocentrism – a fusion of phallocentrism, understood as privileging a male-centred point of view, and logocentrism, understood as a focus on language as assigning meaning to the world. Judith Butler refers to this specifically in relation to the formation of heteronormativity, but also to neo-colonialism:

> The effort to include "Other" cultures as variegated amplifications of a global phallogocentrism constitutes an appropriative act that risks a repetition of the self-aggrandizing gesture of phallogocentrism, colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call that totalizing concept into question.
> *(Butler 1990, 18)*

This neologism serves as a framework within which Western universalist concepts of freedom, emancipation, and autonomy can henceforth be read as forms of

Western patriarchal oppression of non-Western women. In the words of Gayatri Spivak: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1994, 92).

Consequently, many Western feminist and postcolonial theorists started to worship purportedly authentic communities and collectivities in the Global South, notwithstanding their oppressive patriarchal structures. Angela Davis, for example, asserted that "it is refreshing to be out of the USA where we don't always have to challenge the constant individualization that happens especially under the impact of neoliberal ideologies. We talk about collectivities and communities" (AlQaws 2012, 05:08). In face of 9/11, the feminist theorist Susan Buck-Morss argued that Western universal values, hence emancipation and feminism, had failed and that Western criticism of modernity was in crisis. In a profoundly irrational way, she hoped for support from Islamism. In the preface to her book *Thinking Past Terror*, first published in 2003, she introduced the line of reasoning in all its absurdity as follows: "The book's central proposal is that Islamism as a political discourse can be considered together with Critical Theory as critiques of modernity in its Western-developed form" (Buck-Morss 2006, 12). She referred to Sayyid Qutb, one of the masterminds of the Muslim Brotherhood, and located the points of contact between Adorno and Qutb in the concept of immanent critique:

> The influential Egyptian writer, Sayyid Qutb, a contemporary of the Frankfurt School theorists, critically attacked Islamic regimes as a return of the condition of ignorance – the "*Jahiliyyah*" of pre-Islamic times. Hence present-day Islamic society (Egypt) was un-Islamic. The strategy precisely paralleled the argument of Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment, that Western reason, which emerged from myth, had itself turned back into myth.
>
> *(Buck-Morss 2006, 98)*

Sayyid Qutb was a leading ideologue of the Islamo-fascist Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas later emerged. His repressive critique of contemporary Egyptian society, which he dismissed as decadent, bore no resemblance to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; rather, it closely paralleled the National Socialist rejection of modernity. Accordingly, the Nazis supported the Muslim Brotherhood both materially and ideologically (Herf 2009). Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno's, Qutb's project was anything but emancipatory: he sought to purge Islamic society of all that he deemed un-Islamic, enforcing a particularly repressive interpretation of Sharia – even, if necessary, through violence. His stance amounted to an antimodern critique of modernity, animated by a longing for a pure Islamic origin. Hitler, similarly, yearned for the eradication of all modern mediation. By contrast, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of modernity was radically modern and rooted in Enlightenment; it turned explicitly against the search for authenticity and aimed to salvage precisely that aspect of Enlightenment which Qutb wished to abolish: the idea of individual freedom and happiness. Qutb's critique of *Jahiliyyah*

('ignorance') was grounded not in reason, intellectuality, or critical thinking, but solely in authoritative reference to Allah. Buck-Morss's mistaken and irrational comparison between Critical Theory and Islamism reduces immanent critique to a formalistic method of social analysis no longer directed towards emancipation and freedom. The whole impetus of Critical Theory – to rescue Enlightenment from its intrinsic dark sides and liberate its potential in the sense of emancipation and freedom – vanishes in Buck-Morss's relativism, which allows anti-emancipatory movements like Islamism to be viewed as an appropriate replacement for Western thought, notwithstanding that, according to Qutb's Islamism, sovereignty belongs not to individuals but to God alone, and thus regards democracy as blasphemy (Kepel 1985, 46–48). Like Hitler, Qutb cast himself and his followers as an avant-garde against the decadence of modernity.

To mention Qutb in the same breath as Horkheimer and Adorno not only ignores Qutb's rabid antisemitism but also overlooks the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno developed Critical Theory in crucial ways as they came to take antisemitism increasingly seriously. Qutb, on the other hand, in his text with the telling title *Our Struggle with the Jews* (Qutb 1987, cf. Kiefer 2013), first published in 1950 and frequently reprinted, created crude antisemitic conspiracy myths about Jews doing evil and about Allah sending the Muslims and Hitler to save the world from the Jews:

> Allah let Hitler rule over [the Jews]. And even today, the Jews have returned to evil in the form of "Israel", which causes the Arabs, the owners of the land, grief and suffering. May Allah send down upon the Jews people who will inflict the worst punishment on them.
>
> *(Quoted in Herf 2009, 259)*

The left-Islamist alliance advocated by Buck-Morss requires not only consistently blinding out antisemitism but also antifeminism. This erasure is accomplished by framing autonomy in postcolonial contexts as autonomy from "Westoxification" (Buck-Morss 2006, 22) and freedom as liberation from Western hegemony: "What is involved here is not freedom but dignity. And in a postcolonial context, dignity matters. Better put, dignity is freedom in a different sense, as liberation from Western hegemony" (Buck-Morss 2006, 53). In this view, freedom is too abstract, while dignity appears authentic. What is disregarded is that dignity does not, in and of itself, imply equal rights; yet in such debates, equal rights are often rejected as a neocolonial discourse that ignores indigenous cultural knowledge as a different kind of literacy. Such a perspective recalls a Manichean worldview that sets the West as monolithic and purely repressive against the Global South, which in turn is purified of internal contradictions to serve as an idealised projection screen for anti-Western resentments. This becomes clear in Buck-Morss's account of the relationship between women and freedom in Islam: "Nothing, we are told by the Western hegemonic discourse, so differentiates 'us' from 'them' as the

lack of freedom for women in Islamist societies" (Buck-Morss 2006, 27). Instead of criticising the oppressive character of Islamist gender regimes, Buck-Morss legitimatises strict Islamist behavioural codes as "based on respect for women (in contrast to the 'Western' commodification of women and their disparagement as sex objects)" (Buck-Morss 2006, 27). Similar to Judith Butler, who approvingly referred to descriptions of the Islamic burka as an "exercise of modesty and pride" behind and through which "female agency can and does work" (Butler 2004, 142), Buck-Morss also locates with veiled Islamic women the force of negation capable of effectively countering the flaws of "Western modernity" while at the same time "performing their own feminist critique of the culture industry's reification of women's bodies" (Buck-Morss 2006, 55). In this view, consumerism and the commodification of women's bodies is all that Western freedom has to offer women, and from this form of freedom non-Western women must supposedly be protected (for a critique, see Moghissi 1999, 41). What Butler and Buck-Morss, however, both absolutely refuse to see and admit is that Western freedom in fact offers far more, not least democratic participation, uncensored engagement in public discourse, equality, and individual rights to sexual self-determination. Instead, Butler delegitimised struggles against unequal gender relations in Islam when they were pursued by Western powers, characterising them as a "culturally imperialist exploitation of feminism" (Butler 2004, 41). As Viola Roggenkamp sharply points out, such feminists "confront the dreary Babylon of sin in The West by the headscarf-clad Muslim woman as a Mater Morgana of the pure, the exalted woman" (Roggenkamp 2003).

The Western accomplishments in gender equality are the bone of contention in the very Islamist critique of *Jahiliyyah*, which Buck-Morss positively refers to, as the Moroccan feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi points out:

> Pre-Islamic sexuality is described in Arab literature as chaotic, all-embracing, rampant promiscuity whose essence is women's self-determination, freedom to choose and dismiss their sexual partner, or partners, and the utter unimportance of the biological father and paternal legitimacy. The idea of female sexual self-determination which is suggested by the term "women's liberation" is likely to stir ancestral fears of this mythical (pre-civilized) Jahiliya woman before whom the male is deprived of all his initiative, control, and privilege.
>
> *(Mernissi 2011, 181f.)*

Rebecca Schönenbach, referring to the Algerian sociologist and women's rights activist Marieme Hélie-Lucas, outlines that in order to overcome what Islamists call the uncivilised pre-Islamic era – *Jahiliyyah* – they follow a consistent three-stage strategy. First, they target women's legal rights under the guise of "protecting Muslim women", pushing for gender segregation in public spaces. The second stage consists of direct assaults on critics like journalists, cartoonists, women's rights advocates. Finally, they escalate to indiscriminate violence against anything seen as

incompatible with the Islamist ideal: cafés, football matches, nightclubs (Schönenbach 2025, 47). The Islamist attack on the Bataclan, a concert hall in Paris, on 13 November 2015, with about 130 people dead and hundreds more injured, stands as a brutal emblem of this final stage, as does 7 October – a stage in which antisemitism and misogyny converge in assaults on spaces of mixed, secular, and joyful life.

When Western intellectuals refer positively to Islamist ideology, it is not only hostility towards free sexuality and bodily autonomy that is being disguised as dignity and authenticity; it is also a display of anti-intellectualism. The idea that all women should be emancipated from patriarchal relations and have access to modern knowledge and education is rejected as a neocolonial gesture. Ramón Grosfoguel, professor emeritus at University of California, Berkeley, coined the term "epistemicide" (Grosfoguel 2009, 99; for a critique, see Elbe 2025), understood as the deliberate and methodical destruction of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage in the Southern Hemisphere by the West. Accordingly, decolonial feminism accuses White feminists of imposing Western ideas on the Global South in a neocolonial manner, thereby suppressing 'local ideas' and 'indigenous knowledge' (e.g., Vergès 2021; for a critical view, see Zerilli 2009). Western feminists are portrayed as super-intellectuals with no sense of cultural authenticity, who would suppress indigenous systems of knowledge that contradict the Western idea of emancipation. While it is indeed necessary to criticise Western ideas for their social restrictions – universalism for not being universal, freedom and autonomy for being restricted to certain groups of people while excluding others – romanticising cultural authenticity, on the other hand, obscures the oppressive aspects of what is deemed authentic and implies the denial of misogyny, antifeminism, racism, and antisemitism within non-Western cultural communities. This reactionary stance disguised as progressive thought mirrors the mindset Adorno criticised in *Minima Moralia* as "that form of reaction which not only fails to acknowledge itself as such but even passes off its reactionary moment as ahead of its time" (Adorno 2005, 218).

This form of provincialised progressivism and longing for authenticity becomes particularly relevant in the context of antisemitism and misogyny: in a cultural relativistic and essentialising manner, both ideologies are provincialised to facilitate their denial or legitimation, a pattern evident not only in parts of academia but also in the art world. One example of this is *documenta 15*, the largest international exhibition of contemporary art worldwide, which took place in the German city of Kassel in 2022 and caused an antisemitism scandal. Some members of the Indonesian artists' collective Ruan Grupa, selected as the curatorial team, openly expressed support for the antisemitic Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. Almost inevitably, the *documenta 15* global art show they curated featured several works employing both overt and subtle antisemitic codes. The most controversial and ultimately removed work was a metre-long painting by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi entitled People's Justice, which depicted the struggle

of indigenous communities against Western imperialism. In keeping with the popular Manichean anti-imperialist worldview, the painting is divided into two parts, with the imperialist, Western, decadent, and all-destroying side on the left, depicting all sorts of terrifying figures in garish colours. These include a soldier with a Star of David and a pig's face, and a man with bloodshot eyes, a hooked nose, thick glasses, and payot curls. On his bowler hat, the double rune sign of the SS is clearly visible, which suggests that Jews were the new Nazis. This figure is placed at the centre of the imperialist side, acting as the mastermind behind Western capitalist omnipotence. The figure also has bloody vampire fangs and looks like Dracula, thus not only quoting the antisemitic image of the Jew as a bloodsucker (as a metaphor for usury) but also showing the clearly sexualised component of decadent lust and sexual permissiveness. The strange scenery of the painting is permeated with sexual fantasies, with phallic symbols and lecherous figures alternating.

While the antisemitism in the painting was quickly exposed and criticised, leading to its removal, the sexist and antifeminist components of the painting have received little attention. Yet they are just as powerful and effective. In the immediate vicinity of the antisemitic depiction of the Jew as a blood-soaked string-puller, there are striking depictions of monstrous, sexually devouring women: naked or scantily clad, bare-breasted, and with tongues hanging out lustfully, half-animal, half-human, they appear as seductresses and yet themselves seduced by the Jewish figure and his money: they push full shopping trolleys in front of them, to which their desire seems to be directed. Pretending to criticise the excesses of consumerism based on exploiting the Global South, the picture in fact denounces as evil and abhorrent a sexuality that is directed towards pleasure and escapes the narrow confines of procreation – a free sexuality that in this image is distorted into a monstrosity identified with whores and Jews. Both symbolise unnatural, decadent, commodified greed and lust.

In contrast, the right-hand side of the painting depicts idealised communities of indigenous peoples suffering under the yoke of the imperialist West. This part of the world is painted in clear, earthy colours, expressing above all a connection with the soil and a rootedness in tradition. There is no suggestion of sexual desire or eroticism, and all bodies are covered, except for one male figure, who works hard in the fields and has a bare torso. On this side of the painting, women are mainly represented as suffering and nurturing mothers with children. Their hardship, as the scenery suggests, is due solely to the oppression and exploitation by the powers on the other side of the picture, while the traditional patriarchal community structures are presented as harmonious. Any internal contradiction and conflict is removed from the indigenous side and projected onto the imperialist side.

The antisemitism in this painting is not limited to the figures of Jews, but permeates the entire depiction, from the juxtaposition of decadent modernity and authentic immediacy to the motifs of pathological defence against transgressive sexuality. These moments act as a hinge between antisemitism and misogyny. In the light of Adorno's remarks on the various components of the loss of experience,

Taring Padi's huge picture can be seen as a symbol for the interconnection of culture industry, anti-intellectualism, and an antimodern longing for authenticity. Not only does it contain individual antisemitic and sexist figures, but the whole image reflects an antisemitic and antifeminist worldview.

Reactions to the scandal in the art world and the wider public were mixed. On the one hand, there were calls for an awareness of antisemitism in postcolonial contexts, while on the other there were denials that such images could be considered antisemitic at all, precisely because the context was postcolonial. This reveals a specific provincialisation of antisemitism, according to which antisemitism as well as the awareness of it was an issue especially and only in Germany because of the Nazi past. The awareness of antisemitism, therefore, is provincialised as something particularly and necessarily German, while the rest of the world can advance to different frames of reference. It would be inadmissible, the argument goes on, to impose this specifically German framing on actors who are in a completely different position and come from a different historical context. One and the same act – displaying an antisemitic and misogynist worldview – purportedly takes on different meaning depending on who is doing it. This view not only consistently ignores the Christian as well as Islamic background of Southeast Asian societies and the corresponding historical influences, but also the global nature of antisemitism in the past and present, such as the fact that the Nazi programme to exterminate Jews worldwide was a global enterprise, with opponents but also prominent supporters in the Islamic world, such as Amin Al Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who served as a Nazi ally (Herf 2009; Küntzel 2024; Motadel 2014). Especially against this background, it is important to insist on a universalist understanding of antisemitism as a general problem of humanity and to demand that everyone oppose it equally. In contrast, the particularist view, which argues from a cultural relativist perspective, focusses on the cultural positionalities of the subjects, while the objective level and the phenomenon itself – the antisemitism – is likely to be ignored.

The entanglements of anti-intellectualism, cultural relativism, Manichean anti-imperialism, anti-Western resentment, antifeminism, hatred of Israel, and antisemitism become clear in Taring Padi's painting but were by no means confined to this one case. A year after the *documenta 15* scandal, in October 2023, two members of the curatorial collective Ruan Grupa – responsible for displaying the antisemitic art – liked videos on social media showing Muslims cheering the Hamas massacres on 7 October and celebrating these massacres as resistance against an occupying power.

How is it that Western intellectuals have come to regard Islamism as an alternative to Western modernity, to legitimise Hamas as 'armed resistance', while overlooking both antisemitism and antifeminism? From 9/11 to 10/7, one can trace a gradual habituation to an identity-political indifference towards the victims of global Islamism – including, in the first place, Muslim victims. Antisemitism and antifeminism are bracketed or, in some cases, reframed as expressions of resistance by 'the oppressed' against 'Western cultural imperialism'. Concepts are turned

upside down and used against their own meaning, which is deliberately suspended – mirroring a nihilistic worldview in which, in an Orwellian sense, antisemitism and antifeminism can appear as a form of liberation from Western supremacy. The many, often mutually contradictory, layers of meaning of a concept are not grasped dialectically but collapse into a nihilistic anarchy.

Once, Critical Theorists, especially Adorno and Horkheimer, advocated a form of dialectical thinking that was not beyond regulation or structure, but relied on concepts and terms that were kept open and fluid in order to adequately respond to the sociohistorical content of the phenomenon in question (Adorno 1993). This means that the phenomenon, here antisemitism and sexism, is in the foreground, with all its historical specificities. Critical Theory's dialectical thinking is not neutral but starts from a value judgement: that existing societies are unfree, and that antisemitism and sexism are central components of this unfreedom. It seeks change and emancipation and involves doubting everything that is presented as absolute. It questions dogmas of faith, ossified traditions, and the naturalisation of social conditions in what are called hard facts. This kind of thinking in Critical Theory does not, however, give up on reliable concepts and terms that carry a universal meaning. Instead, the universal shall be rescued in determinate negation of those moments that hinder its true universality.

In contrast, within the poststructuralist and postmodern traditions of thought, critique of the positivist fixation of concepts culminates in the radical deconstruction of the concept itself, understood as an instrument of domination over the particular. As Eva Illouz (2024), Bruno Chaouat (2020), and Ingo Elbe (2024) point out, the intellectual blindness of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism towards antisemitism and its intertwining with sexism is intrinsic to the development of the theory itself, namely the endless deconstruction of concepts and their universal meaning. In this move, thought seeks to cast off all systematic constraints and, in what Eva Illouz critically terms "supercritique" (Illouz 2024, 21), eventually drifts into an 'anything goes' of a post-truth and post-fact era. Yet where the binding force of the concept is entirely lost, so too are the distinguishing features of the phenomena it once encompassed. Recognition is no more possible without concepts than it is without a critical reasoning of them. Radical deconstructivism, on the other hand, erases the concepts and, with them, the memory of the phenomena they structure. The radical deconstruction of concepts, understood as the dissolution of their universal validity, abandons the phenomena rather than providing a framework for their experience and critique.

The immense loss of historical and political capacity for distinction and judgement that becomes obvious today as the new form of intellectual anti-intellectualism is inseparable from the erosion of concepts. The void created by the absence of binding concepts becomes apparent in debates surrounding 7 October: without a rigorously theorised concept of antisemitism and its entanglement with other ideologies, primarily misogyny and antifeminism, its significance in contemporary

societies is overlooked. When this happens, antisemitism and misogyny fail to be apprehended as the essential ideological context within which the actions of Hamas are situated.

### Anti-Intellectualism, Semi-Modernity, and 'Islam Under Siege'

The conceptual framework of antimodern reaction to modernism also sheds light on Islamic societies, which often display anti-intellectualism, a pursuit of authenticity, and a longing for purity – traits indicative of a backward-looking rather than forward-oriented mindset (Benslama 2017; Charlier 2017; Diner 2009; Tibi 2009; 2012). These features in Islamic societies echo the reactionary movements in early twentieth-century Germany. Bassam Tibi points out that Islamic societies are often characterised by a selective embrace of modernity: the strong tendency to adopt technological innovations while rejecting the cultural values tied to them, like (gender) equality, individualism, and secularism. He therefore uses the term "semi-modernity" to characterise Islamic societies (Tibi 2009). Similarly, Jeffrey Herf used the term "reactionary modernism" to characterise the National Socialist foreshortened acquisition of modernity in the sense of taking over technology and valuing industrialisation, while rejecting modernity on the ethical, social, and political level (Herf 1986). There seems to be a striking similarity or even ideological continuity between National Socialism and Islamism with regard to fighting off Enlightenment ideas. Both created crude conspiracy narratives concerning a 'Jewish' mind that would ruin the *Volkskörper* or the Umma from within.

Tibi explains that the narrative of 'Islam under siege' blends conspiracy myths with anti-intellectualism, anti-Western attitudes, and antisemitism:

> Long before the expression 'war of ideas' was used in the West to describe the conflict between secular democracy and jihadism, Islamists and Salafists spoke of harb al-afkar against alleged victimization of the Muslim umma in a world-political circumstance of 'Islam under siege.' The framework of this war is provided by the idea of ghazu fikri (intellectual invasion of the world of Islam), allegedly instigated by the Jews.
>
> *(Tibi 2012, 69)*

The sexist component in this antisemitic and anti-intellectual conspiracy ideology manifests in the denial of women's access to education, as currently most radically practised by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Hamas, too, grounds its worldview in such antisemitic conspiracy that feeds on misogyny and anti-intellectualism. Its charter claims that the West and Israel use educational materials, books, and films to estrange women from the Islamic community. Western ideas, together with their proponents – especially Israel and the West – are treated as mortal enemies (Hamas Covenant 1988). Not all Islamist regimes exclude women from public life and deny them access to education to such an extent as the Taliban do. In the Islamic

Republic of Iran, for example, women have access to almost all fields of education, although instruction usually takes place in gender-segregated settings. Critics such as Fathiyeh Naghibzadeh explain this apparent gender equality within a segregated system by arguing that an ideology of gender apartheid, if taken seriously, requires women in all areas of social life – particularly as doctors and teachers. What distinguishes the Iranian Islamist regime from the Taliban's 'Stone Age Islamism' is that the latter treats women as subhuman, whereas the former replaces the principle of equality with the principle that women were of equal moral worth and dignity but fundamentally different, which implies inequality before the law and restricted access to public and political spheres.

Much like in European modern antisemitism, the ideology of 'Islam under siege' – which refers to the widespread feeling among Muslims that their faith has been under attack since 9/11 (Ahmed 2003) – can, in some respects, be understood as a compensatory response to a perceived sense of powerlessness in the face of the West's economic and technological superiority. In such a scenario of self-victimisation, the realisation of human rights, and women's rights in particular, not only easily falls by the wayside but is openly sacrificed in order to uphold a sense of honour and dignity, behind which a hatred of modernity is concealed. In this strategy, the association of Jews with the free-floating and boundless mind, intellectualism, and the power of doubt, i.e., forces seen as destabilising traditional bonds following the dissolution of the Caliphate and, later, through globalisation, is of central importance: "The Jews are singled out and held responsible for all the wrongs that happened to Islam in its civilizational exposure to the West" (Tibi 2012, 182).

In response to the uncertainty brought by multiple political and economic transformation, Islamism divided modernity into two seemingly separate components: "the instruments to be adopted and the values to be vehemently rejected" (Tibi 2012, 189). These rejected values include individualism, the idea of autonomous subjectivity, and secularism, which are closely linked to the development of equal law, urbanisation, the emancipation of women, the emphasis of the individual in relation to communities, the weakening of traditional gender roles, and the freedom of thought, i.e., the ability to think beyond the restrictive bonds of religion and tradition. Islamists combat these values as forms of "Westoxification" (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 36; Elbe 2024, 198), which must be kept away from Islam. "In their venture the Islamists claim to purify the religion of Islam by casting out all 'inauthentic' ideas and influences" (Tibi 2012, 179). Only through such purification, they argue, can the Umma be strengthened again. This notion echoes the antisemitic-nationalist motto "Through purity to unity", a phrase used both in German nationalist student fraternities and in National Socialism. While the turn of the nineteenth century was marked by an unfulfilled longing for authenticity and a struggle to reach autonomous subjectivity, post-First World War Germany transformed this longing into an ethnonationalist and racist obsession with purity and collectivity.

The rejection of Western modern values does not stop Islamists from adopting the technological advancements that stem from the same modernity. This selective adoption, however, means that modernity is not internalised but merely appropriated on a technical level, thus remaining superficial. This is reflected in the lack of technological innovation within modern Islamic societies, which consistently adopt technology from the West or other non-Islamic regions rather than developing it themselves. "Islamists and Salafists overlook the fact that modern knowledge involves a certain way of looking at the world, i.e. a rational worldview, and also requires an uncensored, reason-based dealing with the related problems" (Tibi 2009, 315). Tibi sees this division of modernity as evidence of Islamism's inability to cope with the predicament of modernity. He traces how Islamism blocks the principal idea of cultural modernity, which, following Habermas, he identifies as the principle of subjectivity that implies four key premises: "1) individuation (principium individuationis), 2) the right to criticism, 3) autonomy of action, 4) idealistic philosophy itself as a self-conscious idea" (Tibi 2009, 316). Subjectivity – the core element of modernity – "highlights the capabilities of humans, based on human reason, to shape and master their own destiny. On the other hand, it makes religious faith reflective" (Tibi 2009, 316). Hence, semi-modernity has a serious effect on the development of the mind and subjectivity. Instead of fostering personal agency, curiosity, and independent thinking, this incomplete embrace of modernity has led to a widespread stereotypy in thinking and perceiving the world, to a weakening of subjectivity, and even to authoritarian desubjectivisation.

Whereas fin de siècle philosophy of life encapsulated a modern antimodernism which centrally included a struggle with the normative social demands of autonomous subjectivity, in National Socialism, autonomous subjectivity was completely flattened and replaced by a crude collectivism. This loss of subjectivity in collectivism is the result of an authoritarian rebellion against the bourgeois normative demand of autonomy and individualism. In contrast, Tibi characterises Islamic societies in the nineteenth and twentieth century as widely lacking these normative demands. The Western principle of subjectivity developed within the dialectic of domination and freedom, as outlined in Chapter 2. Subjectivation means achieving autonomy through self-control. This includes, above all, the mastery of one's own inner nature, which included the internalisation of the incest taboo as a fundamental pillar of civilisation. Subjectivation thus entails that individuals internalise the social normative framework, appropriating it as their own, and on this basis reflecting and criticising it. Once the mechanisms of control have been internalised, immediate external repression is no longer required.

In the West, modernity has established the autonomous subject as a normative ideal, yet the concrete realisation of this ideal repeatedly fails under social conditions that obstruct self-determination and autonomy. The subject here remains caught in an irresolvable contradiction: it is expected to be free, self-directed, and capable of enjoyment, while at the same time it encounters social and economic barriers that make precisely this freedom and autonomy impossible. The predicament

of Western modernity consists in the contradiction that people are supposed to be individuals while society does not provide them the conditions to truly individualise, first of all economic independence and a work logic based on the needs of the people and directed at the fulfilment of their needs instead of profit maximation. That these moments are not sufficiently found within the logic of modern production processes constitutes a major structural obstacle to equality, self-determination, and intersubjectivity. Against that background, individualisation is incomplete or even fails due to this contradiction. This failure, however, is rarely reflected upon as socially conditioned; rather, it is externalised and projected onto the Jews, who have become representatives of 'money and mind', and so of mediation. This is why, in Western societies, antisemitism works like a false cure: it is a compensation for failed individualisation.

In Islamic societies, however, as Tibi argues, the situation is structured in a different way. The idea of the autonomous subject, which involves processes of individualisation at the social level and the internalisation of drive control at the individual level, has not emerged in the same way; thus, the problem of coping with the normative demand to become an autonomous subject, and of failing to achieve individual autonomy, does not arise to the same extent. Instead, the ideal of socialisation in Islamic societies is still widely connected to the community. A ban on individuals separating themselves from the community on an emotional, social, and economic level serves as a counterpoint to autonomous subjectivation. Instead of the internalisation of social norms, religious and patriarchal rules still widely regulate the social order by assigning each member a clearly defined place, particularly through strictly hierarchical community structures, systems of gender apartheid, and normative systems of honour.

Islamist ideology reinforces this dynamic by reacting against tendencies towards Westernisation within Muslim communities produced by global capitalism, which exerts pressures towards subjectivation also in regions shaped by conservative Islam, a process further amplified by globalised social media use. Individuals are compelled to respond to this pressure, which results in the oft-cited tensions between tradition and modernity that lead to conflict within traditional Muslim communities. Islamism is a reaction against the struggle for modern subjectivation within Muslim communities that led to at least a partial turn away from religion and towards an identification with Western values. Islamism seeks to reverse these developments.

Whereas Western authoritarianism builds upon disappointed processes of subjectivation – arising from the rebellion of failed autonomy claims – Islamic authoritarianism functions precisely to prevent the very emergence of the idea of an autonomous subject, and in this sense also to prevent the idea of internalisation, which, just like psychoanalysis, is widely regarded as Jewish and hence un-Islamic. This becomes especially evident in the domain of sexuality: while in the West the ambivalence between the promise of freedom and the reality of constraint often gives rise to projections in the form of sexist enemy images, which sometimes

result in femicides, the Islamist context openly and officially legitimises the immediate direction of these ambivalences against women, whose subordination and control serve as the institutionalised resolution of such tensions. Because the restraint of sexual drives is not sufficiently internalised as a social norm, the regulation of gender relations largely relies on practices of veiling women and of gender apartheid, that is, on externalising drive control. Women socialised in Islamic contexts are protesting against these dynamics of structural oppression, sometimes at the risk of their lives, as in Iran during the *Woman, Life, Freedom* uprisings. Like Western societies, Islamic societies cannot be characterised solely by their oppressive features but must also be understood in terms of the resistance of people within these societies against oppression.

The failure to adopt modernity has prevented the development of subjects who can balance the ambivalences of a modern world. True subjectivity requires the ability to mediate critically between personal autonomy and external pressures. Without a cultural, social, and political framework to support this kind of inner development of an autonomous subject, individuals in radical Islamic and other authoritarian contexts remain unable to process the disruptive and often disorienting changes brought about by modernity. Instead of cultivating the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and conflict, individuals are left unprepared and exposed to these changes, resulting in feelings of instability, disconnection, and anomie. This comes close to what Freud called the "discomfort in culture" (Freud 1999a), and Leo Löwenthal the "social malaise" (Löwenthal and Gutermann 2021) that finds expression in the narrative of 'Islam under siege'.

In fundamentalist Islam, people are entirely absorbed into an invented tradition – one that is imagined to have always existed exactly as it is and is not meant to change. Dan Diner describes the ahistorical moment in Islam as follows: "Quite unlike the historical thought developed in the West – namely, as something tied inextricably to movement and development – within the context of Islam, the concept of time has been 'sealed off', as it were, by the sacred" (Diner 2009, 8). This implies "that the core of historical thought in Islam is characterised by the understanding of time not as a linear development directed to the future, but rather as a return to an idealized, utopian past" (Diner 2009, 8).[6]

Since fundamentalist forms of Islam lack a however dialectical concept of future and progress comparable to that of European modernity, its drive to change social conditions for the better differs considerably: similar to right-wing extremism, it is rather oriented towards the reestablishment of a mythical past while the curiosity for the not yet known is widely repressed. The idea of transformation directed towards the future is, in a sense, seen as a deviation from the faith. Mahrokh Charlier explains that fundamentalist Muslims direct "their life aspiration not toward the present or the future, but toward the past, toward the immutability of the prophetic tradition" (Charlier 2017, 69). This deeply affects the development of subjectivity and intellectuality, particularly that of women. In contexts where women serve as symbols of an authentic feeling of community (Rumpf 2003, 18), their subjectivity

is likely to be erased in their roles as wife and mother, and ultimately as preservers of the Umma.[7] But male subjectivity and individuation is also deeply affected by the identification processes being directed primarily towards the Islamic community instead of individuality. The widespread use of the name prefix Abu – meaning 'father of' – in Arabic male names indicates that men in Islamic contexts, too, are not regarded primarily as individuals in the emphatic sense, but rather as heads of or members of family units.

Anti-individualism and anti-intellectualism in conservative Islamic – and even more so in Islamist – contexts implies a prohibition against separation between the individual and the community (Charlier 2017, 75). The individual is expected to dissolve entirely into the collective. This goes hand in hand with the culture of honour, deeply entrenched in conservative Islamic milieus. The pursuit of honour and the fear of honour loss are not attached to the individual; rather, individuals become executors of the honour of the family or the community. This is precisely what renders honour codes so rigid and leaves individuals little room to develop their subjectivity outside strict communal norms.

This dense web of norms surrounding family honour and its defence is clearly gendered and sexualised. Women and girls are expected to uphold family honour through chaste behaviour. Men and boys, by contrast, are charged with the continuous surveillance of female family members and with intervening should they fail to conform to normative expectations. Honour is thus tied in particular to the sexuality of women and girls, which must not be 'tainted'. This dynamic is not concerned with protecting women's self-determination but, on the contrary, with preventing it. The social standing of both the man and the family depends on the perceived chastity of women.

These dynamics give rise to ideals of masculinity that legitimise violence when family honour is perceived to be under threat – ranging from persistent harassment to the exclusion of non-compliant women from the family unit to honour killings. Short of such extremes, honour cultures anchored in the community foster heightened dispositions towards violence among men whose self-image often diverges sharply from their lived reality, indicating a fracture between individual and community. Practitioners working in antiviolence programmes report that many young Muslim men mandated by courts to attend such training state that they are not inherently aggressive, nor wish to be; rather, they claim to have felt compelled to defend the honour of their sister, mother, or family against perceived provocations and insults (Pfeifer et al. 2018; Toprak 2020).

The invented tradition of Islamists rests fundamentally on two pillars: antisemitism and gender apartheid, mediated via antiindividualism. As described in Chapter 3, women in Islamism – much like in National Socialism – are seen as entry points for contamination and thus embody the potential for the internal decay of the community. According to this ideology, Jews (now as Israelis) lead women towards such subversion by filling their heads with the whims of Western ideas. Therefore, the Jew must be fought in order to preserve the woman as the foundational pillar of the Umma – a term that etymologically and ideologically points

to the idea of the desexualised mother (Benslama 2017). Authenticity and purity are the discursive building blocks through which antisemitism and antifeminism operate, both in Western and in Islamic societies. In both cases, this is not simply antimodernism, but "reactionary modernism" (Meera Nanda, quoted in Elbe 2024, 286; see also Herf 1986) – an anti-emancipatory fusion of modernity and antimodernity.

### Anti-Intellectualism as Redemptive Violence

In anti-intellectualism of various kinds – fin de siècle European, National Socialist, Islamist – the mind is feared and opposed as something that, through mobility, openness, and curiosity, calls long-established systems of order into question and thereby puts them at risk. What is being resisted here, first and foremost, is a dynamic of change that modern society generates from within itself. This also explains the ideological division of modernity into two supposedly clearly separable realms which in reality correspond to one another: technology on the one hand (including surveillance, disciplinary, and military technologies), which is readily adopted; and, on the other hand, the values of the Enlightenment – equality, freedom, and autonomy – which even in the West, where they originally emerged within a specific sociopolitical and economic historical context, have never been fully realised and were ultimately completely rolled back under National Socialism. In Islamism, too, these values are met with uncompromising rejection. And as in National Socialism, those identified with the spirit of change are demonised in Islamism as well. These are, first and foremost, Jews, but also women, whose social position can only improve through Enlightenment, education, an unruly mind, and openness to emancipatory social transformation.

All the more disturbing against this background is the fact that this biting antimodern anti-intellectualism – where hostility towards the mind is bound up with hostility towards human beings as bodily beings and embodied subjects entitled to satisfaction and happiness – is rarely the exclusive domain of the completely uneducated. Also the currently dominant progressive rejection of modernity in cultural relativism is an intellectual enterprise aimed at warding off change, even if its impetus may differ from the Islamist and right-wing radicals: in order to combat the negative effects of the Enlightenment in colonialism and racism, the Enlightenment as a whole, together with its values, is deconstructed and broadly condemned as hostile to the ways of life of non-Western peoples. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and more recently since 9/11, this Western anti-Western interest in deconstructing the Enlightenment has increasingly attached itself to Islam, which is to be rescued from Western imperialist and colonialist deformation and which, in turn, is expected to rescue the West from the failures of the Enlightenment.

For the 'true' Islamic community, an original inner unity and harmony are postulated. Social antagonisms, differing cultural orientations, and conflicting interests – such as those in gender relations – therefore appear solely as the result

of influences from 'outside'. In other words, deviation becomes betrayal. Women in particular, who articulate divergent views and, for example, criticise patriarchal structures within the community, are within this logic easily denounced as "Westernised traitors" to "authentic culture" and as "internal enemies" (Kreile 2003b, 40).

The lines of argument found in progressive cultural relativism, far-right ethnopluralism, and Islamism overlap. This applies both to their insistence on sealing off and 'purifying' national, cultural, ethnic, or religious collectives, eventually grounded in traditional antifeminist gender relations, and to their shared anti-Western orientation and hostility towards the mind. For this reason, all three also share antisemitism in one form or another.

From the fin de siècle through National Socialism to Islamism, it has repeatedly been members of the educated classes who have demonised the mind as a force that liberates people from narrow social conditions. This intellectual anti-intellectualism can be seen both in Ludwig Klages's life-philosophical attack on the mind and in Sayyid Qutb's learned defence of a fundamentalist Islamic order against pre-Islamic *Jahiliyyah* – a term that functions as a code word for what is rejected as decadence. Jews and women stand at the centre of these attacks. National Socialist ideologue Ludwig Langemann framed them as a national-heroic struggle against the "Jewish-democratic-feminist Mammon-spirit" (quoted in Kuhn 1990, 45). Islamist Malek Bennabi rejected the twentieth century as the "century of the woman, the Jew, and the dollar" (quoted in Bensoussan 2019, 87). The same logic appears among Iranian Islamist leaders who interpret gender equality as a Zionist plot. Both the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* and the Islamist-radicalised Umma conspired against the liberating mind and accused its supposed representatives – the Jews – of conspiracy.

"Those impelled by blind murderous lust have always seen in the victim the pursuer who has driven them to desperate self-defense", Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002, 154), pointing to the projective nature of conspiratorial thinking. Self-victimisation is an essential part of this mentality. National Socialist demagogues portrayed the invasion of neighbouring countries as 'counterattacks' and the annihilation of the Jews as self-defence. Their delusion of redemption also targeted the abstract mind.

In Islamism, self-victimisation has become a central programme under the slogan 'Islam under siege'. The attacks on the Bataclan and on the editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015 were anti-intellectual massacres aimed at a critical, unruly, and questioning mind – one that expresses itself in joy, pleasure, and mockery of reactionaries. These massacres function as sacrificial rituals meant to restore the narrative of 'Islam under siege' against the alleged provocation of lascivious unbelievers. It is no coincidence that the egalitarian spirit was targeted here as well. As in National Socialism, Islamism combines feelings of inferiority with a delusion of redemption from abstraction and equality, culminating in exterminatory antisemitism.

## Notes

1 See Chapter 2.
2 In contrast to Critical Theory, poststructuralist and postmodern critiques pushed the rejection of fixed concepts to the point of their dissolution, where the loss of binding terms risks dissolving the very features of the phenomena they once described – an 'anything goes' that undermines the experience and understanding of the phenomena. The implications of this loss for understanding antisemitism have been critically examined by Eva Illouz (2024) and Bruno Chaouat (2020).
3 When Adorno refers to the "critical element in the mind of the Jews", the question arises whether there is a real substance to the Jewish mind or whether it is entirely the product of an anti-intellectual and antisemitic imagination. Since ideologies do not emerge in a vacuum, they do not function as abstractly as one might wish when defending a purely projection-based theory that denies any correspondence with reality. Antisemitism does not attach itself to just anyone, but specifically to Jews, who became so apt as projection screens not only due to their being subjects of domination, but also because, historically, they represent what antisemites hate, and not merely in a projected sense. In Judaism, intellect, education, doubt, and ambivalence have in fact played a much more central role than in Christianity. Gender relations among Jews in the enlightened bourgeois milieu were also, in reality, far more advanced, as can be seen in the case of Rahel Varnhagen. Moreover, within European nation-states, Jews indeed long possessed only an abstract form of citizenship and thus became representatives of abstractness. This means that antisemitism does not entirely invent the Jew; rather, it attaches itself to something that actually exists, but distorts and disfigures it into something negative, and turns it into absolute evil. The problem, therefore, does not lie with Jews, but with antisemites, who cannot tolerate what Jews sometimes genuinely stand for: for example, a different gender regime despite the patriarchal traditions within Judaism; or the refusal to submit to the Christian conception of God, insisting instead that a human being (Jesus) cannot be God; the this-worldly orientation of Jewish messianism and the refusal to regard the world as redeemed, all of this, and much more, constitutes traits that are provocative for the antisemite. This also becomes evident in contemporary Islamic antisemitism: Jews and Israelis are hated because they in fact represent modernity in the region, including gender relations that contradict those dominant in Islam. Female soldiers in the IDF are the most striking example. For antisemites, the established order appears turned upside down.
4 For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Chapter 7.
5 See, as examples of the many similar statements against Israel that have supported Hamas, virulently reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator and calling the massacre a legitimate act of anti-colonial resistance: "Joint Statement by Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups on the Situation in Palestine" (https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/10/10/psc-statement-backlash/), "Brown Students for Justice in Palestine's Statement on the Recent Events in Palestine" (https://www.instagram.com/p/CyRiOLyp2Ge/?img_index=1), "Statement in Solidarity with the Palestinian People", University of Gent, 10 October 2023 (https://www.ugent.be/ps/conflict-ontwikkeling/en/news-events/news/statementpalestinianpeople); "Join the Thousands of Writers Who Have Signed This Letter for Gaza", 27 October 2023 (https://lithub.com/join-thousands-of-writers-in-signing-this-letter-for-gaza/).
6 Diner goes on to explain the difference between Islam and Judaism as two religions of the law: "If, however, there is a difference between these two religions of the law, it is that two thousand years of diaspora life have equipped the Jews to live in two temporal orders: Jewish time and that of the local culture in whose midst Jews happen to be. Having to live in, and between, different times enabled Jews to develop a dual modus vivendi analogous to separated spheres of life that later evolved with secularization. This strategy of separation was not available to Islam. As a religion embracing law, power, and domination, Islam is an intrinsically political religion" (Diner 2009, 9).

7 The feminist critical theorists Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell criticised the "situated vision of the self as a member of a family, community, etc." as deeply anti-individualistic and "problematic for feminists" when being a woman is seen as largely culturally situated, as is even more the case today especially in postcolonial and cultural relativist approaches. "Indeed, her individuality has been sacrificed to the 'constitutive definitions' of her identity as member of a family, as someone's daughter, someone's wife and someone's mother. The feminine subjects have disappeared behind their social and communal persona" (Benhabib and Cornell 1986, 12). They go on to explain that, despite shared criticism of the liberal concept of the self, feminist and communitarian perspectives diverge in key ways. While communitarians emphasise the embeddedness of the self within a web of social relationships and narratives, feminists also acknowledge this situatedness but stress the importance of renegotiating psychosexual identities and enabling individuals to autonomously reconstruct them – an essential process for women's and human liberation more general (Benhabib and Cornell 1986, 12f.): "The self is not defined exhaustively by the roles that constitute its identity; nor are social roles to be accepted uncritically. The simple identification of the subject with its social roles reinstates the very logic of identity that feminists have sought to critique in their examinations of the psychosexual constitution of gender. The project is to develop post-traditional forms of gender identity on the basis of insights into the uniqueness of the female experience" (Benhabib and Cornell 1986, 13).

# 7

# CIRCULATION AND COMMODITY FETISHISM

Modern antisemitism cannot be adequately understood without situating it within the social abstractions of capitalist society. At its core lies a distorted confrontation with value, mediation, and abstraction – processes that structure modern life while remaining opaque to everyday experience. Where capitalist domination operates impersonally and through social forms rather than direct rule, antisemitic ideology responds by personalising and naturalising these abstractions, translating systemic contradictions into the figure of the Jew. This chapter examines antisemitism as a form of false critique of capitalism that misrecognises exploitation, commodification, and crisis by projecting them onto Jews as imagined agents of circulation, finance, and abstraction. At the same time, it shows that this misrecognition is inseparable from gendered ideologies: the ideological re-signification of money, productivity, and consumption relies on misogynistic distinctions between production and reproduction, purity and corruption, rootedness and mobility. By analysing the value form and its ideological distortions, the chapter traces how antisemitism and sexism converge in capitalist modernity and how these patterns reappear – reworked but structurally continuous – in National Socialism and contemporary Islamist anticapitalism.

## Antisemitism and the Value Form

As discussed in the chapter on nature and anti-nature, antisemitic ideology involves the naturalisation of abstract social processes that are not adequately understood, particularly the value form that permeates modern capitalist societies. Commodification and the related fetishisation are specific forms of this naturalisation – rendering as 'natural' what is in fact social and experienced as deeply disorienting. Jews are viewed as representatives of these disorienting processes in modern society.

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Hence, in antisemitism commodification takes place in a mediated manner. Fetishisation serves the function of naturalising what is incomprehensible. Projecting abstractness onto precast figures like the Jews reduces the complexity of modern social and economic structures and personalises them. In essence: antisemitism is not about exploiting Jewish workforce but about blaming exploitation on the Jews.

Modern antisemitism is centrally about projecting the negatively experienced aspects of capitalism onto Jews. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) and especially Moishe Postone (1980) elaborated, alongside capitalist exploitation Jews are also blamed for those moments in capitalism that are experienced as crisis-ridden. These include social upheaval, explosive urbanisation, rural exodus, the decline of traditional dependencies, and the emergence of a large, increasingly organised industrial proletariat (Postone 1980, 107; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 141–144), as well as the weakening of traditional gender roles and patriarchal family structures. The transition to capitalism marked the end of feudalism. However, this transition was barely recognised as a new form of rule, its uncomprehended abstractness opening it up to misinterpretation as a "Jewish takeover" (Claussen 1994, 110). "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, 107). Or, as Slavoj Žižek put it: "social antagonism comes first, and the 'Jew' merely gives body to this obstacle" (quoted in Frosh 2023, 136).

The limited empirical basis for the antisemitic identification of Jews with the sphere of circulation lies – like their identification with weakness – in the history of their socioeconomic exclusion. In feudal and traditional European societies, Jews were barred from craft guilds and land ownership, and capitalist societies restricted their access to industrial means of production, the primary source of surplus value (Claussen 1994). These exclusions forced Jews into intermediary roles in circulation, banking, and trade. The stereotype that all Jews are bankers or traders, and vice versa, is an antisemitic overgeneralisation of this historical process, in which the repressive exclusion and discrimination of Jews is turned against them. Jews thus became a projection screen for the economic misery of the broader population: the Jew as the cold-hearted creditor.

Projection transforms structural, abstract domination into concrete, personalised domination. Modern antisemitism provides psychological relief by attributing the intangible suffering produced by capitalism to intentional, malevolent actors. A central element of modern antisemitism is the hatred of the abstract nature of economic processes, which is attributed to Jews. "The intangible is thus sought to be rendered tangible" (Grigat 2025, 57). The personalisation of social and economic conditions forces established bourgeois forms of social interaction and mediated forms of social and economic domination into the framework of traditional, precapitalist patterns of perception. Modern social structures and power relations, which become increasingly abstract and detached from direct personal influence, are translated back into direct relationships between individuals, groups, or clans

(Claussen 2000, 99). In this process, what is conceptually reversed is the process of mediation. As Horkheimer and Adorno write:

> That is why people shout: "Stop thief!" – and point at the Jew. He is indeed the scapegoat, not only for individual maneuvers and machinations but in the wider sense that the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to him.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 142)*

This scapegoating results from a fundamental misunderstanding of capitalist dynamics, in particular of the law of value as deciphered by Marx. According to this law, workers, by signing a labour contract, sell their labour power to the owner of the means of production, including the full value they produce. The fact that this produced value far exceeds the value of their own labour power, and thus also their wages, remains hidden from them. They only perceive, in the sphere of circulation, how little they can buy with their wage and feel betrayed. Antisemitism overlooks the exploitation of workers in production and the production of surplus value (Grigat 2007, 279). The distorted perception of exploitative conditions sees profit as generated in the circulation sphere by traders rather than in the production sphere by workers and appropriated by owners of the means of production – as if sellers of goods would set prices arbitrarily. Focussing on the sphere of circulation rather than production thus constitutes a form of false consciousness. In its antisemitic articulation – the identification of the sphere of circulation with the Jews – it turns into a double false consciousness (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 142).

Postone, in his analysis of antisemitism as a distorted form of anticapitalism, refers to Marx's analysis of the double character of the commodity, in which use value and exchange value diverge and thus appear independent of each other (Marx 1962, 53). Postone takes it a step further, describing how the value form itself appears split into money (as abstract value) and commodities (as use value). This duality results in a perceived opposition: money is seen as abstract, decomposing, evil, and international, while commodities are seen as concrete and rooted in '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, 109). In contrast, industrial labour, ideologically dissociated from these abstract relations, "appears as the linear descendent of 'natural' artisanal labor, in opposition to 'parasitic' finance capital" (Postone 1980, 110).

Dichotomisation of this sort forms the ideological basis for the antisemitic distinction made especially by National Socialism between 'productive capital' and 'rapacious capital'. In this schema, abstract capitalist forces become racialised and biologised: "The opposition of the concrete material and the abstract becomes the racial opposition of the Arians and the Jews" (Postone 1980, 112). The abstract, associated with Jews, is imagined as a hidden global power – 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, 112).

In nineteenth-century Germany, this ideology gained particular traction, because there "the development of industrial capitalism was not only very rapid, but occurred in the absence of a previous bourgeois revolution and its consequent hegemonic liberal values and political culture" (Postone 1980, 107). Capitalisation without liberal political culture is an early sign of semi-modernity in Germany. In this context, the fetishisation of abstract social forces produced an antisemitic imaginary of conspiracy and domination.

Ideas of rootlessness, nature, and anti-nature, intertwined with exchange relations, play a key role here. Jews are imagined possessing an original mobility, granting them disproportionate access to economic spheres and culminating in the myth of 'world domination' in a modern, rootless world. The more uprooted people feel, or really are, the more they tend to cling to the idea of rootedness and reject a 'rootless life', in which modernity and mythic nomadic prehistory seem to touch (Klinger 2003, 32).

This ambivalence explains why Jews are perceived both as archaic and advanced, as nature and anti-nature – simultaneously representatives of an ancient past and of a threatening, mobile modernity: "They are regarded by advanced civilization as both backward and too advanced, like and unlike, shrewd and stupid" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 153). Against them, the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* is invoked as natural, stable, and grounded. Jews, constructed as embodying a threatening abstraction, become the object of projections driven by a deep yearning for tangible, comprehensible, and controllable social and economic relations.

At the heart of antisemitism, then, lies a distorted response to the failures of modernity: the broken promises of justice, equality, and freedom. Outrage at these failures, which stem from the very structure of capitalist society and circulate without clear object or subject, finds an anchor in the figure of the Jew. Jews are blamed for people's experiences of a cold and indifferent society, for perceived powerlessness and violations of justice. At the same time, this projection allows the coldness within society to be acted out with impunity against Jews, who have always been perceived as implicitly or explicitly guilty.

## Sexuality and Commodification

How does sexism enter the constellation of antisemitism and the value form? Like antisemitism, sexism is deeply embedded in the phantasmagorias of capitalism. While antisemitism constructs Jews as representatives of the economic sphere of circulation – primarily as speculators and finance capitalists – sexism commonly splits the image of women into mother and whore, the latter being available for everyone and a figure portrayed as a fallen woman excluded from nationalist and racist family planning. From the late eighteenth century onward, discourses about prostitution emerged as a space in which antisemitism and antifeminism intersected. In this constellation, women were seen as commodities, and Jews – stereotyped as pimps, white slave traders, and 'money Jews' – as their commodifiers.

Discourses that conflated Jews and prostitution gained popularity and were closely linked to the rise of ethnonationalist discourses on national health and hygiene (Bereswill and Wagner 1998; Gilman 1993; Herzog 2005). These discourses attributed physical and sensual qualities to money, both in the image of the 'money Jew' and that of the 'whore', thereby symbolically fusing sexuality and money (see Freud 1999c). Sexual desire and the lust for gold and wealth were amalgamated and portrayed as a specifically female and Jewish weakness (Dijkstra 1986). It follows that women's liberation from patriarchal constraints appeared to be a consequence of materialism: the lust for money was seen to drive women to abandon their traditional roles as mothers and caregivers and to use their sexuality not for procreation but for pleasure.

In this context, the antisemitic stereotype of Jewish rootlessness functioned as the antithesis of ethnic procreation, just as the stereotype of Jewish money-making stood in contrast to an ideologically valued national production, imagined as rooted in land and soil. At the fin de siècle, when capitalist financial transactions increasingly turned into anonymous processes, the antisemitic rhetoric surrounding the 'usurious money Jew' lost any residual semblance of a factual basis and should have seemed completely outdated. Yet this only intensified its appeal within antisemitic projection fantasies, which opened up an associative field of 'cancerous growth', of uncontrolled spread, transgression, and 'infiltration'. Within this field of associations, prostitution assumed a pivotal role. Numerous stereotypes intersect here: the counterpart to the antisemitic trope of 'Jewish decomposition' is the 'whore', who harms the people by transmitting the "lust plague" of syphilis (Haupt 2008). Christina von Braun (2004, 35) argues that discourses on prostitution reveal a reincarnation of disembodied signs, much like processes in racist antisemitism. As money became the universal equivalent, purchasable sexuality assigned it a bodily reality, thus re-embodying the abstract through the commodified female body. Antisemitic imagery reflects this dynamic in the figures of the 'Jewish financier' and the 'Jewish trafficker of women'. In such projections, both Jews and women are linked to the seductive and destructive power of money, giving it a concrete form. Instigated by the 'Jewish pimp', the prostitute does not contribute her body to the reproduction of the national body. Instead, as a 'sexual woman', she sells it for money, which, in turn, dissolves all rootedness. Like money and the Jew, she is perceived as life-denying, disintegrating, and deadly.

The connection between money and sexuality in antisemitic and misogynistic stereotypes, embodied in the figures of the 'money Jew' and the Jewish woman as 'sexual woman' and 'whore', serves to repress both. Antisemitism detests what mediates, the intermediary spheres of indirectness. This hatred manifests in multiple ways: in hatred of the law, as the sign of mediated power no longer directly linked to individual rulers; in hatred of the sphere of circulation, which mediates between production and consumption through the principle of equivalence; and in hatred of the mind, as the capacity to transcend immediate natural constraints. Hence, in antisemitism, the Jew stands for both mind and money: "The banker and

the intellectual, money and mind, the exponents of circulation, are the disowned wishful image of those mutilated by power, an image which power uses to perpetuate itself" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 141).

Sexual lust, too, is repressed and increasingly hated in antisemitism the more it eludes immediacy, that is, the less sexuality is directed towards reproduction, and the more pleasure becomes an end in itself. Such pleasure is considered 'whorish' and thereby directly associated with money as the general equivalent. In antisemitic and misogynistic stereotypes, the contradictions of modern, capital-accumulating society are ideologically synthetised. Under National Socialism, the idea of 'rapacious capital', identified with Jewishness, was linked with a sexuality that turned against reproduction, particularly in emancipated women (Planert 1998). Ludwig Langemann, cofounder of the *Bund zur Bekämpfung der Frauenemanzipation* ("League to Combat Women's Emancipation") in 1912 (Habermann 1998), and one of the most prominent proponents of antisemitism and misogyny in the early twentieth century, fantasised in his 1919 pamphlet *Die Zusammenhänge zwischen Semitismus, Demokratismus, Sozialismus und Feminismus* ("The Relationships between Semitism, Democratism, Socialism, and Feminism") that feminism and Judaism destroyed any sense of national heroism (see Kuhn 1990, 45). Similarly, Alfred Rosenberg, a key ideological architect of National Socialism, drew a direct link between women's emancipation and Judaism, claiming that both led a "parasitic life at the expense of male strength" and thus corroded the national community from within (quoted in Sauer-Burghard 2008, 36).

The sexualised element also stems from the connection between money and nature. The lust attributed to the 'Jewess' as the 'sexual woman' is often associated with greed for gold, as Bram Dijkstra illustrates in his analysis of antisemitic and misogynistic fin de siècle literature and art. The lust for gold is supposedly driven by women's alleged desire for male potency and their surreptitious intention to emasculate men. Images of the 'vagina dentata', very popular at the fin de siècle, signify the emasculating power of emancipated and sexual women. Hence, the true 'Aryan' man would never engage in the infertile sensuality of the sexual woman, but guard his "semen continence" in order to protect civilisation from being overrun by the agents of feminisation (Dijkstra 1999, 374). Freedom and permissiveness in sexual and financial transactions is considered free-floating, contradicting the ethnic bond with the soil.

As Herbert Marcuse explains, society based on the performance principle (as the form the reality principle has taken on in advanced capitalism) considers perverse a sexuality that is not aimed at reproduction, concealing a specific freedom and a promise of happiness:

> Psychoanalysis views practices that prevent procreation as an opposition to the continuation of the reproductive chain and, consequently, of paternal domination. […] Perversions seem to reject the enslavement of the pleasure ego by the reality ego altogether. In demanding freedom from instinctual drives in an

> oppressive world, they are often characterised by a strong rejection of the feelings of guilt that accompany sexual repression.
>
> *(Marcuse 1990, 53f.)*

Women who sell sex and thereby promise pleasure – regardless of how unhappy they themselves are under the given circumstances – are perceived as demonic, as a kind of sorceress or witch endowed with supernatural powers. In their sexual permissiveness and promiscuity appears a distorted form of freedom which also includes a distorted form of female agency against the gender-specific division of labour.

The promise of freedom and agency, subtly embodied in the figure of the prostitute, plays a negative role in the hatred of women: the promise of autonomy is repelled through misogynistic hostility. It also echoes in antisemitism, which attributes to Jews the only real agency in the face of the depersonalised mechanisms of modern domination. This is why acts of violence against women characterised as deviant, like the sex worker, or against Jews are perceived by the perpetrators as reactive acts of supposed self-defence aimed at restoring violated principles of justice and order. As the moral philosopher Aurel Kolnai analysed in his 1935 essay *Versuch über den Haß* ("Essay on Hate"), the attribution of accountability and freedom of action is central to the functioning of hatred (see Bach 2025, 92f.). Jean-Paul Sartre makes a similar point: since, due to a lack of free will, one cannot "hate an earthquake or phylloxera", antisemitism and antifeminism imply that their objects are free. The Jew, just as the deviant woman, is free to do evil (Sartre 1995).

This evil agency and intentional wrongdoing ascribed to Jews in antisemitism and to women in antifeminism are closely connected to money, whose social role as abstract equivalent is being concretised in this framework. That the majority of people are consistently denied both the desired material goods and sexual pleasure by a society based on economic inequality and a repressive sexual regime makes them prone to relentlessly insisting on a mythical transcendence of the material world while simultaneously hating the representatives of the abstract.

### Subjectivity and the Ideology of Productivity

In capitalist society, subjectivity and masculinity are closely linked, insofar as the recognition of subject status is ideologically tied to productive work, which is defined narrowly as market-mediated, commodity-generating labour that is embedded in contractual relations. This prevailing notion of productive work implicitly excludes the entire sphere of care work, which is relegated to the private sphere and seen as the domain of women (Becker-Schmidt 2010). Stereotypically, women do not produce but care for the producers (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 206) – and therefore seem to be closer to nature. Antisemites, on the other hand, view Jews as representatives of trade and finance, which, in this ideology, appear directly unproductive and detached from the production process. Antisemitism and sexism thus both systematically deny Jews and women full subject status by correlating

this denial with the unproductive positions ascribed to them within the capitalist production process.

In Western bourgeois society, the gender-specific division of labour ideologically separates the spheres of production and reproduction, although in reality they are mediated and interconnected (Becker-Schmidt 2010). Despite the fact that poorly paid female factory workers have played a significant role in capitalist production since the onset of industrialisation, the normative ideal remained that of the male sole wage earner. This ideological configuration explains why women were historically denied subjectivity: they lacked the legal status of contracting subjects who could autonomously enter into contracts and market agreements and autonomously sell their labour power as a commodity. To do so, they needed the official consent of a male representative (in many European countries, like West Germany until the late 1950s). This long-standing patriarchal tradition continues to have a significant impact on the present day, despite the formal equality of women and men in today's Western societies.

Regina Becker-Schmidt (2010) describes this phenomenon under the concept of "double socialisation" (*doppelte Vergesellschaftung*), highlighting how women have been, and to some extent still are, subject to two distinct forms of domination: the patriarchal and the capitalist. These forms entail conflicting demands. While capitalist socialisation is largely mediated through contractual relations and the abstract principle of equivalence, patriarchal domination is characterised by direct dependence and the subordination of women to men. This contradiction in modes of subjectivation and social integration renders women particularly susceptible to being instrumentalised as projection screens for discontent with modern forms of capitalist socialisation. In women's specific situation, capitalist and patriarchal demands both converge and contradict one another, since patriarchy relies on personal relations of dependence, while capitalism sets in motion a sphere of abstraction. Here, a more general contradiction becomes visible: individualisation and subjectivation can scarcely be achieved by anyone, since the social conditions necessary for doing so are largely absent in class society. The situation of women in modernity reveals that the project of modernity remains incomplete.

Antisemitic discourse similarly denies Jews autonomous subjectivity and, by extension, access to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Like women, Jews were portrayed as unproductive, a framing rooted in the ideological elevation of manual labour and physical toil as central components of masculine virtue. Stephan Grigat (2025, 242) traces the connection between antisemitism and the glorification of labour, citing Martin Luther's treatise *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* ("On the Jews and Their Lies"), in which the Reformer demanded that Jews be forced to work and that "one should put into the hands of the young and strong Jews the flail, the axe, the hoe, the spade, the distaff and the spindle, and let them earn their bread in the sweat of their noses" (quoted in Grigat 2025, 242). The motif of the Jewish nose does not appear here by chance. As discussed in Chapter 3, the 'Jewish nose' functions as an ambivalent sign of damaged masculinity, sensuality, and sexual lust.

As George Mosse has shown, physical labour became a defining element of masculine ideals in the early twentieth century at the latest (Mosse 2020, 140–157). "German work" is regarded as "concrete mediation and productive, morally guided, and community-building activity" (Achinger 2022, 84). In her reading of Gustav Freytag's *Soll und Haben* ("Debit and Credit"), Christine Achinger argues that the novel, a widely read bestseller first published in 1855, portrays productive, disciplined labour as an exclusively German male bourgeois quality. While the nobility and Poles are depicted as incapable of organised work, the Jews are shown as industrious only in pursuit of selfish gain. This notion of "German work" thus comes to signify a quasi-racial marker of superiority, serving to justify social and national domination. Achinger further contends that this hierarchy is reinforced by a split within the very idea of modernity itself. Freytag's novel distinguishes a 'good', German form of modernity – associated with linear progress, productivity, and collective cohesion – from a 'bad', Jewish modernity, linked to materialism, conflict, fragmentation, and the dominance of abstraction over tangible social and economic life (Achinger 2022, 85).

National Socialist propaganda specifically depicted Jewish men as unmasculine and unproductive. This construction relied heavily on the stereotype of the effeminate, non-muscular body, symbolising a profound and genuine strangeness to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The Nazi propaganda organ *Der Stürmer* particularly emphasised Jewish men's alleged lack of masculinity through claims that they were unwilling, unfit, and unsuited for work (Siegele-Wenschkewitz and Stucklik 1990).

Hitler reinforced this narrative by juxtaposing the 'industrious Aryan' man with the 'parasitic Jew'. In this ideological framework, labour functioned as a social, gendered, and racial boundary. National Socialist rhetoric constructed a distinct trope that framed Jewish men as effeminate and racially predisposed to avoid work. Hitler asserted that Jews viewed labour as punishment and that their activity was exclusively exploitative (Friedländer 1997, 96). *Der Stürmer* visually reinforced this stereotype by depicting Jewish men reclining in hammocks or armchairs, symbols of deliberate idleness, and of idle intellectuality. The image of the lazy but greedy Jewish businessman helped produce a stark ideological contrast: German men embodied the masculine impulse to labour and provide, whereas Jewish men merely exploited and profited (Showalter 1982, 109–131). In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler referred to the National Socialist concept of work proclaiming "the victory of the idea of productive labour, which itself was eternally antisemitic and will remain antisemitic" (quoted in Grigat 2025, 243). Grigat points out that the gravity of this statement manifested itself above the gates of the extermination camps: "Arbeit macht frei" (Grigat 2025, 243).

Theodor Fritsch, influential German publisher and author of, e.g., the *Antisemiten-Katechismus* ("Antisemites' Catechism") made use of this narrative, stating in 1927: "We have no experience of a Jewish businessman encouraging his son to become a farmer, a conductor, a carpenter, or a sailor", said a man who made a living from writing – a clear case of intellectual anti-intellectualism, as described in the preceding chapter. He concluded: "No one will seriously believe in the transformation of the people of Judah into genuine human beings" (Fritsch 1927, 202).

The ideology of productivity thus served to depict Jewish men as inherently abnormal, unmasculine, and eventually outside the realm of humanity, due to their supposed detachment from productive, traditionally masculine professions.

Historically, another reason for antisemites viewing Jews as unmanly and unable/unwilling to work may lie in a misogynistic misrepresentation of differing Jewish gender roles, especially when compared to bourgeois norms from the eighteenth century onward. In traditional Jewish families, women often took on roles that, in Western culture, have been and continue to be coded as masculine, such as earning money, conducting business and trade, managing wider family affairs, and acting within and shaping the public sphere, while men ideally dedicated themselves to study and were thus perceived as passive (Hartmann 2025). The gender-specific division of labour was considered one of the "foundational conditions of bourgeois society", and its transformation therefore seen as a threat to the "stability of the national collective" (Heß 2005, 95). But in fact, the antisemitic attacks connected to images of alleged Jewish gender relations had little to do with any actual gender system that may have existed in rabbinic ideals (cf. Boyarin 1997). This becomes clear when considering that even assimilated Jews who lived according to bourgeois gender norms were persistently accused of transgressing gender boundaries.

In Germany and Austria, for example, the widespread and publicly resonant nature of the discourse around supposedly inverted Jewish gender roles is evidenced by numerous postcards from the fin de siècle. These depict, for example, a Jewish man feeding a baby while his wife (a so-called *Emanze*) storms out of the house shouting feminist slogans, or a trouser-wearing, cigarette-smoking woman on a bicycle giving her Jewish husband, who has a baby in his arms, a ride on the luggage rack (cf. A.G. Gender-Killer 2005, 53; Gold and Heuberger 1999). Both Jews and emancipated women were subjected to ridicule and contempt; the blurring of gender roles and the transgression of gender boundaries were held against both (Brunotte 2014).

Meanwhile, the blurring of distinctions between the genders is a necessary by-product of capitalism. Capital exploits every form of labour power, regardless of gender, age, or origin. The demand for labour in industrial production dismantles traditional gender boundaries that confine women to the home and forces them into factories as cheap labour, a development that – as an unintended side-effect – improves women's ability to organise collectively and gain autonomy. This reveals an inherent tension between capitalism and patriarchy. Yet capitalism does not exist as a pure or autonomous system; rather, it is intertwined with patriarchal traditions, which enhance its efficiency. Consequently, it depends on women's unpaid care work and on their availability as a reserve army of labour. Antisemitic imagery translates this objective process into a personalised form by projecting it onto an imagined inversion of gender relations in Judaism.

In the National Socialist work ethic, this interlocking of capitalism and patriarchy underwent an ideological transformation, as the historian Michael Wildt has shown. Because labour was ideologically elevated to such an extent, the

question of its material remuneration receded into the background in favour of symbolic, public recognition of work.

> This also cleared the ideological path for propagandistically recognising all socially performed labour that was not remunerated – above all women's work in the household and the family – as an equivalent service to the *Volksgemeinschaft*, without fulfilling the social-reformist demand of the women's movement for payment for these activities.
>
> *(Michael Wildt, quoted in Grigat 2025, 243)*

In this way, National Socialism ideologically bridged the gender-specific division between productive and reproductive labour and repressed women's emancipation by dissolving it into the reproduction of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Once again, antisemitism displays a reversal of gender relations: while bourgeois gender norms designated men as subjects and denied women subjectivity, these attributions were reversed for Jews. Jewish men appeared to lack subjectivity because they were not considered productive workers, while Jewish women seemed to assume the role reserved for men alone in bourgeois contexts through their participation in bourgeois public, intellectual, and economic life.

## Circulation and Consumption

The antisemitic dichotomy between rooted Germans and unrooted Jews, between Aryan production and Jewish circulation, has a distinctly gendered counterpart. Historically, masculinity has been associated with rootedness, while femininity has been linked to circulation and mobility. In many traditional cultures, women were married into other clans and families, leaving their place of origin and entering foreign households as strangers. Kinship systems relied on the exchange of women, which constituted a fundamental basis of cohesion within and between the families or clans. Women thereby functioned as gifts exchanged between families and were thus "sexual semi-objects" (Rubin 1996, 119) over whom male family members had power of disposal. The relationship between men and women in a family unit was thus one of exchangers and exchanged – giver/taker and gift, active and passive, subject and object. This constituted two spheres sealed off from each other by gender attributions. This dynamic, as the feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi has observed, contributed to the exclusion of women from inheritance rights in kinship-based legal systems, where the clan or family, rather than the individual, served as the primary legal entity – because otherwise the wealth of the clan or the family would move to other clans (Mernissi 1987). Gayle Rubin points out how in the different stages of the historical traffic in women, practised in simple societies, a historical process of abstraction towards complex systems of equivalence can be traced (Rubin 1996, 141). Reification takes already place, women being viewed "at once a sign and value" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Rubin 1996, 138).

Echoes of periods in which women were exchanged between families and clans as "sexual semi-objects" persist in commodity-producing societies. Gayle Rubin argues that such societies continue to bear the imprint of women's historical function as a medium of circulation (Rubin 1996). In bourgeois marriage, this is reflected in the norm that the man's social status is transferred to the woman, while her wealth becomes his, but not vice versa. Important is also the enduring fact that, within both Christian and Islamic contexts, neither inheritance, nor social status, nor religious identity is transmitted through the female line. A notable exception to this pattern is found in Jewish Halacha, which determines Jewish religious identity matrilineally.

Carol Pateman has shown that the marriage contract plays a systematic role in liberal democracies and is deeply embedded in liberal political theory. In her critique of classical social contract theory, she argues that the marriage contract functions as a "sexual contract" that not only subjects women to a specific private form of domination but also excludes them from participation in the political and social contract itself (Pateman 1988). This exposes the double character of bourgeois or liberal society and captures a key insight of feminist social analysis: the separation between the private sphere and the political public sphere – aligned with gender-specific social roles – was central and constitutive for bourgeois society and for the specifically modern structure of gender relations (Gerhard 2003, 92f.)

In bourgeois society, however, there is yet another moment that assigns women a position within the sphere of circulation: women are associated with consumption. In the warehouse and the arcades, first established in the mid-nineteenth century in Paris (Benjamin 1991c, 2003), consumption becomes a female way of life, and the seduction to buy becomes an integral part of gender relations. Alongside consumption, illness also gave women a public presence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the bodies of mentally ill women being exposed in mental asylums like commodities (Foucault 2020). Notably, *consumption* was the historical term for tuberculosis. The disease was frequently associated with notions of feminine fragility, as exemplified in Alexandre Dumas's 1848 novel *The Lady of the Camellias*, but it was also linked to intellectuals and artists, who were perceived as being removed from nature and leading conspicuously 'consumptive' lives. Such figures were imagined as bloodless and degenerate yet paradoxically marked by the coughing up of blood. Jews, too, were associated with consumption, often depicted as weak but deceitful carriers of the disease and thus as pathological agents within the social body.

The various female figures produced by bourgeois society are reduced to commodity fetishism in the forms of prostitution and consumption; women are thereby reified and turned into commodities. Against the background of developing consumer culture, "conspicuous consumption" was identified with feminine idleness and superficiality (Adorno 1983). The association of women with consumption encompasses both broadly misogynistic and specifically antifeminist dimensions. The misogyny stems from the bourgeois conception of womanhood, which ascribes to women an incapacity for sublimation and instinctual restraint, constructing the stereotype that they live solely according to the pleasure principle,

'wanting everything without work'. The antifeminist dimension, by contrast, targets the bourgeois woman not in her role as a housewife but as a consumer, since consumption presupposes engagement with the public sphere, for example, in department stores. This gives rise to an associative link between consumption, public space, and emancipation, appropriated by antifeminist discourse to keep women under male control. In this way, antifeminist prejudice mobilises the ideology of productivity to claim that the bourgeois woman, and even more emphatically the educated Jewish woman, consumes in the marketplace what she herself does not produce. She thus becomes the object of misogynistic resentment, denounced as idle, wasteful, and parasitic, living off the labour of others. In this respect, she parallels the antisemitic figure of the Jew, who is likewise condemned within bourgeois ideology. Both are made to bear the blame for the entire bourgeois class, while the underlying ideology of productivity, which veils exploitation, remains unchallenged.

Partly by means of misogynistic and antisemitic projections, the bourgeois class constructs its self-image as that of a productive class, obscuring the fact that its material wealth is not derived from its own labour, but from the appropriation of others' labour. In the case of the male bourgeois subject, this exploitative relationship is concealed by the prevailing ideology of productivity, which endows him with the appearance of an autonomous producer. By contrast, the bourgeois woman – particularly in her role as a wife excluded from the sphere of work yet gaining access to the public sphere through consumption – exposes the underlying economic reality: that economic power within capitalist society is rooted not in personal productivity, but in the capacity to command and consume the labour of others. In this respect, antifeminism and antisemitism exhibit a structural parallel, insofar as both serve to obscure the mechanisms of domination embedded in capitalist production. As Horkheimer and Adorno observe:

> Bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic purpose: to conceal domination in production. He [the capitalist, K.S.] called himself the producer, but he and everyone secretly knew the truth. The productive work of the capitalist, whether he justified his profit as the reward of enterprise, as under liberalism, or as the director's salary, as today, was the ideology which concealed the nature of the labor contract and the rapacity of the economic system in general.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 142)*

In this complex configuration, the bourgeois wife stands as a visible reminder that the primacy of production is ideological. What ultimately matters is not the act of producing, but the power to dispose of the labour of others. Because she is denied subjectivity and autonomy, she cannot dispose of anything directly but only through her husband; she thus becomes the scapegoat for the bourgeois man, who leaves conspicuous consumption to her as a status symbol while retaining the power to command. The misogynistic associations of wastefulness, idleness, and

greed directed at the woman mirror the antisemitic associations surrounding Jewish economic roles. Antisemitism and antifeminism always associated the process of emancipation with undue property and education. Women are said to be driven by a lust for gold and "mammon" (Dijkstra 1986), while Jews are seen as the epitome of materialism. The "fantasy of the conspiracy of lascivious Jewish bankers who finance Bolshevism" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 141) and the cliché of the wasteful, jewellery-laden Jewish woman (Jakubowski 1995) belong into the same category. Both function within the same ideological framework, as described by Horkheimer and Adorno: "The Jews, identified with the unproductive, mediating sphere of circulation, were the trauma of the knights of industry, who have to masquerade as productive creators. […] their anti-Semitism is self-hate, the bad conscience of the parasite" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 144).

Thus, a central function of the ideology that distinguishes between parasites and producers lies in the projection of generalised social relations onto specific groups, most notably Jews, but also, as demonstrated, women. In the conspiratorial world of antisemites, Jews and women are seen as greedy consumers rather than producers. According to this ideology, they receive "reward without work" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 165), hence they escape capitalist exploitation and even mock it. They appear to be free from the constraints of work, which attracts the hatred of those who see themselves as bound by these exploitative relationships and unhappy as a result. This lies at the heart of antisemitic pseudo-criticism of capitalism, where "It is not the exploitation of one class by another that is condemned […], but the freedom from compulsory (alienated) labor, a freedom that is yearned for by all, whether or not they admit it" (Rensmann 2017, 191). Jews are a predestined projection screen for this authoritarian rebellion.

### 'Money-Jew' and Greed

The antisemitic construction of the 'money Jew' is situated within a broader constellation linking money, circulation, and rootlessness – categories that also possess gendered dimensions. Central to this dynamic is the figure of the Jew, associated with abstract circulation and contrasted with a national, rooted ideal of production. A parallel structure underlies traditional gender roles, in which femininity is aligned with circulation (through marriage, movement between families, and the traffic in women) and consumption (both as consumer and the consumed), while masculinity is associated with stability and productive labour. This structural association culminates in antisemitic and antifeminist discourses that denounce both Jews and emancipated women as representatives of a threatening "Jewish-democratic-feminist-spirit of Mammon" (Langemann, quoted in Kuhn 1990, 45).

But what explains the antisemitic obsession with the alleged greed of Jews and the peculiar connection made with the emancipation of women? Greed represents a general phenomenon within capitalist society: the fetishisation of money as the specific equivalent commodity. But, as Marx points out, money is merely

an expression of the universal commensurability that commodities have. It is not, however, its cause:

> Commodities do not become commensurable through money. On the contrary. Since all commodities are human labour objectified as values and are therefore commensurable in and of themselves, they can collectively measure their values in the same specific commodity, thereby transforming it into their collective measure of value, or money.
>
> *(Marx 1962, 109)*

In modern societies, social integration primarily occurs through labour and exchange, both of which are mediated by money as the abstract universal signifier. As Marx (1962, 146) notes, money is the "radical leveller", dissolving traditional personal dependencies and replacing them with abstract relations between formally free individuals governed by contract. As money becomes the general medium of exchange, it structures all social relations through a logic of equivalence, bringing a semblance of unity to a society fractured by class inequality.

Against this background, the stereotype of the 'money Jew' takes on a particular ideological significance. This figure serves to personify and give concrete form to the otherwise impersonal and abstract power of money. The opaque process of capitalist circulation is expressed in Marx's formula M–C–M' (Money–Commodity–Money Plus), which, in simple terms, describes how money is transformed into more money through production, exploitation, and exchange. Unlike the simpler cycle C–M–C, in which goods are exchanged to meet needs, the capitalist cycle is driven by the endless accumulation of value.

In antisemitic thought, this structural process within capitalism is projected onto the figure of the 'money Jew'. Through this projection, anonymous domination is re-personalised, and abstract social relations are reimagined as quasi-feudal relations of direct dependence. The power of money is thus rendered visible and embodied in the figure of the Jew, turning what Marx formulated as M–C–M' into an image of immediate, personal appropriation. This mechanism reveals a fundamental inability or refusal on the part of antisemites to comprehend the abstract nature of capitalist property relations, preferring instead older, more concrete notions of wealth and accumulation.

As Sartre (1995) has argued, antisemitism entails a mythical conception of property imagined as embedded in national soil and community. Antisemites reject the civilisational shift from landed property to abstract property such as finance capital. Landed property, rooted and immobile, appears identity-creating and stable, while money – mobile, fluid, and abstract – is seen as corrosive of identity and belonging. Yet in this very abstraction in money lies the paradoxical potential for a universalisation and, ultimately, an abolition of private property. As Marx (1983, 84f, 100) suggests, the full realisation of abstract property reveals its potential to transcend itself.

Horkheimer and Adorno (1997, 54) articulate this dialectic in a broader sense and apply it to Enlightenment rationality:

> The instruments of domination, which are intended to control everyone – language, weapons, and ultimately machines – must themselves be controllable by everyone. Thus, the element of rationality asserts itself in domination as something distinct from it. The concreteness of the means, which makes it universally available, its "objectivity" for everyone, already implies a critique of domination, as the means by which thought arose.[1]

Rationality is both the basis of domination and the means through which the transcendence of domination becomes conceivable. The same dialectical logic applies to money: as the universal medium of exchange, its impersonality already contains the seeds of a critique of private property, insofar as it is potentially accessible to all and detached from particular persons or places. Money is the means by which an immanent critique of property relations can unfold.

While traditional or feudal societies do not even have a sense of this dialectic, advanced capitalist society, however, simultaneously produces and obstructs this emancipatory potential. The abstract universality of money is ideologically re-contained through its personalisation in the antisemitic image of the 'money Jew'. Antisemitism thus does not oppose property relations as such, but rather attacks the most advanced, abstract form of property – money – precisely because it bears the possibility to generalise and thereby destabilise ownership. In this ideological manoeuvre, money is mistaken for the cause of social injustice, rather than the social relations that structure access to and control over it. Antisemitic ideology thereby replaces a critique of capitalist social relations with a mythologised attribution of blame. Capital, in this twisted logic, is no longer understood as a social relation, but as a substance[2] – a fatal misrecognition that leads to the acceptance rather than the critique of capitalism.

In this vein, the German sociologist and economist Werner Sombart wrote in 1911 in *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* ("The Jews and Economic Life"):

> Money is as devoid of substance as the land from which the Jews came; it is only mass, only quantity, like a herd; it is fleeting like a nomadic existence; it has no roots in fertile soil like a plant or a tree.
>
> *(Quoted in Omran 2000, 198)*

The naturalisation and biologisation of capitalism (Postone 1980) and the personal embodiment of the utterly impersonal only work through figures in which sensuality and disembodiment, concretion and abstraction intersect, as in the 'money Jew'. Jews are regarded as representatives of the abstract, becoming its concrete embodiment. The abstract is to be rendered harmless by combatting it in concrete figures. This is reminiscent of the connections between nature and anti-nature described in Chapter 2: Jews are regarded as anti-nature, which is expelled from them through brutal naturalisation.

The ideological displacement of abstract and concrete that takes place in capitalist economy is mirrored in contemporary debates about universalism and particularism in the domain of law. The abstraction underpinning money is analogous to the abstraction inherent in human rights. Just as through money differences are levelled by equating all commodities on a common scale, thereby disregarding the concrete nature of the things as well as differences between those who buy the commodities (all money has equal value, regardless of who possesses it), the idea of universal human rights abstracts from cultural, gendered, or religious particularities.[3] The ambivalence of this abstraction lies in its potential for both equality and erasure. While formal equality does not guarantee justice in unequal conditions, the problem lies not in the universal principle, but in the material disparities that undermine it.

Similarly, money, despite functioning as a universal equivalent, can become the scapegoat for inequality, much like the universal ideals in postcolonial discourse, which blames the universal for not being inclusive, which is, in fact, a social and not a conceptual problem. In both cases, false critique of abstraction can obscure the real sources of injustice: social, political, and economic inequalities that govern access to money and rights. Thus, contemporary postcolonial discourses frequently accuse the universal of repressing the particular, while they leave actual relations of domination intact, often in the name of preserving particularity and diversity. In contrast to this narrowed particularist view, Ute Gerhard emphasises that the global feminist debate on equality and/or difference – particularly in light of the differences among women themselves, their diverse living conditions, and their varying orientations – has developed a concept of equality that presupposes the recognition and consideration of difference. Rather than ignoring diversity, this understanding of equal rights explicitly incorporates difference into the negotiation of rights. Equality as a legal principle does not imply identity or uniformity; on the contrary, it assumes human diversity and demands equal rights in those areas essential to human dignity, self-determination, and participation in family, society, and the state (Gerhard 2003, 96f.).

In this context, Thorsten Fuchshuber (2025, 8f.) draws attention to the renunciation of instinctual drives required by both commodity exchange and the rule of law. This renunciation mirrors the process Freud describes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where he writes:

> If civilisation imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilisation. In fact, primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct.
>
> *(Quoted in Fuchshuber 2025, 8f.)*

The sublimation of drives forms part of the same civilisational trajectory as the transition from primitive accumulation to the abstract law of value and from domination based on direct dependency to domination mediated by social institutions. This civilisational development renders economic accumulation opaque and untransparent,

M–C–M' being a process which normal people usually do not look through. Instead, the fantasy of primitive accumulation, of taking by force, of virile conquest, still often prevails, even if historically one would not have benefitted from such conditions.

This fantasy finds a visible scapegoat in the figure of the Jew, imagined as the agent of accumulation through trade and abstraction. Here, primitive accumulation, violence, and gender intersect. Even if the majority of men could not accumulate wealth, they still possessed the potential to control women, whether through rape or marriage. The advancement of capitalist society, however, increasingly enables women to enter exchange relations as subjects in their own right, thereby loosening male control. This development is experienced as a threat, often projected onto Jews, who are blamed for what appears as the disintegration of traditional gender hierarchies. Antifeminists are anticapitalist only where capitalism erodes unequal gender relations.

In this configuration, which the philosopher Eva von Redecker (2020) names "phantom possession", rape functions not only as a misogynistic, woman-hating reactionary revolt against processes of abstraction, particularly in the realm of gender emancipation, but also as a symbolic act of compensatory appropriation. It reflects an attempt to reclaim a lost imaginary of masculine power and entitlement that is perceived to have been usurped by the abstract, feminised, and Judaised forces of modernity.

In the 1920s, Sombart recapitulated the ideological conflict surrounding abstraction, modernity, and perceived effeminacy in the antisemitic stereotype of the Jew:

> The Jew is, in his innermost being, averse to all knightly attitude, all sentimentality, all chivalry, all feudalism, all patriarchy. He also does not understand a community based on such relationships. […] He is the born representative of a "liberal" worldview, in which there are no lively, individually different people of flesh and blood, but only abstract citizens with rights and duties.
>
> *(Quoted in Omran 2000, 201)*

National Socialism claimed to position itself beyond both capitalism and communism by projecting both systems onto Jews. Its economy combined statist and private elements, while in reality resting on the mass exploitation of forced labour and the systematic expropriation of Jewish property.

## Antisemitism, Gender, and the Moral Coding of Economic Crisis in Islamism

Like National Socialism, Islamism presents Islam as an alleged alternative to both capitalism and communism. Stephan Grigat introduces the term "Umma socialism" to denote a concept that signals both an affinity with and a distancing from National Socialism. Umma socialism encompasses the welfare-state elements of Islamist ideology – such as its alms-based economy, its commitment to the common good, and its resentment towards interest – while at the same time referring to the Umma as an anti-national project, namely a community of all Muslims (Grigat 2007, 345). This 'third way' is articulated by Sayyid Qutb as a natural and just solution to the problems of modernity. In line with reactionary modernism, Qutb's critique of capitalism takes

the form of a moral indictment of modern values, particularly those associated with individual freedoms, rights, and gender equality (Gerdes 2025). This becomes especially clear in the following passage from *Milestones*, in which Qutb locates the social misery of capitalism primarily in transformations of gender relations, contrasting them with the Islamic community (Umma) as a concrete and harmonious social collective:

> Look at this capitalism with its monopolies, its usury and whatever else is unjust in it; at this individual freedom, devoid of human sympathy and responsibility for relatives except under the force of law; at this materialistic attitude which deadens the spirit; at this behavior, like animals, which you call "Free mixing of the sexes"; at this vulgarity which you call "emancipation of women", at these unfair and cumbersome laws of marriage and divorce, which are contrary to the demands of practical life; and at Islam, with its logic, beauty, humanity and happiness, which reaches horizons to which man strives but does not reach. It is a practical way of life and its solutions are based on the foundation of the wholesome nature of man.
>
> *(Quoted in Gerdes 2025, 208)*

Islamism advances a critique of capitalism that remains largely superficial and displaced. It focusses primarily on the prohibition of *riba* (interest), while the exploitation of labour itself remains largely unproblematised. Although Islamism emerged as a response to the profound socioeconomic transformations in the Middle East after the First World War, it does not address questions of political economy, class exploitation, or development in a structural sense. Instead, Islamist discourse shifts its focus to gender relations and women's morality, which become central themes across social classes and ideological variants of political Islam.

The vague and socially ambiguous promise of a just and authentic Islamic order is filled with moral content through the assertion of a supposedly God-ordained gender hierarchy and the reformulation and politicisation of traditional patriarchal norms. Rather than offering a structural critique of capitalism, Islamist "Umma socialism" (Grigat 2007, 345) opposes both the state and secular civil society with an "unofficial society" rooted in religious and traditional communities. Their anti-capitalism thus remains moralistic rather than material: it targets individual behaviour, gender norms, and cultural "decadence", while leaving underlying economic structures largely untouched (Kreile 2003b, 38). In this sense, Islamism does not constitute an alternative to capitalism, but rather a moral reordering that stabilises existing inequalities by redirecting social conflict away from political economy and towards religion, gender, and identity. This displacement is reinforced by economic antisemitism, which in Islamism closely resembles that of National Socialism. Islamist movements propagate the antisemitic pamphlet *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and project the practice of interest – condemned as *haram* – onto Jews, who are demonised as its supposed agents. One example is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who stated at the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2008 that the Zionists "have been dominating an important portion of the financial and monetary centers as well as the political decision-making

centers of some European countries and the US in a deceitful, complex and furtive manner" (quoted in Foxman 2010, 40).

Robert Wistrich (2009) likewise demonstrated how Islamic antisemitism – particularly within Hamas and Hezbollah – has repeatedly attributed global financial crises to Zionists, who are alleged to control both the American economy and government. Osama bin Laden followed the same antisemitic conspiracy narrative in his 2002 *Letter to America* (Bin Laden 2009). The letter begins by condemning interest-based finance as morally corrupt and religiously forbidden but then shifts responsibility for this supposedly immoral economic system away from political and economic structures and onto Jews as a collective. Jews are portrayed as the hidden beneficiaries and masterminds of usury, alleged to have seized control of the economy and, through it, the media and all spheres of social life. Complex economic relations are thus personalised and racialised, while Americans are depicted as passive victims reduced to servants of a Jewish power elite. Structural contradictions of capitalism are displaced onto an imagined Jewish agent, transforming socioeconomic critique into antisemitic projection.

With this letter, bin Laden sought to justify the attacks of 9/11 by framing them as resistance against an imagined world Jewry. The attack on the United States was presented as an act of liberation, supposedly intended to free America itself from Jewish domination. Strikingly, this letter resurfaced and went viral on social media after 7 October, where it was used to portray Hamas – following the tradition of al-Qaeda – as a resistance movement allegedly fighting global oppression.

The 1988 Hamas Charter similarly employs economic antisemitic stereotypes of world conspiracy and fuses them with secondary antisemitic tropes that equate Jews with Nazis. Article 20 states: "In their Nazi treatment, the Jews made no exception for women or children."

Even more explicit is Article 22:

> With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. With their money they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. With their money they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests. With their money they were able to control imperialistic countries and instigate them to colonize many countries in order to enable them to exploit their resources and spread corruption there.
>
> *(Hamas Covenant 1988)*

Against this imagined Zionist imperium of money, exploitation, and greed, depicted as plunging the world into chaos, Hamas positions the "pure" Islamic

community, grounded in the virtue of women as mothers, sisters, and caregivers of jihadists. It is striking that the term money appears in the Hamas Charter almost exclusively in connection with Jews, Zionists, and their Western imperialist allies. Only once is money mentioned in a different context: in relation to the idealised Islamic woman, whose virtue lies in restraint, frugality, and the rejection of any lust for gold or material goods:

> Because economy and avoidance of waste of the family budget is one of the requirements for the ability to continue moving forward in the difficult conditions surrounding us. She should put before her eyes the fact that the money available to her is just like blood which should never flow except through the veins so that both children and grown-ups could continue to live.
>
> *(Hamas Covenant 1988)*

Here, money – the abstract equivalent – undergoes a specific re-materialisation and concretisation: it is imagined as flowing like blood through the veins of the Umma, analogous to the National Socialist concept of the *Volkskörper*, rather than functioning as a universal medium of mediation within globalised financial markets. Islamism rejects the West in particular because it is perceived as groundlessly materialistic and driven by pleasure-seeking. Behind this degeneration, Islamists claim, stand the Jews, who are alleged to seek the destruction of the supposedly natural bonds of cohesion within Muslim families. In both National Socialist and Islamist ideology, the West appears as corrupted by Jews, who are said to gain access to communities primarily through women. Women are attributed a supposed inclination towards pleasure and wasteful consumption, which Jews or Zionists are accused of exploiting for their own purposes. In the West, Khamenei complains, women are degraded into consumer goods as part of a Zionist plot, producing a form of decadence that destroys human societies (Magid 2017). The linkage of Jews, money, and women is therefore not only a central element of Western antisemitism, as previously demonstrated, but also a core component of Islamist ideology. That women are turned into consumer goods through sex work is a common point of attack in Islamist critiques of the West. However, it becomes evident that this critique is not motivated by concern for protecting women from male domination or by opposition to the commodification of sexuality. This is demonstrated by the fact that Islamists themselves, particularly in Iran and in regions shaped by Shiʿi Islam, permit 'temporary marriage' (*mutʿa*), also referred to as 'pleasure marriage', whose minimum duration can be as short as half an hour. This practice not only enables premarital sex between young people, but also effectively institutionalises and legalises sex work under conditions that clearly privilege men over women. The man determines the contractual terms of the temporary marriage, not the woman, and pays a fee set by himself for sexual services. The contract of temporary marriage thus protects the man, not the woman. In Iran, where temporary marriages are widespread, women are repeatedly punished for sex work as 'moral corruption', up to and including death penalty (Navai 2014).

Within Islamism, the division of women into pure and impure, wife and whore, constitutes a central mechanism in the regulation of sexuality. 'Immoral women' are accused of contributing to the deterioration of the Umma. Here, the interrelation of nation, nationalism, and ethnic community-building becomes apparent, revealing not only the close connection between antisemitism and misogyny, but also their entanglement with socioeconomic structures. The relationship between nation and anti-nation, society and community will be addressed in the next chapter.

## Notes

1 The English translation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 29) is very inaccurate in this passage. This is why I translated directly from the German original.

2 Discomfort with the abstract form of equivalence is deeply rooted also in the general consciousness, as can be seen, for example, in the material form of the Euro, where the supranational character of the European currency is counterbalanced by symbols of national identity. The abstract number on one side of the coins is, on the other side, resubstantialised by national identity symbols, from Roman triumphal arches to *Marianne*, *Europe*, the Federal Eagle, or Mozart. The desubstantialised form of capital continues to be considered destructive, as has been seen in debates on global economic crises. While money and finance capital are presented as dirty, devious, and destructive, so-called productive capital is idolised as belonging to the 'national whole' and as creating value. See Jessop (2013), Kutter and Jessop (2014), and Stögner (2018).

3 Feminist critiques like that of Olympe de Gouges in 1791 have early on challenged the androcentric foundations of human rights, arguing – much like critiques of eurocentrism – that the very conception of 'the human' underlying human rights is historically modelled on the autonomous male, and, one might add, White or Western subject. Yet, unlike claims of eurocentrism, this feminist intervention has not sought to relativise or reject the idea of human rights itself. Instead, it has pushed for a more genuinely universal application and a critical redefinition of the human rights framework to include those historically excluded from its scope (Gerhard 2003, 86f.).

# 8

# ANTISEMITISM AND ANTIFEMINISM IN THE CONTEXT OF NATION AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Modern antisemitism and antifeminism take shape within the historical framework of the nation-state, whose emergence provided both the institutional horizon for emancipation and the terrain on which new forms of exclusion were articulated. The modern nation-state, founded on the Enlightenment promise of equality before the law, reshaped governance through abstract, legally mediated forms of rule, while at the same time reproducing in a modified form economic, social, and gender inequalities – and in many cases even deepening them. In this constellation, antisemitism and sexism emerged not as remnants of a pre-modern past, but as modern ideological reactions that helped to stabilise these contradictions by legitimising exclusion within an order that formally proclaimed universality and equality. Against this backdrop, this chapter traces how the intertwined histories of Jewish and women's emancipation gave rise to new hostilities, how Jewish otherness was reshaped under the conditions of assimilation, and how nationalism and gender ideology worked together to contain the destabilising effects of Enlightenment universalism. This perspective is then extended to the twentieth century, showing how National Socialist and Islamist notions of community function as anti- or supranational opposition to the nation-state, tipping the dialectic of the Enlightenment into a destruction of the Enlightenment. Finally, the focus turns to contemporary antizionism as a post- and supranational reconfiguration of antisemitic projections. Throughout, it is shown how conflicts over nation, community, gender, and sovereignty repeatedly reactivate unresolved tensions of modernity and transform the failures of the Enlightenment into myths of collective threat and exclusion.

## The Failed Promise of Enlightenment

The antisemitic and sexist notions of defective Jewish corporeality, physicality, and sexuality were likewise significant in shaping the emergence of the European

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nation-state order. This development coincided with the Enlightenment era and the intensification of capitalism, and it entailed questions of emancipation, identity, and sovereignty. Antisemitism and antifeminism both constitute reaction formations to the assimilatory effects of the emancipation processes that began in Europe in the eighteenth century. With the assimilation of Jews, and with the declining significance of religion in an age defined by rationality and the principle of equivalence, the visible distinctions between Jews and non-Jews often disappeared (Stern 2002). However, this did not mark the end of hostility towards Jews; rather, it gave rise to a form of antisemitism that sought to reestablish the 'otherness' of the Jews. Similarly, antifeminism served the ideological purpose of restoring a fundamental otherness of women – an otherness that had been to some extent eroded by processes of capitalisation and the integration of women into the industrial workforce. Both antisemitism and antifeminism drew upon sexist and racist ideological devices to achieve this end.

The era of the Enlightenment not only broke with long-established ways of thinking but also brought about a radical transformation in the organisation of social life. The transition from feudalism to a bourgeois social order involved a fundamental change in the form of domination – what Max Weber described as the shift from traditional, direct relations of rule to legally mediated domination. The claim to equality before the law associated with this transformation of domination represents one of the most profound historical changes and is central to modernity. It reshaped the structure of social order and generated a powerful dynamic of inclusion, profoundly altering the living conditions of previously excluded minorities, particularly Jews. At the same time, the conditions of possibility for equality were also debated with regard to, and on behalf of, women. However, since Enlightenment debates on equality took place within a society dominated by massive economic inequality and colonial exploitation, ideologies started to emerge whose function was on the one hand to veil this contradiction and on the other hand to legitimise inequality within the general claim of equality. Antisemitism and sexism, alongside the emergence of modern racism (Roepert 2022; Stögner 2026), all served this function in their particular forms.

Over the course of the French Revolution, Sephardic Jews in France were granted full citizenship rights in 1790, followed by the Ashkenazim in the autumn of 1791 (Volkov 2001, 63). In his *Essai sur l'admission des femmes aux droits de cité* (1791), Enlightenment thinker and encyclopaedist Marquis de Condorcet called for the extension of citizenship rights to women. France's National Assembly deliberated on numerous petitions that, if not demanding full equality, at least sought the legal recognition of women's right to equal education. However, progress in this domain lagged behind that achieved in the sphere of Jewish emancipation. "The topic was widely discussed; it was ideologically appropriated and thematised – but nothing more" (Volkov 2001, 63). The counterrevolutionary refusal to grant women equal citizenship rights culminated in the execution of Olympe de Gouges in November 1793 (Scott 1996).

In the German states, the complete legal equality of Jewish citizens was not achieved until 1869 (Achinger 2007, 46; Claussen 2000, 69). Nevertheless, the debates surrounding both Jewish and women's emancipation had begun much earlier and were closely intertwined. This interconnection is evidenced by two texts published in Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century, both addressing the bourgeois assimilation and emancipation of Jews and women respectively: *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* ("On the Civil Improvement of the Jews"), written in 1781 by the Prussian civil servant Christian Wilhelm Dohm, and *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* ("On the Civil Improvement of Women"), published anonymously in 1792 by the Enlightenment thinker Gottlieb von Hippel. The notion of "civil improvement" referred both to the capacity for and the necessity of integration into the process of universal Enlightenment and emancipation (Achinger 2007, 40–46; Frevert 1994, 75). The relationship between Jews and non-Jews remained hierarchical: "From the perspective of the enlightened official, the mass of Jews appeared as an object – of reform measures, in the deliberately ambiguous sense of the term" (Claussen 2000, 69). While Dohm's "On the Civil Improvement of the Jews" was widely discussed, Hippel's "On the Civil Improvement of Women" attracted little attention and was regarded more as a curiosity than as a serious contribution to the debate (Volkov 2001, 62f.).

Both antisemitism and antifeminism were anti-emancipatory movements and ideologies, directed equally against the equality of Jews and that of women. To deny them the capacity for emancipation while conceding to them human, though not civic, rights was a common discourse (cf. Claussen 2000, 70). As a result, antisemitic and antifeminist discourses frequently reinforced one another, and slogans imbued with sexist and antifeminist connotations often shaped debates over excluding Jews from general civil rights. Shulamit Volkov notes that the "question of equality" framed numerous marginalised groups in similar terms, subsuming not only women and Jews but also peasants and the emerging industrial proletariat under the same categories (Volkov 2001, 63). Although all anti-emancipatory movements opposed the levelling of socially entrenched differences, antisemitic and antifeminist arguments in particular drew upon embodied images of 'blood contamination' and of the undermining of male virility or female femininity. The emancipation of Jews and women was thus construed as a countermovement to a supposed 'natural order of things', and therefore as perverse and degenerate (cf. Le Rider 1990, 251f.; Thorson 2000, 71; Volkov 2001, 76).

Among proponents of emancipation, by contrast, the recognition of difference alongside equality before the law was by no means always paramount. Rather, the emphasis often lay on assimilation into the prevailing order, an order to which both Jews and women were deemed capable of adapting through "balanced and progressive education" (Volkov 2001, 64). Stanislas Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, a deputy of the French National Assembly, articulated in 1789 the fundamental contradiction in the Enlightenment's approach to Jews: "We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals. […]

They must be citizens individually" (quoted in Sznaider 2010, 429; see Claussen 2000, 68). This statement, intelligible within the framework of Enlightenment universalism, reveals the intention to integrate Jews as individuals on the condition that they relinquish their Jewish particularity. Against the backdrop of twentieth- and twenty-first-century antizionism, the statement acquires renewed relevance as it comes to signify the refusal to grant Jews a nation-state of their own (Fine and Spencer 2018, 111–129). The demanded assimilation and integration as citizens entailed the abandonment of self-defined, particular interests and political objectives. "The 'civil equality' granted to them successively offered no real choice between equality and difference; for their otherness appeared to the majority not as a positive challenge but as a legitimation for exclusion, hostility, and fantasies of annihilation" (Frevert 1994, 79).

Women, by contrast, were denied even the possibility of assimilation and integration as citizens by the opponents of emancipation. Their "special nature" was invoked, while the Jewish "particularity" was to be erased (Frevert 1994, 80).

This is one of the sources of what Horkheimer and Adorno called the "triumph of repressive égalité, the degeneration of the equality of rights into the wrong inflicted by equals" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 9) – an equality that was turned against the Jews, who, in modern antisemitism, came to be associated with rootlessness and foreignness, ultimately becoming synonymous with the elusive non-identical – an 'entity' that threatened the consolidating national order and the idea of an original unity between *Volk* and essentialised nationhood. The fact that the emancipation of Jews and of women was not subsumed within the broader emancipation of the bourgeoisie from the feudal nobility, but rather remained beset by persistent obstacles and setbacks, is seen by Critical Theorists as rooted in the deficiencies of Enlightenment thought itself. In antisemitism, this becomes visible as the "Limits of Enlightenment" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 137–172; Claussen 1994).

Among these deficiencies is the fact that the Enlightenment's concept of universalism was coded as bourgeois, White, male, and non-Jewish – that is, a hegemonic particularity laid claim to universal validity and legitimised the exclusion of a very large proportion of the people. Access to this constructed universalism was conceivable, if at all, only through "improvement measures" on the part of those to be integrated. Such a conception of equality reinforces existing inequality and exclusion: "The guarantee of equal rights," as the feminist Critical Theorist Andrea Maihofer notes, "is based on recognition as ultimately equal (despite individual differences)." Yet once individuals, groups, or cultures are regarded – or declared – to be fundamentally different in social or cultural terms, "the conventional discourse of equality offers no assurance of their equal rights" (Maihofer 1994, 260). Instead, its very logic tends to legitimise social discrimination, exclusion, or oppression, and to produce a compulsion towards conformity.

The idea of the equality of all human beings and the discourse of gender difference are closely intertwined. Likewise, the ever-renewed construction of Jewish otherness serves to reaffirm the ideological homogeneity of the non-Jewish hegemony, veiling inner conflict while simultaneously reinforcing mechanisms of

exclusion. What appears threatening to this hegemony is the notion that "the Other might (virtually) become the Same" (Rossi-Doria 1998, 147), that the Other might cross over from object to subject position, thereby recalling the repressed dimensions of the Enlightenment.

> What was denied, or found no place, in the great universalist dream of the Enlightenment now returns, more threatening than ever, like the stone guest: the Other – in the simultaneously concrete and symbolic form of woman and Jew. […] From the controllable and defined marginality of their assigned spaces, the ghetto and the home, these new subjects strive, through a slow and contested process of emancipation, to claim a place within the common social sphere.
>
> *(K. Tenenbaum, quoted in Rossi-Doria 1998, 148)*

As the bourgeoisie assumed power, it gradually retracted the very Enlightenment ideas it had once mobilised in opposition to feudalism, in order to fight off the demands by the working class, women, and minorities like the Jews. Bourgeois society remained in a state of semi-Enlightenment. Indeed, bourgeois society required sharply defined outsiders to mend the contradiction between its proclaimed equality and its actual inequality, thereby sustaining unity within an antagonistic social order. The significance of marking certain groups of people as the Other *par excellence* for the existing universe of power and domination is attested to by the compulsive drive to identify – and indeed to stigmatise – both Jews and women who sought to escape the narrow moral corset of bourgeois society.

Stigmatisation intensified at precisely the moment when Jews had successfully assimilated into majority society and when women's rights activists began to demand openly active social and political participation, asserting their public presence. Whereas Jews had for centuries been persecuted and humiliated by Christendom on account of their otherness and distinguishability, rejection henceforth was motivated precisely by their indistinguishability. As literary and cultural scholar Sigrid Weigel observes, "in the same measure as assimilation becomes a reality, the non-fixability of the Other assumes threatening traits, and a need arises for the visualisation of difference, for the marking of the Other" (Weigel 1994, 347).

## Refabrication of Jewish Otherness: The Anti-National Jew

In the periods preceding the Enlightenment, hostility towards Jews and towards women was inscribed as if naturally into the very structure of Christian and patriarchal society, requiring no further legitimation. This self-evidence changed, however, with the Enlightenment and the rise of the bourgeoisie, which propagated the equality of all. The inequality of particular groups – such as women and Jews – now demanded special ideological justification. It is therefore no coincidence that the Enlightenment era also marks the birth of modern ideologies as strategies for legitimating and concealing social inequality – ideologies that stand in a mediating relationship to one another: antisemitism, antifeminism, nationalism, and racism.[1]

Whereas the feudal worldview distinguished merely between friends and enemies, the age of mediation introduced the figure of the stranger – a figure whose indeterminacy and in-between position rendered it a perceived threat to the precariously maintained unity (Bauman 1995, 75). All anxieties concerning unity could thus be projected onto this figure. Not despite but rather because of their assimilation and acculturation, Jews came to be associated with foreignness in modern antisemitism; indeed, they were inscribed into the "figure of the Third" (Holz 2004) – a position that does not belong to the Same but represents the indeterminate, the ambiguous, the unfixable.

The loss of the Jews' visible distinctiveness through secularisation and assimilation thus entailed a corresponding loss of certainty. "It almost seems", writes Christina von Braun, "as though the 'Jewish race' is hated not for reasons of its otherness, but rather for its indistinguishability. This is precisely the source of racist antisemitism: the attempt to make Jews visible, biologically identifiable, graspable" (von Braun 1990, 207f.; cf. Arendt 1976). Here the projective dimension of antisemitism becomes unmistakably clear, for what repels as foreign, Freud reminds us, is often only the all-too-familiar: "the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 1999f, 254). What is repressed is that which resists categorisation and subsumption – and it is precisely this indeterminate, negative element that is projected onto the Jew as the prospective stranger.

These projective attributions culminated in the stereotype of the anti-national Jew – a figure that, owing to its alleged rootlessness and abstraction, was said to corrode nations from within. The class-related antagonism that indeed disrupts the ideologically maintained unity of the nation is split off and projected onto the Jew, who is thereby constructed as anti-national and without roots.

Modern antisemitism depicts Jews as not loyal to any nation and incapable of establishing true statehood. This stereotype inverted the fact that Jews as a people had no nation-state of their own into the stereotype that they would infiltrate other nations and undermine the national principle from within. Jews were excluded from the nation and – because of this exclusion – defamed as an alien and anti-national element. They had to pay for their exclusion once again (Fine and Spencer 2018). In face of the nineteenth century stereotype of the international, cosmopolitan, anti-national Jew, Heinrich Heine referred to the Holy Book as the 'portable fatherland' of the Jews, while in antisemitic societies the book-reading Jew was the epitome of effeminate deficient masculinity. From this perspective, the Nazi book burnings were part of the Holocaust – intended to destroy the Jewish homeland – and part of reestablishing unyielding German masculinity.

The identification of Jews with the abstract and the non-identical had already played a crucial role in the analysis of the socioeconomic foundations of antisemitism and, when considered against the backdrop of the fetish character of the commodity in capitalist society, revealed antisemitism as a comprehensive ideology of legitimation. This logic of legitimating contradiction also manifests itself in the domain of the nation, whose very conception is oriented towards univocity and coherence. In the nineteenth century, the idea of the nation asserted a putative unity that cut across the social

division into mutually antagonistic classes. It is precisely at the fissures of this supposed unity – where real class conflict emerges – that antisemitism proliferates as an ideology of legitimation and concealment. In the territory of what is now Germany, this dynamic was particularly pronounced, not least because the concept of a unified nation for a long time existed merely as an ideological construct, while political unification under a nation-state was only achieved at a much later stage (Plessner 1959).

Moishe Postone (1980, 113) cites several reasons for the identification of Jews with the uncomprehended abstract: 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 and 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 characterised by self-interest. Accordingly, the citizen was considered abstract, equal before the law, while the individual as person experienced themselves as concrete, embedded in class (and gender) relations, and considered private (Postone 1980, 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 for a long time not fully realised but rather conceived as concrete, grounded in language, soil, myths of origin, traditions, religion – as an ethnically conceived culture nation, and not in the sense of a modern nation-state (Postone 1980, 113; see also Brubaker 1992; Salzborn 2020a; Smith 1994).

Jews, however, did not belong to this concrete cultural nation but rather "fulfilled the determination of citizenship as a pure political abstraction" (Postone 1980, 113) – and in this sense, they indeed appeared as a distinctly modern and foreign element within German majority society. It was for this reason that, ideologically, the bourgeois state and the abstract law of citizenship "became closely identified with the Jews" (Postone 1980, 113). They were therefore perceived as non-identical – lacking ties, boundaries, and identity.

The German specificity lay above all in its belated nation-building and in the fact that nationalism, as a political ideology, preceded the formation of a unified nation-state. Consequently, German nationalism was far more mythologically charged and intertwined with a blood-and-soil ideology than in France, Britain, or the United States, where nationalism and national identity were more closely linked to citizenship and to a corresponding political commitment to civil rights and civic duties (Brubaker 1992; Hobsbawm 1992; Smith 1994).

In Western Europe, nationalism developed on the basis of bourgeois liberties and civic rights. In France and Britain, it was associated with the Enlightenment, revolution, and already well-established political and societal institutions (Bibó 1992, 50). There, the nation was understood as a nation of citizens (Hroch 2004, 7). In Central and Eastern Europe – including Germany and Austria – nation-state formation occurred only belatedly. In the absence of political unity and strong bourgeois forces, an ethnonational conception

of the nation emerged, one that emphasised ethnicity, language, culture, and mythic imaginary. Since in these regions it was primarily the feudal nobility that acted as the bearer of burgeoning nationalism, the emancipatory and anti-feudal dimensions were widely lacking. Instead, a culturalist and ethnicising nationalism solidified – one that upheld feudal structures and bore distinctly anti-emancipatory traits (Weiss and Reinprecht 1998, 29).

*Deutschtum* was thus not defined through a unified nation-state, its institutions, and a corresponding civil society, but through a *Volkskultur* – a German folk culture understood as a timeless, deeply rooted Germanness that transcended the fragmented political borders of the period (Safranski 2007). This *Volkskultur* found expression, for instance, in the Brothers Grimm's fairy-tale collections *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* or in the song collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* by Achim von Arnim and Clemens von Brentano. Central to this conception of *Deutschtum* was the exclusion of Jews, as is evident from the *Teutsche Tischgesellschaft* ("German Table Society") founded in 1811 by Brentano as an explicit counter-model to Rahel Varnhagen's salon, a space he himself, together with Arnim, had frequently attended. Whereas the romantic salon culture led by Jewish women like Varnhagen in Prussia at the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century can be read as an early cross-gender and cross-confessional rehearsal of general political emancipation within an educated semipublic sphere, the *Teutsche Tischgesellschaft* represented a masculinist enclave within a tavern – excluding Jews (even the baptised) and women alike (Asche 2019, 109, 115).

As Christine Achinger (2022, 80f.) has demonstrated, this ideological constellation explains why Dohm's proposals for the "civic improvement of the Jews" were never implemented in the German states, and it also indicates that the arguments of those opposing Jewish emancipation had themselves undergone a process of modernisation. On the one hand, the granting of equal rights was to be made contingent upon prior proof of assimilation. Yet this condition did not apply universally: rather than granting equal rights to all on the basis of the equality of all humans, only for one group – the Jews – was concrete equality made the prerequisite for abstract legal equality, thereby marking a categorical distinction between them and other members of bourgeois society, ultimately excluding them from humanity itself:

> In a political universe in which the natural-law equality of the Jew as *homme* is supposed to ground his abstract legal equality as *citoyen*, but in which this equality is – contrary to Dohm's liberal promise – denied to him because of his concrete inequality as *bourgeois*, Jewish difference is transformed from one among others – as it still was for Dohm – into a matter of principle, implying the exclusion of Jews from humanity.
>
> *(Achinger 2022, 81)*

The Jews were identified with the concept of citizenship as a purely political abstraction precisely because their concrete particularity was regarded as

incompatible with universality, which itself was conflated with the particularistic notion of Germanness in the sense of *Volkstum*. What with Horkheimer and Adorno can be described as the false universal becomes visible here: a universality that is not truly universal but modelled on gentile-patriarchal German hegemony. Against this backdrop, Jewish particularity becomes the embodiment of the incompatible, while, paradoxically, the Jew is simultaneously identified with abstract universality in the form of citizenship that eludes false concretion.

Accordingly, Achim von Arnim, co-founder of the *Teutsche Tischgesellschaft*, asserted that wherever Jews lived, society must expect that they would attempt to infiltrate it through deception and imitation – that is, through acculturation (Asche 2019, 117). In the antisemitic rejection of the civil improvement of the Jews, it was established that a Jew could never be a German. The German national self-understanding in the first half of the nineteenth century no longer distinguished primarily between Christians and Jews, but between Germans and Jews. The difficulties inherent in the process of emancipation understood as assimilation, as they became manifest in the Jewish salons, are described by Hannah Arendt through the figure of Rahel Varnhagen:

> There is no assimilation if you only give up your own past but ignore that of others. In a society that is largely hostile to Jews – and until well into our century, that was true of all countries where Jews lived – you can only assimilate if you assimilate into antisemitism.
>
> *(Arendt 1981, 233)*

The retraction of emancipation by an increasingly antisemitic society in Germany coincided with a counterrevolutionary stance towards Napoleonic France: for instance, Rahel Varnhagen's salon was closed in 1806 following the invasion of Napoleon's troops. From 1809 onward, the new Berlin table societies were established as politically conservative circles dominated by the nobility, which, like Brentano's *Teutsche Tischgesellschaft*, explicitly prohibited women, Frenchmen, and Jews from admission (Nienhaus 2003). "What mattered", Arendt observes, "was that people joined forces intellectually against the Enlightenment, politically against France, and socially against the salon. The exclusion of women must be understood as a direct protest against the Jewish salon of the time" (Arendt 1981, 136). The anti-French resentment was further nourished after France, as an occupying power, had decreed the legal equality of Jews in Prussia through the "Prussian Edict of Emancipation" in 1812.

The replacement of the Jewish women's salons by the masculinist *Tischgesellschaften* simultaneously removed the question of women's equality from the agenda. Even if the salons should not be idealised, since the Jewish *salonnières*, though respected as hostesses, were not reciprocally invited into the homes of their non-Jewish male guests, they nonetheless carved out spaces for agency and social significance, and that as doubly disadvantaged individuals: as members of a population still without civic rights and as women without legal capacity (Asche 2019, 119).

With Arendt, we can draw a direct connection between misogyny, antisemitism, and the reaction against Enlightenment, emancipation, and republicanism. In this antimodern ideological constellation, the Jew and the educated woman alike served as projection screens. Notably, what was debated and resisted under the heading of the "civil improvement of women" closely mirrored the very educational ideal embodied by the educated Jewish woman as *salonnière*.

## Nation and Gender

Ethnonationalism claims that the nation is an unmediated representation of the people, assuming an identity between the two concepts, and rejects the idea of an overarching, universal, abstract whole. This identity, as Horkheimer explains, gains enormous ideological significance in the face of actual social antagonism: "That the whole is the nation is pure ideology. Nationalism stands in opposition to the welfare of society, although it proclaims the welfare of the whole as its slogan" (Horkheimer 1985, 334). The anti-emancipatory traits of ethnonationalism in this context manifested themselves in its antisemitic and antifeminist "cult of masculinity", which in nineteenth-century Germany emerged as a countermovement to a culture despised as "feminine-Jewish-decadent" (Volkov 2001, 77). Yet women could only be excluded from the concept of the nation to a limited extent – primarily on the level of political and social participation (Yuval-Davis 1997, 116). Although the process of women's emancipation in the nineteenth century was less advanced and of a different nature than Jewish emancipation, although women were generally denied recognition as legal subjects, and although women were largely denied access, by virtue of their gender, to essential social and political resources and institutions of bourgeois public life such as education and professional work, their exclusion from the nation took place mainly on the programmatic level of general antifeminism. Women were, so to speak, the "included Others", whereas Jews were the "excluded Others" (Gilman 1993, 46).

In the ideology of national unity, by contrast, women played a significant role as preservers of the nation and its purity, which is a sign of the extent to which gender relations affect the construction of national and ethnic identity. The motif of the biological reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997, 116) entails the identification of women as mothers of the nation, accompanied by the appeal to women to bear more or fewer children depending on circumstances. This appeal, however, does not address all women equally but varies according to their class, social status, and ethnic belonging (Rajal 2025a; Yuval-Davis 1997). Beyond biological reproduction, women are also assigned the role of cultural reproduction of the nation; they are fashioned as "symbols of national 'essence', unity and emancipation as well as border guards of ethnic, national and racial difference. These constructions of womanhood are often used as resources for national relations of both domination and resistance" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 116).

After unification in 1871, the German nation was frequently symbolised by the figure of *Germania*. Unlike the French *Marianne*, *Germania* was not a symbol of the bourgeois ideals of liberty and equality, nor did she tend to unsettle gender stereotypes and roles. She was not a key figure in the struggle for freedom, but rather "likened to the bride who awaits her bridegroom – a united Germany – or perceived as the anxious mother of her people" (Mosse 2020, 104). *Germania* succeeded the Valkyrie – the battle-tested maiden – at a time when prevailing antisemitic gender images had already associated the woman in arms unequivocally with a dangerous, destructive "invasion from the Orient" (Dijkstra 1986; Mayer 2001). The Wilhelminian *Germania* "as mother and patron saint was never aggressive or masculine, even when dressed in armor" (Mosse 2020, 108).

The specific gendering of Germany in *völkisch* discourse was contradictory and corresponded to the ambivalent relation to sexuality and the repression of instinctual drives and needs. Under National Socialism, Germany was imagined as a "masculine state" (Mosse 2020, 171), as when Heinrich Himmler insisted that "for centuries, yea, millennia, the Germans […] have been ruled as a *Männerstaat*" (quoted in Mosse 2020, 171). Himmler's insistence on the men's state – against the idea of matriarchy, which had still played an essential role in *Lebensphilosophie* and *völkisch* back-to-nature ideologies at the fin de siècle (Korotin 1994; also see the section "Philosophy of Life and Jugendstil: Fin de Siècle Cultural Fatigue" in Chapter 6 of this book) – marked the ruling class as a "male élite", a *Männerbund*, which is "no longer merely the shock troops of war against internal and external enemies" (Mosse 2020, 170): the men's state as the ultimate male 'racket' (a term used by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to denounce the brutal force with which the powerful assert their interests against minorities), yet one that imagined itself constantly threatened by feminine and feminising forces, particularly implicated in manifest homosexuality and women's emancipation (Mosse 2020, 170). By contrast, and here the divergence between the two concepts of nation and state becomes clear, the German nation was imagined as distinctly feminine. Because the nation and the state did not coincide in Germany until the late nineteenth century, this separation was also reflected in their symbolic gendering. The German nation, which existed long before the nation-state, was portrayed as feminine and associated with women, blood, disease, and contagion (Linke 1999, 225; Theweleit 1987; 1996), and thus as something perpetually endangered by external enemies. The state, in turn, was imagined as masculine, its role being to protect and preserve the vulnerable nation. It is striking that women appear only as symbolic bearers of the nation, while concrete women are denied any direct access to "national agency" (McClintock 1996, 261; see also Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, 28). Disembodied into metonymic figures, women are viewed as symbolising a nation that is imagined threatened by enemy forces.

The ideology of "German rebirth" after 1918 drew once again upon the image of woman: as mother and "saviour of the German people" (Hering 2003, 26), this representative image was transfigured into an asexual, pure, and noble being, set against female figures that antisemitism associated with Jewishness – the prostitute,

the oriental sex slave, the vamp, and the armed woman (see Chapter 3). In *völkisch* ideology, the nation was conceived as a living organism that, like any organism, could fall ill. The people was likewise not thought of in its abstract form as the body politic of the nation-state, as a civic nation, but as a concrete *Volkskörper* (body of the people) whose integrity depended on the 'purity' of its blood. While the abstract concept of the nation, detached from particularities such as regional language (cf. Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1992), is concretised in the *Volkskörper*, the notion of blood undergoes an abstraction process to become compatible with it. The rematerialisation of this abstract representation of blood occurs primarily through the idea of its purity. Women were held responsible for maintaining the purity of blood and thus protecting the people from intruders. The motifs of 'defilement', abduction, and rape of women play a significant role here; Horkheimer traces a direct line to fantasies of matricide, noting

> that the violation of the German woman, sometimes even direct matricide, is repeatedly one of the chief motifs in the antisemitism of the Nazis. Germany itself, which the Jews are said to have violated, stands for the mother. In antisemitism the idea of matricide and violation of the mother comes to full bloom.
>
> *(Horkheimer 1996, 217)*

Christina von Braun traces the significance of the accusation of ritual murder and the killing of women in antisemitism back to the void left by the secularisation of the Christian message of salvation:

> With secularisation, the metaphor of crucifixion is replaced by the "sexual crime" or "racial defilement" – and herein lies the true key to the meaning of sexual imagery in racist antisemitism. The "corpus dei" becomes the "Volkskörper", and its symbolic form is the individual woman.
>
> *(von Braun 1992, 16)*

The "secularisation of the Christian sacrificial death" (von Braun 1995, 185) was enacted within *völkisch* ideology through its assignment to women and Jews: the German woman imagined as the victim of the Jew. This is expressed in the fantasies of the violation of the German woman, *Germania*, and consequently of the German nation by the Jew. The lustful gaze cast upon the violated woman suggests that the 'Aryan' observer finds in it an outlet for his own repressed fantasies of domination, denigration, and rape.

In the intensification of *völkisch* ideology in Germany after the First World War, a collective incapacity to reconcile love and sexuality becomes manifest. This, too, is bound up with martial fascist ideals of masculinity which, according to Adorno (1997a, 682), were so destructive precisely because they rested on the principle of being able to endure pain and therefore being utterly indifferent to the pain of others. Linked to this is the splitting of femininity into the images of the pure sister – desired yet unattainable – and the vulgar sex slave, despised and violated. Theweleit describes this dichotomy among the fascist *Freikorps* as the distinction

between the red woman, reduced to a bloody pulp, and the White woman, elevated above all instinctual desire. The latter, the unattainable and untouchable woman (mother, sister, or companion), is the object of pure veneration. She is imagined as the guardian of the nation (Theweleit 1987, 108–123).

By contrast, the idea of the sensual and sexual woman, the woman with a weapon (in the form of education, self-confidence, autonomy, resistance, and emancipation), is despised as a whore and *Flintenweib* (battle-woman or female partisan). She may be violated and is consigned to annihilation. Yet she still embodies the phallic mother, the first object of desire, which in the failed ambivalence conflict cannot be sublimated but only repressed. As the repressed, desire returns and manifests itself in the connection between antisemitism and sexism. This is corroborated decades later and in a very different context – in the 1940s United States, in *The Authoritarian Personality*, particularly in the sub-study on prejudice and criminality, based on interviews with prison inmates. The passage reads in the language usage common at the time:

> A further consequence of the prejudiced inmates' submission to parents is splitting-off of sexual impulses toward the first heterosexual figure, the mother. These are kept split off by developing reverence for the mother's imagined asexual "purity" […]. Their fear of Negroes' approach to "white women" may well be a projection of their own repressed impulses toward the mother.
>
> *(Adorno et al. 2019, 876)*

When antisemitism operates with sexual imagery, it accuses Jews precisely of the incapacity, described above, to unite sex and love. This projection is necessary to psychically bind one's own repressed impulses towards women.

The image of woman as the "welfare of the nation" is a fixed component of the gendered division of national labour. While the willingness to die a heroic death was central to the construction of nationalist masculinity (Yuval-Davis 1997, 117), women, as guardians of the nation, were imagined as being permanently victimised by foreign men and sacrificed for the nation. This is, on the one hand, a direct reaction to the widespread use of rape in war as a weapon against the whole population. As Karen G. Weiss puts it, "because women are often held up as a symbol of nationality, raping an enemy's women during war is used as a tactic to disparage, degrade, and demoralize an entire nation" (quoted in Almog and Amir 2025, 2).

But in racist, antisemitic, and nationalist contexts, it can detach itself both from the immediate threat and from actual wartime practices, projecting them onto the Other (Yuval-Davis 1997, 51; Wobbe 1994). The strangeness produced in such scenes of violence and rape is itself the product of projection, displacing repressed sexual desires onto the Other (cf. Bohleber 1992).[2] This projection functions even more effectively when the Other is a totally abstract figure (such as the 'Jew'), one not identified with the principle of nationhood but occupying an in-between position. The specifically antisemitic representation of Jews as anti-nation and anti-people provides the ideal screen for such projection.

This is evidenced by the fantasies of Jewish world conspiracy, which prove most effective where politics becomes sexualised, for instance in the accusation of the 'Jewish white-slave trade', construed as a deliberate and globally coordinated plan to destroy the 'German people' through the 'poisoning' of their women (Gehmacher 1998, 103). Historian Johanna Gehmacher traces the connection between racist antisemitism and the 'purity' of the people: "If one invents a race and then an attack upon it, that attack must consist in the breach of a postulated rule of endogamy" (Gehmacher 1992, 431). Following this thesis, the accusation of abduction of women, which from the mid-nineteenth century formed a staple of racist antisemitism, would also point to a secretly desired retraction of the cultural achievement of exogamous marriage rules – ultimately a desire to retract the incest taboo. This is already expressed decades before National Socialism, for instance in Wagner's operas, "which at their core contain all the emotions and fantasies of the National Socialist worldview", as Horkheimer (1996, 217) wrote in a letter to Frederic Wertham. Thus, the incestuous love of Richard Wagner's *Wälsungen* siblings signifies the hermetic sealing of the in-group against the (prospective) out-group – indeed, the truly mythical fear of the outside. "It is based on fear and hatred of other families" (Horkheimer 1996, 217).

Under National Socialism, political rule was also exercised through the appropriation and instrumentalisation of the female body. The "Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring", enacted in Germany in July 1933, inaugurated, through a state-administered system of targeted abortions and forced sterilisations, "a policy of control and disposal over women and their bodies which was as decisive for the acquisition and maintenance of Nazi power as the legalistic and terrorist seizure of state power itself" (Kuhn 1990, 40; see also Rajal 2025a). The nexus of antisemitism and misogyny in Nazi ideology does not imply an equilibrium between the two ideologies. Jewish women were murdered because they were Jewish and not because they were women. But gender mattered because of women's reproductive capacities. Himmler said that Jewish women in particular were to be eliminated because they were the natural source of a constant renewal of the 'Jewish race' (see Messerschmidt 2003, 157).

The coercive nexus of National Socialism also derived its stability from control over German women and the unmediated appropriation of their sexuality. The Nazi state embodied itself in its defined gender regime: as an allegory of power, not only were muscular male figures employed, but also female figures cleansed of all ambivalent sexuality – maternal or upright, asexual female figures, as in Nazi sculpture (Wenk 1990, 186). Woman appears here as the de-eroticised, clean companion of the hardened Aryan man. German women, whose bodies in Riefenstahl's films (cf. Wildmann 1998) were celebrated and instrumentalised as the "ornament of the masses" (Kracauer 1998), served to preserve the paranoid-masculine racket from which they simultaneously benefitted. Yet the glorification of the 'German woman' conceals a profound contempt for gender, sexuality, and the body as such.

## Antinationalism and Gender: Islamic Umma and National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*

While nineteenth-century German nationalism conflated nation and people, thereby lacking a civic conception of the nation and understanding it only in ethnic or cultural terms, twentieth-century National Socialism radicalised the dichotomy between concrete *Volk* and abstract *nation* to such an extent that its ideology has at times been described as anti-national, its goal being the destruction of the bourgeois-national in favour of a *völkisch* supranational order. Hannah Arendt (1976) argues that National Socialism opposed national thought with *völkisch* ideology. Arendt interprets *völkisch* ideology and ethnoracist thought as factors contrary and ultimately subversive to nationalism. She narrows nationalism to its republican meaning and identifies in the notion of ethnic nationalism a contradiction in terms, for within a republican framework *nation* and *ethnicity* are mutually exclusive.

Franz Neumann advanced an argument similar to Arendt's and emphasised "the negation of the state and of state sovereignty" in Nazi *völkisch* ideology. According to his analysis, National Socialism "rejected the state as the subject of international law" and substituted for it "the sovereign *Volkstum*" (quoted in Salzborn 2010b, 403). However, as Fine and Spencer (2018) argue, there is always the potential of a slippage from the republican or civic form of nationalism to the ethnic one.

The antibourgeois, antilegalist, and supranational conception of the community of all Germans (or Aryans) in National Socialism, directed against the principle of sovereign nation-states, finds a parallel in Islamism, as Fethi Benslama observes: "Islamism promises the restoration of the caliphate through the disintegration of nation-states" (Benslama 2017). The ideological foundation for this vision, however, is not an ethnic community but rather the idea of the Muslim community – the Umma. In early Islamic history, the Umma developed as the focal point of Muslim loyalty, replacing the tribal structure. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a secular state by Kemal Atatürk in 1924, many perceived the bond with the Umma as severed. This experience was one reason for Hassan al-Banna to found the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 in Egypt, which subsequently entered into confrontation with the liberal West and posited "the brotherhood of Muslims against citizenship, religious-moral emotion against love of the nation" (Benslama 2017). Islamism thus articulates a confrontation between community and society similar to that of National Socialism, and it asserts a principle of sovereignty distinct from the Western model of the nation-state, accompanied by its own legal order: Caliphate and Sharia, which Islamism seeks to restore "through theological purity", positioning them against the principle of national political sovereignty and the corresponding institutions of equal law. What emerges is a confrontation between two systems of governance: one focussed on civic society as point of reference, the other on Islamic community (Benslama 2017). Here we find an analogy to German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' 1887 analytical distinction between society and community (Tönnies 1979) – a distinction that became particularly important in National Socialism, which identified society as Jewish, while

Aryan identity was thought of only in terms of community, with the accompanying distinction between abstract and concrete.

The anti-national conception of the Umma in contemporary Islamism becomes evident in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As early as 1980, the revolutionary leader Khomeini declared: "We do not worship Iran; we worship Allah […] I say, let Iran burn. I say, let this country go up in smoke, provided that Islam proves victorious" (quoted in Grigat 2008, 18). This ideology's contemporary relevance could be observed, for example, at a demonstration organised by the German Islamist group *Generation Islam* after 7 October, where a speaker declared from the podium that the fragmentation of the Middle East into nation-states one hundred years ago had brought an era of peace under Islamic rule to an end (Vertein 2024, 27). Discourses of this kind characterise the nation-state order as colonial and identify it as a root cause of all conflicts in the Middle East. Unlike non-Islamist pro-Palestinian activists, *Generation Islam*, in line with Hamas, therefore does not advocate the establishment of a Palestinian state, but instead calls for "providing the Middle East conflict with an Islamic solution" (quoted in Vertein 2024, 27). It becomes evident that most factions of Islamists, as well as the Nazis, propagate a form of anti-nationalism that is anything but emancipatory, which makes it necessary to defend the nation-state, from an emancipatory perspective, against its repressive dissolution in the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* or the Islamist Umma, since both negate the rights of the individual and of minorities.

The anti-national ideology of Islamism is gendered in a manner analogous to the National Socialist idea of a supranational Aryan community. The Islamist construct of the community of all Muslims – the Umma – explicitly refers "to the signifier 'mother' (oum)" (Benslama 2017). Fatima Mernissi explains that the consolidation of the Umma as a "patrilineal, monotheistic system" required, on the one hand, a turning away from traditional tribal structures, and on the other, the establishment of a patriarchal family system that demanded the subordination of women to men and the regulation of sexuality within Islamic marriage (Mernissi 1987, 84).

Islamist gender politics serve as a means of social reintegration in a society marked by crisis and fragmentation following the collapse of the Caliphate. At its ideological core lies a retraction of developments that enabled gender equality within Islamic societies, thereby manifesting the antimodern and anti-emancipatory thrust of Islamism. In this ideology, the woman is to remain confined to her reproductive function and the domestic sphere. The patriarchal order thus persists in the transformation from family to Umma, as control over women is maintained through the collective of Muslim men. Instead of introducing profound reforms to address social problems, the Islamist project is carried out in a projective manner affecting particularly female gender roles (Kreile 2003b).

Since the 1970s, Islamist gender politics have gained traction by responding to, and alleviating, a pervasive sense of crisis. They play a key ideological role in sustaining the appeal of the slogan 'Islam is the solution'. This politics addresses fears generated by economic crises, declining state welfare, social disintegration, and moral disorientation linked to the erosion of traditional family structures and

changing gender and generational relations (Rumpf 2003, 23). Islamist discourse externalises these conflicts by projecting their causes entirely onto the West and couples the politicisation of gender relations with claims to moral superiority (Kreile 2003b).

As the feminist Critical Theorist Mechthild Rumpf argues, ruling elites have sought to offset their loss of legitimacy through concessions to Islamist movements, particularly by curtailing women's rights (Rumpf 2003, 23). While women entered the labour market during phases of state-led economic expansion in the Middle East, this trend was reversed during subsequent crises. In this situation, Islamist movements legitimised women's exclusion from paid work by reviving and religiously sanctioning traditional models of femininity (Kreile 2003b, 37). Consequently, as the feminist political scientist Renate Kreile aptly put it, "the 'struggle over the veil' becomes a veiled class struggle" (Kreile 2003b, 32). This dynamic echoes the National Socialist slogan of *Rassenkampf statt Klassenkampf* ("race struggle instead of class struggle").

During the economic crises of the 1980s, many viewed the slogan 'Islam is the solution' as a response to marginalisation, poverty, unemployment, and housing shortages. In this context, gender functions as a central medium of anticolonial resistance and antiglobal fragmentation. For Islamists, control over 'their own' women symbolises the defence of the identity and integrity of an Umma perceived to be under threat from the West (Kreile 2003b, 34f.). As shown in the section "Anti-Intellectualism, Semi-Modernity, and 'Islam Under Siege'" the identity-political demarcation between an imagined homogeneous and authentic Islamic community on the one hand, and the West as the antithetical image of Islamic ideals on the other hand, involves an ambivalent Islamist self-image that oscillates between victimhood ('Islam under siege') and the feeling of superiority and omnipotence (Kreile 2003a, 204f.).

The conception of the Umma refers to the idea of a unified Muslim community that abstracts from all inner heterogeneity and conflict. To enhance this abstraction, Islamist gender relations and gender images serve an important ideological function. Sexualisation functions to neutralise sexuality, a paradox apparent in the practice of veiling that hides the hair of a woman as a body part that is imagined as lust-inducing and seductive. According to the German feminist writer Viola Roggenkamp, "the covering of a woman's head hair carries within it the symbol of covered female shame. The hair on the head and the hair of the vulva are symbolically equated" (Roggenkamp 2003). She follows the interpretation of psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi that in veiling, the upper half of the body is overemphasised, after interest in the lower half has been repressed. The veil is an expression of sexualisation and at the same time neutralises the sexualised character of the woman for the sake of community building.

The neutralisation of sexuality for this purpose is carried further in the image of the mother, who is perceived as an entirely asexual being. This phenomenon is not unique to Islam but recurs across many traditional contexts, as the Italian feminist writer Elena Ferrante demonstrates in her analysis of southern Italian gender relations and the dichotomous division of womanhood into mother and whore. Ferrante aptly quotes Elsa Morante: "No one, not even the seamstresses of mothers, ever thinks that a mother possesses the body of a woman […] To clothe mothers meant to veil them" (Ferrante 2021, 21). The mothers' femininity vanishes.

Veiling women is a sign that they belong to men, "with their bodies, their labour, and their material property" (Roggenkamp 2003). Veiling functions simultaneously as a prohibition and authorisation, constituting "the foundation of a social order in which women are explicitly positioned as the target objects of an uncontrollable masculine sexuality" (Tamzali 2020, 89). Because men do not sufficiently internalise the normative prohibition of sexuality, they redirect the sexuality denied to them against women. Roggenkamp reads the veiled woman accordingly as "the man's fetish", who may herself feel superior, pure, and holy once she has internalised her significance for the Umma (Roggenkamp 2003).

The idea of a unified community presupposes the suspension of gender relations within its boundaries. Women are integrated into the community primarily through their role as mothers or sisters; outside this role, the coherence of the community appears endangered. Femininity, in this sense, remains structurally external to the community and marks a point of instability at its core (Benslama 2017). This is why in the Umma, men and women commonly refer to one another as brothers and sisters. This, too, is not unique to Islamism: similar patterns can be found in the correspondence and writings of German *Freikorps* fascists during and after the First World War, as Klaus Theweleit documents in *Male Fantasies*. He shows that in the eyes of a fascist, woman "only as a representation of his sister […] appears on an equal level; but from this perspective, any act of pleasurable lovemaking appears obstructed by the taboo on incest with the sister" (Theweleit 1996, 103).

In both fascist and Islamist communities, the image of the mother nourishes the fantasy of an imaginary, substantial bond that leads members to believe themselves descended from a common origin, from a sacred body desexualised through taboo (Fuchshuber 2024). Benslama traces how fear of the destruction of this original community, in turn, generates phantasms of hostile intrusion into the collective maternal body of the Umma: an intrusion imagined to corrupt this body through sexual contamination, leaving behind a genealogical stain that defiles its pure fertility (Benslama 2017). For radical Islamists, as for fascists, the community thus also functions as an illusory substitute for the original unity with the mother.

However, this is not merely a psychological problem; rather, in line with the concepts developed in *The Authoritarian Personality*, Islamism mobilises psychological mechanisms to provide a distorted solution to a fundamentally social problem. In response to the erosion of kinship ties in modernised societies, Islamist movements present the Umma as a "supra- and super-family" (Kreile 2003b, 39) and promote a reorganisation and reintegration of society beyond traditional patterns of familial bonding. The transformation from kinship-based communities to politically and religiously constituted Islamist communities represents an adaptation to modern crisis-ridden social conditions in which the state is largely absent in terms of welfare provision.

> Islamist organisations not only offer social services and provide clear moral orientations; they also promise – crucially – to reformulate and reconstitute the

> patriarchal authority of fathers, husbands, brothers, and other male relatives, which has been threatened by sociocultural processes of erosion. They do so by relocating control over women to a new level, where it is now collectively guaranteed by all men of the Umma, the "super-family" of believers.
>
> *(Kreile 2003b, 39)*

Within this "super-family", the incest taboo is universalised and thereby rendered unlivable. It is consequently externalised, with women positioned as "sexual horror" (Benslama 2017) within the community and Jews and Zionists as enemies to Islam beyond it.

### Anti-Nationalism, Postnationalism, Supranationalism: It Is All About Israel

Sexism, antifeminism, anti- or supranationalism, and antisemitism intermingle in the specific conception of community, which, for the Nazis, was based on *race*, and for Islamists, on their fundamentalist version of a *religion*, a purportedly pure Islam. As has been shown, both operate on the basis of gender images that assign women the role of community preservers, while simultaneously regarding them as the weak point through which enemies of the community gain access and destroy it from within. As in National Socialism, in Islamism too, these 'corruptors' are the Jews, who are also associated with the sexual drive as the enemy inside the community.

The disintegration of the Umma with the end of the Caliphate and the partial colonisation of the affected territories by Western powers inflicted a deep wound and led to a collective narcissistic crisis (Diner 2009). The importation of European antisemitic world conspiracy narratives into the Islamic world helped to cope with this crisis in a projective manner that lacked self-criticism: "Behind the dissolution of the Umma, signalled especially by the emancipation of women and the breakdown of the traditional moral order, stood, accordingly, the Jew" (Elbe 2024, 319f.). Islamism views not only women's emancipation but also the global nation-state order as part of a Jewish world conspiracy to undermine Islam, as Bassam Tibi emphasises:

> Islamists argue that Jews and Zionists instigated the abolition of the caliphate as the first step toward dividing the Muslim umma into small and weak nations. Nation building is therefore part of a Jewish master plan, carried out in conspiracy with non-Jewish enemies of Islam, to weaken the umma and destroy the Islamic polity.
>
> *(Tibi 2012, 62)*

National Socialist ideology combined aggressive nationalism with supranational elements that became manifest in the idea of the *völkisch* community but still regarded Jews as an anti-national element and incapable of building a nation. Islamists, by contrast, see Jews as the proponents of the modern nation-state, because they view the nation-state order as anti-Islamic and Western, entailing the separation of religion and politics. They not only aim at reversing this order for Islamic

regions, but at a "global desecularization in pursuit of an Islamic world order" (Tibi 2012, 62). This is why, according to Benslama, Islamists not only view the West as enemy, but also "the Westernised Muslims, who have definitively separated from the Caliphate, who reject the subordination of politics to religion, who understand themselves as citizens of a nation" (Benslama 2017).

This enmity against the modern nation-state is shared by Hamas, which only pretends to advocate for a Palestinian nation-state, but rejects it alongside Israel. As stated in their charter, they in fact advocate for a supranational Palestine as

> an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up. Neither a single Arab country nor all Arab countries, neither any king or president, nor all the kings and presidents, neither any organization nor all of them, be they Palestinian or Arab, possess the right to do that.
>
> *(Hamas Covenant 1988)*

Hamas advocates a divine Palestine, i.e., a theocracy in opposition to all worldly forms of governance.

Matthias Küntzel notes that the Islamist worldview is not primarily politically but religiously motivated. Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar understood the killing of Jews as a religious duty and a prerequisite for the "salvation of the world" and the "resurrection of Muslims" (Küntzel 2025, 111). Hamas terrorists follow the idea of a religious struggle, not that of national liberation. It is therefore not surprising, Küntzel continues, "that Hamas terrorists in the GoPro videos from October 7 do not proclaim the liberation of Palestine, but instead sing praises to the Prophet Muhammad and Allah" (Küntzel 2025, 111).

However, Islamism does not present itself as mere religious inwardness but in the first place as a political theology in which the binary distinction between friend and enemy is central – similar to Carl Schmitt's definition of the political. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, the religious leader becomes a God-authorised sovereign who decides on 'exceptional events'. The crucial aspect is less religious orthodoxy than the identification of metaphysical enemies, foremost among them Zionism and the State of Israel (Benl 2025, 268). Hatred of the nation-state and its legalistic principles and abstract institutions is expressed in eliminationist antizionism (Grigat 2021, 154). In this ideology, the destruction of Israel is a prerequisite for the restoration of Islamic sovereignty.

The demonisation of Zionism as a "collective evil" (Wilf 2025) has a long history that reaches back to National Socialism. Long before the creation of the State of Israel based on the UN Partition Plan for Palestine and Resolution 181 of 1947,[3] antizionism, which denied Jews the right to national self-determination, was part of Nazi antisemitic propaganda. Central to 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 2025, 64). 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 2025, 64). In his 1920 programmatic 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, 406; see Kistenmacher 2025; Rensmann 2020; 2021).

As early as the 1920s, the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg argued against the idea of a Zionist state, regarding "all Jews as Zionists and Zionists as representatives of the whole of Judaism" (quoted in Nicosia 2012, 99; Rensmann 2021). 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 in Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, all of which 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. The claim is that Muslims have a greater right to the land than Jews, without addressing the complex historical migrations of both populations (Bensoussan 2019; Weinstock 2019). Israel-related antisemitism in the Arab and Islamic 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 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 well researched (Becker 2024; Herf 2009; Küntzel 2024; Motadel 2014).

Parts of Western academia, especially critics of nationalism and state violence, 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). Israel becomes the representative of all that is bad in the principle of the nation-state per se. While Israel stands for the abstract state (rooted in abstract law), Arab states and Palestine 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, as Stephan Grigat points out:

> The opposition between the abstract and the concrete, between "rapacious" and "productive" 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 different versions of Islamism. Today, German neo-Nazis place themselves squarely in this tradition and claim that "Israel is our misfortune".
>
> *(Grigat 2025, 65)*

According to Elke Rajal's analysis of German debates after 7 October, the far right and parts of the radical left use similar discursive models of guilt defence when it comes to delegitimising Israel (Rajal 2025b). The redemptive ideological

character of this form of antizionism becomes evident when actors from opposing ends of the political spectrum converge on the demand to eliminate Israel as a supposed prerequisite for world peace (Bassi 2023; Hirsh 2018).

Western antisemitism, particularly on the extreme right, conflates the state with an ethnic-national community, projecting onto Israel what one refuses 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, antisemites idealise it as a tangible, authentic, and primordial national community. The abstract state and its legal structures must dissolve into the immediacy of communal traditions. In radical antizionist statephobia, 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, authenticity, unity, and unambiguousness is encapsulated in a slogan seen at anti-Israel demonstrations: 'Palestine will set us free!'

A specific ambivalence towards the state and its contradictory nature becomes evident here – an ambivalence that finds expression in antisemitism directed against Israel. In "projective antizionism" (Grigat and Stögner 2025) and "conspiracist antizionism" (Tabarovsky 2022), antisemitic conspiracy myths are openly invoked. Israel functions as the "Jew among nations" (Poliakov 2022, 33), a phrase that succinctly captures the pathological projection of antisemitic traditions within antizionism (Grigat and Stögner 2025, 13).

The Jewish state serves as a projection screen, on the one hand, for the uncomprehended contradictions inherent in the concept of the nation-state – namely, that the state, as a manifestation of the capitalist social relation, embodies the monopoly on violence vis-à-vis its citizens and, precisely through this monopoly, at least *pro forma* guarantees their rights, even if it often fails to do so in practice; and, on the other hand, for the fact that the state and its institutions are not identical with its citizens. That state and people are not identical is the sore point to which antisemitism responds in its rejection of abstraction: it levels the state institutions, contrary to any mediated understanding, into the concretist idea of a *Volksgemeinschaft* or into the pseudo-universalist idea of the Umma. Both forms of community are, by definition, exclusive of Jews, although the *Volksgemeinschaft* extends this exclusion even further: unlike in the Islamic *dhimmi* system, it offers no tolerated status for Jews, nor does it allow for the possibility of conversion or assimilation.

In projective antizionism, there are two ways of viewing Israel: on the one hand, as the embodiment of the artificial, the abstract, and the inauthentic – an 'entity' that is not even a 'real' state – this view is shared by right-wing extremists and Islamists. On the other hand, for many Western progressives, anti-nationalists, and anti-imperialists, the Jewish state appears as representing precisely what one believes to have overcome: an ethnonational community whose vehement attachment to its particularity stands in the way of universal world peace (like, e.g., Butler 2012).

There is a third version that could be termed 'projective philozionism' and which occurs in some ultra-right-wing groups. Their object of desire is the very nationalism projected onto Israel, articulated in the antilegalistic concept of *Volkssouveränität* (people's sovereignty), and accompanied by envy of what is imagined as Israel's particularist ethnic nationalism – one they believe they themselves have lost (Schreiter 2022).

In any case, it is never actually about Israel or Israeli politics. Rather, Israel becomes a screen onto which each side projects its fears, desires, and ambivalences concerning the modern state order. The dichotomy of concrete versus abstract, natural versus artificial, becomes flexible and can be mobilised, in one form or another, against Israel. This becomes clear in contemporary antizionism: some condemn Israel for being a state that defends its borders against attacks instead of dissolving into a supranational whole of "cohabitation" (Butler 2012), while others regard Israel as an illegitimate construct of a non-people, devoid of any right to exist. In all these cases, where Israel is conceived either as an artificial construct or as a form of hidebound particularism to be overcome or reclaimed, ideological continuities with National Socialism become apparent.

The claim that Jews are not a people with their own identity, and therefore neither entitled to possess a nation-state nor able to establish one, was already propagated by the Nazis and has since become a standard element of antizionist discourse. It appears both in the rhetoric of the PLO and among left-wing antizionists in the West from the 1970s onward. Thus, Article 20 of the PLO Charter declares that Judaism is merely a religion and not an independent nationality: "The Jews are not one people with an independent identity, but citizens of the states to which they belong"; Jewish claims to "historical or religious ties with Palestine" are said to be "incompatible with the facts of history" (quoted in Markl 2025, 234). This discourse strategy of delegitimisation also resurfaced during anti-Israel protests at universities in Berlin after 7 October: the claim was made that the Jews are not a real people, and that the Palestinians are the 'real' people instead (Rensmann 2025, 222).

Just like a nation, a people is not simply a natural given, but rather the result of specific historical and political constellations. Anything else would mean confusing the *völkisch* ideology of origin with truth. Hardly anyone else has expressed this as clearly as Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jew and anticolonial 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" (quoted in Frosh 2023, 160). According to this line of argument, it is in Israel as the only 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" (quoted in Jacobs 2015, 140). However, Horkheimer was not against the Jewish state, but to the contrary described Israel, after the Shoah, as a necessary place of refuge from antisemitism (Jacobs 2015, 142). What he deplored

was a consistently antisemitic world that made Jewish negativity a death threat to 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, while ignoring global antisemitism (Butler 2012; critical on this, see Benhabib 2013). This, however, is a negative "exceptionalisation of Zionism and Israel" (Bassi 2023) and an expectation that Jews be "exceptional specimens of humanity" (Arendt 1976, 58).

In a postnationalist state-phobia, Butler calls for the dismantling of the Jewish state and the establishment of cohabitation without Jewish sovereignty. They view Jewish sovereignty as part of "colonizing practices […] 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, 213). Against the background of lasting Arab and Islamic antisemitism which preceded the creation of Israel as a Jewish state (Bensoussan 2019; 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 naïve denial of reality, as Micha Brumlik pointed out already in 2013 (Brumlik 2013). Alex Gruber argues that Butler "declares the Palestinians to be the vanguard of a fetishistic project of 'post-sovereignty'" (Gruber 2025, 66) and that this position places Butler in a certain alignment with Hamas, which, as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, envisions a form of non-state organisation oriented not towards national sovereignty but towards the Umma. From this perspective, it appears coherent that Butler interprets Hamas not as a terrorist group but as a social movement resisting dispossession, occupation, and colonial domination – one that they regard as pursuing ostensibly progressive objectives (Gruber 2025, 66; Radical Archives 2010).

After 7 October, Butler did condemn the acts of violence committed by Hamas, yet simultaneously called for a "contextualization" of Hamas's violence within a continuum of violence and counterviolence for which they held Israel, as an alleged settler-colonial state, responsible (Butler 2023). "It is not a terrorist attack and it is not an antisemitic attack, it was an attack against Israelis" (Paroles d'Honneur 2024), they stated six months after the assault, denying both the antisemitism of Hamas and the Jewish identity of most of those attacked. According to Butler, 7 October represented an act of resistance against settler colonialism and systematic state violence towards Palestinians, whereas Israel's military response was genocidal. By advancing this perspective, Butler

> elevated an Islamist terror racket to a messenger of post-sovereignty, while declaring nation-states that defend themselves against terror to be anachronisms – entities attempting to drown out their own obsolescence through displays of force and violence, making others pay for what is ineradicably their own: their vulnerability.
>
> *(Gruber 2025, 72)*

In sum, antisemitism, sexism, and nationalism form an ideological constellation that, in one form or another, has characterised both the development of modern nation-states and anti- or postnationalist struggles against the nation-state order. What Habermas called the "postnational constellation" (1998), focussing specifically on Germany's coming to terms with its ethnonationalist tradition so closely linked to antisemitism, turned out to be fertile ground for a new antisemitism in the form of hatred of Israel. What has changed is the level at which antisemitic stereotypes are produced: no longer purely national, it happens more and more on a supranational, even postnational level (cf. Finkielkraut 2004; Taguieff 2002; Wistrich 2005). This is associated with a certain change in antisemitic stereotypes: While in nineteenth-century political antisemitism the 'Jew' was feared within the nation, as an anti-national figure that questioned the national principle (cf. Massing 1949), this is no longer exclusively the case. Since the foundation of the Israeli nation-state, more obviously since 1967, antisemitic discourses, particularly those of the left, do not exclusively portray the 'Jew' as an anti-national figure. Today the 'Jew' instead functions as a personification of the very national principle that the postnationalists themselves pretend to have overcome while openly promoting Palestinian nationalism as a form of progressive or liberation nationalism. Jewishness is at least as commonly associated with aggressive nationalism as with cosmopolitanism. This is part of a

> new antisemitism [in Europe], manifested *inter alia* in the depiction of Israel as a uniquely illegitimate state or people, Zionism as a uniquely noxious ideology, supporters of Israel as a uniquely powerful lobby and memory of the Holocaust as a uniquely self-serving reference to the past.
>
> *(Fine 2010, 416)*

Projective antizionism has two sides as regards the connection to nationalism: on the one hand, it singles out the Jewish nation-state as anachronistic in an otherwise allegedly postnational era; on the other, Israel is simultaneously seen as an artificial entity, an inauthentic nation-state within the lands of so-called historic Palestine and within the family of authentic Arab nation-states. This makes clear that Israel-related antisemitism is at once a postcolonial *and* neo-orientalist discourse. It operates with similar, if not the same anti-Jewish stereotypes as the nationalist variant. In the guise of antizionism, nationalism and antisemitism can thus be acted out without arousing suspicion. Especially in parts of the global left, antisemitism is made "virtuous" by such indirect communication, as Jean Améry (2022) wrote as early as 1969.

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 and Spencer 2018, 103)*

The old 'Jewish question' reemerges in the contemporary 'Israel question', which lies at the core of present-day threats to Jews worldwide and serves as one of the driving forces behind radical Islamism. 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 2025b; Schreiter and Rensmann 2025; Weiß 2017), parts of the left (Bassi 2023; Fine and Spencer 2018; Hirsh 2018), and Islamists (Grigat 2021; Herf 2009; Küntzel 2024). Likewise, large parts of intersectional and queer feminism can agree on it (Illouz 2024; Jesella 2024; Stögner 2019; 2021). These strange alliances will be observed more closely in the next chapters.

## Notes

1 On the relationship between racism and antisemitism as conceptualised in Critical Theory, see Stögner 2026.
2 After 7 October, numerous feminist intellectuals and activists in the West claimed that Israel weaponised the rape of women and girls by Hamas terrorists. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.
3 There is not enough space to go into detail here, but just to put it briefly: 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 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 history has also contributed to the diverse character of Israeli society today: about 21 per cent of Israeli citizens are Muslim, Druze, or Christian Arabs, while around 73.5 per cent are Jewish, of whom roughly half are descendants of Jews from the predominantly Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (State of Israel 2023; Mazzig 2019).

# 9

# FEMINISM AND ANTISEMITISM

As has become evident in the previous chapters, the specific entanglement of antisemitism and sexism is not limited to one political camp or societal-historical formation but rather permeates all stages of civilisation – Western as well as non-Western – in one or another form. Likewise, it functions as an ideological bridge between otherwise antagonistic political spheres. Today, this unifying function is evident especially in those instances where Israel is at stake. In these constellations, familiar distinctions between left and right, feminist and misogynist, religious fundamentalist and secularist, progressive and reactionary increasingly collapse into ambivalent and contradictory alignments. Particularly disturbing is when feminist actors enter into alliances with antisemitic Islamists and, in doing so, reproduce their antifeminism and sexism. After the 7 October massacres, these entanglements have surfaced with unprecedented intensity, though their genealogy predates that moment.[1]

In this chapter, I examine feminist responses to 7 October as an entry point for analysing these ideological convergences. I then situate these reactions within a brief theoretical genealogy, focusing on the conceptual pitfalls of the intersectionality framework. Originating in Black feminist thought in the United States, intersectionality has become one of the defining theoretical frameworks of the contemporary feminist left, emphasising the multiplicity and interdependence of structures of domination and oppression in modern societies. Yet, as I will argue, intersectionality also exhibits an openness to antisemitic and antifeminist formations. I seek to explain where and why this is the case, while at the same time suggesting that such complicity is not inherent to intersectional thinking as such.

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## Feminist Responses to 7 October: From Silence to Outright Legitimation

The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October was not only the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust but also the manifestation of a monstrous ideological constellation in which exterminatory antisemitism and extreme misogyny were mutually constitutive. The Islamist perpetrators raped women and girls with bestial cruelty before (and after) killing or abducting them, circulating photographs and videos online that depicted women – obviously raped, bleeding from their genitals – and exhibited their victims' contorted bodies before jeering male crowds, mocked them, spat upon them, and dragged them by the hair. All these acts constituted Islamist-misogynistic performances of ultimate hatred towards women's autonomous sexuality.

Such an abyss of horror should have provoked a worldwide feminist outcry – one that unequivocally condemned Hamas and Islamic Jihad as antisemitic and misogynistic murder and rape gangs, demanded the immediate and unconditional release of the Israeli hostages, expressed solidarity with Israelis, and affirmed Israel's right to exist and to self-defence. While Israeli women's organisations meticulously documented the sexual-violence dimension of the antisemitic atrocities of 7 October (Gordon 2025; Halperin-Kaddari et al. 2025), leading international women's organisations, including UN Women, remained silent for weeks, if not months. Shulamit Almog and Gal Amir (2025, 5) speak of "walls of silence" that began to rise immediately after 7 October, when the first reports of rapes committed by members of Hamas and other Islamist terror groups emerged. Familiar feminist credos such as 'Believe Women' and 'Silence Is Violence' lost their validity within this specific context where the sexual violence in question was perpetrated against Israeli women by Palestinian men. Although isolated feminist voices articulated solidarity with Israeli women, they were drowned out, particularly on social media and at demonstrations and rallies in major cities in Europe and the US, by self-declared feminist groups that, in alignment with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign and under the guise of misdirected Palestine solidarity, enacted a reversal of victim and perpetrator. In this inversion, the antisemitic and misogynistic violence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad was reframed as a legitimate act of resistance against an alleged Israeli occupation, accompanied by calls for a Palestine 'from the river to the sea' (see, e.g., Palestinian Feminist Collective 2023).

Within parts of the Western cultural sphere and academia, particularly the humanities and social sciences, repression and denial of the Hamas massacre began on the day of its occurrence (Illouz 2024). Israel had scarcely initiated any military response in Gaza and was still engaged in subduing the thousands of Hamas terrorists who rampaged through southern Israel, often accompanied by civilians from Gaza participating in looting and abducting people, when numerous universities in Europe and the United States hastily produced declarations of solidarity, signed by thousands of faculty members and students. Solidarity, however, was scarcely extended to the 1,200 murdered Israelis or to the 250 hostages abducted to Gaza; they were mentioned, if at all, only in perfunctory gestures of regret couched in abstract

language and false equivalence.[2] The central discursive effort was instead directed towards recoding Hamas's barbarism as an act of resistance and of 'decolonisation' and towards indicting Israel as either preparing or already perpetrating a genocide in Gaza.[3] The Israeli victims of murder, rape, torture, and kidnapping were denied mourning and empathy. Grief itself was withheld.

The Austrian author Doron Rabinovici thus spoke of a "process of derealisation. What befell the victims is not acknowledged. This is the second erasure of their existence" (Rabinovici 2024, 21). Derealisation occurred in multiple ways (for an overview, see Johnson 2023). Probably the most prominent example was Judith Butler, who, in the essay "The Compass of Mourning", published a couple of days after 7 October, wrote of having "been sick to my stomach for days" upon witnessing the violence, affirming that Hamas's violence must be condemned, yet cautioning against remaining in an "anti-intellectual and presentist" stance of moral outrage (Butler 2023). What was required, Butler argued, was a contextualisation of Hamas's acts of violence within a continuum of violence and counterviolence, for which they held Israel – conceived as a putative settler-colonial and apartheid state – responsible (Butler 2023). Nowhere in the text, however, was the antisemitism of Hamas mentioned. While Butler framed empathy for the Israeli victims as a subjective reaction of feeling sick, a matter of moral affect, they wrapped the supposedly more objective, analytical perspective into a reversal of victim and perpetrator.

In the months that followed, Butler more radically derealised Israeli suffering, culminating in March 2024 in open scepticism towards the documented rapes committed by Hamas. By that time, the overwhelming evidence for these crimes had been acknowledged even by UN Women, which had initially reacted with conspicuous hesitation (Patten 2024). For Butler, however, this evidence appeared insufficient: "OK, if there is documentation[4] then we deplore that, […] but we want to see that documentation, and we want to know that it is right", declared the international figurehead of queer feminism during an antizionist event near Paris, which called for "revolutionary peace in Palestine" (Paroles d'Honneur 2024). The sceptical mimic accompanying Butler's words reinforced their performative dimension. The speech act is performed as a posture of doubt, which not only stands in stark contradiction to the widely accepted feminist principle of granting epistemic authority to survivors of sexual violence, but also disregards the fact that the rapes committed by Hamas rank among the most thoroughly documented atrocities in history. Images of obviously raped women were disseminated by the perpetrators themselves on 7 October.

Speaking at the same event, French decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès argued that, historically, accusations of rape have frequently been mobilised with racist intent, thereby implying that the testimonies of Israeli women should be scrutinised as politically motivated fabrications. Comparable feminist interventions occurred in the United States. Amy Elman quotes a University of Minnesota professor and "rape crisis counsellor" who drew a parallel between Israeli rape survivors and White women in the segregated American South, whose fabricated accusations of rape against Black men had led to lynchings (Elman 2024, 303). As these instances

show, this rhetoric only works on the assumption that Jews are White and therefore their rape claims are racist. Elman concludes that

> silencing survivors and their communities under the guise of fact-finding and feminist anti-racism is an especially effective means of gaslighting that ensures further anguish, rape's banalization, and a likely legitimation of corroboration requirements for rape that feminists ended decades ago.
>
> *(Elman 2024, 303)*

The same line of irrationality is reproduced in an "Open Letter to the Israeli and U.S. governments and others who weaponize the issue of rape", which has garnered more than 1,800 signatures, including that of Angela Y. Davis, the well-known civil rights activist and former student of Herbert Marcuse. Instead of unequivocally condemning the Hamas perpetrators and expressing empathy for the Israeli victims, the letter calls for an "end to the manipulation of sexual assault" (Stop Manipulating Sexual Assault 2024).

At the aforementioned Paris discussion event in March 2024, Butler also denied the antisemitic character of the Hamas attacks, asserting that a "commitment to a phantasy of Jewish suffering" obscured the broader dynamics of power: "It is not a terrorist attack and it is not an antisemitic attack, it was an attack against Israelis" (Paroles d'Honneur 2024). With this formulation, Butler rendered irrelevant both the Jewish identity of most of the victims and the explicitly antisemitic ideology of Hamas, which is amply documented in its own charter,[5] rather than recognising them as constitutive to the context of the violence.

Butler's responses illustrate how a one-sided contextualisation of Hamas's atrocities, one that ultimately ascribed responsibility for the violence to its victims, escalated into a profound derealisation of those victims. This dynamic of denial and derealisation is a reaction familiar from post-Nazi society in the face of antisemitic atrocities. Adorno termed it *Schuldabwehrantisemitismus* – a "guilt-defensive antisemitism" – a form of antisemitism nourished by the vehement denial of one's own guilt, or that of one's ancestors, in the Nazi extermination of the Jews, a denial that entails the reversal of victim and perpetrator and the derealisation of the victims of the Shoah (Adorno 2010). One of his most incisive formulations reads:

> The enormity of what was perpetrated works to justify it: a lax consciousness consoles itself with the thought that such a thing surely could not have happened unless the victims had in some way or another furnished some kind of instigation, and this "some kind of" may then be multiplied at will. Delusion passes over the flagrant disproportion between an extremely fictitious guilt and an extremely real punishment.[6]
>
> *(Adorno 1997a, 557)*

This observation has immense contemporary relevance considering the one-sided contextualisation and thus legitimation of Hamas's atrocities, the reversal of victim and perpetrator, and the blatant denial of antisemitic aggression in the

aftermath of 7 October. It seems plausible to interpret the absence of solidarity on the part of significant segments of international left and feminist communities with the Israeli victims as a new manifestation of the old guilt-defensive antisemitism. Israel is delegitimised by descendants of Nazis and of former colonial powers alike. Much like the antisemitic slogan 'Zionists are the new Nazis', accusations of settler-colonialism and apartheid serve a function of moral relief. Much of the historical guilt associated with colonial violence has not been adequately confronted in the societies that succeeded these colonial powers. As a result, this unprocessed guilt can be projected and displaced onto Israel.

Hence, the conditions of post-Nazi society are by no means confined to the immediate successor states of National Socialism, just as antisemitism itself is a global phenomenon. What continues to operate is a defensive resistance to remembering the guilt of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. Yet this resistance does not, as the often-heard slogan "Free Palestine from German Guilt" insinuates (Rajal 2025b), emanate from those who reflectively express solidarity with Israel, but rather from those who fantasise within Germany's already fragile culture of remembrance about a "German Catechism" administered by "self-appointed high priests" (Moses 2021). The deeper truth of this desire for redemption from guilt is revealed in another pro-Palestinian German protest slogan: "Palestine will set us free", seen at demonstrations and disruptions in Hamburg and Berlin in 2023 and 2024. Stephan Grigat interprets it as a form of "redemptive antizionism" (*Erlösungsantizionismus*) (Grigat 2023): the world, in this ideology, will only be free once the Zionist Jewish state is destroyed. Redemptive antizionism, however, is not an exclusively German phenomenon; it is widespread across Western academia, as debates such as those sparked by Judith Butler demonstrate.

Feminist academic responses to 7 October are often marked by a remarkable lack of knowledge regarding the actual situation in Israel and Gaza, as well as the history of the Middle East more broadly. They are, for the most part, unreflective exercises in self-referentiality, driven by a distinct agenda – the delegitimisation of Israel. The belief that one need not know much about antisemitism, the Middle East conflict, or even Hamas's openly genocidal ideology to issue a categorical judgement against Israel is candidly admitted, for instance, by the feminist Critical Theorist Nancy Fraser. She was one of the first to sign the open letter entitled *Philosophy for Palestine*, issued on 1 November 2023, which demanded the end of the war in Gaza without demanding the immediate release of the hostages. When asked by an Austrian journalist to explain the basis of her judgement, she responded that solidarity with Palestine "requires no special expertise", since philosophers "speak as citizens" (Ronald Pohl 2023). This equals, in effect, a renunciation of philosophy's own standards of judgement in favour of the unfiltered adoption of positions drawn from political activism in a (counter-)public sphere, often saturated with disinformation and fake news. When the feminist Critical Theorist Seyla Benhabib (2023) invoked historical facts about the Middle East conflict to challenge the reductive and ideologically distorted perspective of the *Philosophy for Palestine* letter and pointed to Hamas's nihilism in its instrumentalisation of the

Palestinian civilian population as human shields, Fraser expressed her "disappointment" in her colleague Benhabib (Ronald Pohl 2023). In this sense, 'Solidarity with Palestine' functions as a slogan of anti-Western self-righteousness, concerned with the freedom and security of Palestinians only in a purely rhetorical or superficial way. It is, quite evidently, less about critique than about the rejection of Enlightenment principles, among them the principles of academic rigour like reason and evidence, in the name of anti-Westernism – an orientation that, for this purpose, also regards the (subtle) legitimisation of Hamas as acceptable.

Rhetorical patterns of doubting the evidence of the sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas are quite common among prominent public intellectuals, as, for instance, Masha Gessen, an essayist for the influential weekly newspaper *The New Yorker*. In an essay entitled "What We Know About the Weaponization of Sexual Violence on October 7th", Gessen (2024) frames sexual violence in wartime as an inherent and recurring phenomenon: "it always happened in wartimes". This false normalisation of rape – given that it does not occur in all wars, nor with the same intensity – primarily functions to trivialise the massacres of 7 October. The implicit logic is that if such violence is ubiquitous, then these events were not exceptional. Yet, when addressing the suffering of Israeli women, Gessen asserts that it was difficult to find corroborating evidence, since

> most of the women who had been subjected to sexual violence on October 7th were dead. They weren't coming forward with evidence. It was the Israeli government that was amplifying stories of rape, which it claimed had been widespread, systematic, and particularly brutal on October 7th.
>
> *(Gessen 2024)*

Gessen distorts witness testimonies and forensic evidence – by the time already deemed credible even by UN Women – reducing them to mere rumours upon which the Israeli government built a strategy. Although Gessen does not explicitly deny the acts of sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas or Islamic Jihad, they nonetheless furnish denialists with rhetorically sophisticated arguments. This is achieved, for instance, by questioning whether the violence was systematic and by situating the rape allegations within the framework of Israeli propaganda. In the same essay, Gessen also questions "the belief that Israeli soldiers do not engage in sexual violence", referencing "a student's thesis that claimed that rapes of Palestinian women by I.D.F. soldiers are rare because of racism – because the soldiers would consider it somehow beneath them to rape an Arab woman" (Gessen 2024). Gessen does not in any way acknowledge the nihilistic absurdity inherent in such a claim. Given Gessen's assertion of wartime sexual violence as an inevitable occurrence and their pronounced anti-Israel stance, it is unsurprising that the author regards as somehow plausible the deeply troubling and cynical notion that refraining from such violence might itself signify racist bias. This case exemplifies the morally compromised and intellectually incoherent discourse that has emerged in relation to Israel, wherein ethical reasoning is rendered a no-win exercise for Israel and Israelis.[7]

Such interventions which normalise sexual violence in wartime while implicitly casting doubt on reports of rape or minimising the extent of sexual violence against Israeli women by claiming that, because most victims were dead, the state "amplified" these narratives, do not merely contest empirical evidence–they shift the moral axis of interpretation. Such rhetoric adds to the "walls of silence" that surround rape victims (Almog and Amir 2025). The French philosopher Julia Christ rightly notes that in these circumstances,

> No thought is given […] to the question, specific to wartime rape, of what makes men agree to turn their intimate lives into weapons. Instead, one naturalises an alleged propensity for men to rape, and thus comes to terms with reality. As if it were normal for rapes to occur. As if it were normal for armies to use them. Inevitable, unavoidable, incomprehensible. As if it weren't an act that had to be analysed again and again until it was understood, but just something that happens.
> *(Christ 2023)*

By surreptitiously turning documented witness testimony and forensic evidence into a government strategy, the aim of which was to utilise sexual violence as a propaganda weapon against the Palestinians, these texts furnish denialists with rhetorically sophisticated resources: they invite questions about whether the violence was 'systematic', about who benefits from its publicity, and about supposed racist logic on the part of Israelis.

This discursive economy serves several interlocking functions. First, it delegitimises Jewish and Israeli survivors by rendering their attestations suspect, portraying them as duplicitous, manipulative, or politically motivated. Second, it recasts the actions of armed actors as legible within the vocabulary of 'resistance' rather than war crimes, effacing responsibility for sexual violence. Third, and consequentially, it reinforces wider narratives that portray Israel as morally illegitimate and therefore as a permissible object of political violence. The rhetoric of "redemptive antizionism" (Grigat 2023), exemplified in the call for dismantling the Israeli state as a moral imperative, sidesteps the normative labour of judgement, rendering impossible the distinction between terrorism and resistance.

Although Butler later apologised for having doubted the rapes of Israeli women, their initial response exemplifies a trend among certain segments of the feminist left to disregard sexual violence when the victims are Israeli and the perpetrators Palestinian. By casting doubt on well-substantiated reports and testimonies, Butler and others contribute to an environment in which denial and trivialisation of sexual atrocity become normalised. The influence of such rhetoric is significant. When prominent feminist intellectuals question the veracity of sexual violence or deny the antisemitic character of the 7 October mass atrocities, they offer ideological cover to those who seek to erase such crimes. This dynamic generates a self-reinforcing cycle through which denial becomes progressively legitimised. Such voices, consciously or not, reinforce the antisemitic trope that "depicts Jews as liars, or fantasizes that Jews are trying to control or to manipulate, or blames the Jews arguing 'they deserve

what happened to them'" (Koresh 2025, 129). Antisemitism intersects with sexism when otherwise feminist activists blame Jewish women of 'making it up'.

## From Holocaust Denial to Rape Denial

When examining certain feminist responses to 7 October, at rallies as well as in related publications or social media contributions, a dual dynamic becomes apparent: on the one hand, the sexual violence of 7 October is denied; on the other, it is invoked affirmatively, rationalised, or accompanied by expressions of contempt towards the victims. Although this may appear paradoxical, the coexistence of denial and affirmation is a well-documented phenomenon in reactions to the crimes of National Socialism and other manifestations of antisemitic violence (Loy 2024, 18). The denial of rape is therefore to be seen in close connection to the denial of the Holocaust. The French-Israeli feminist street artist Morgane Koresh put it bluntly:

> The scale of the pain and the horror [of 7 October] are unimaginable, and the whole world is saying that we are making it up. We deserve it, or we are just using it as an excuse to attack in Gaza […]. The same way that we heard our whole life that Jews created the Holocaust to have an excuse to create Israel. It is exactly the same!
>
> *(Koresh 2025, 130f.)*

In the open endorsement of terror and its conversion into liberation, the victims were lost, according to the motto: 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs', or 'Any major undertaking comes with collateral damage', as seen in the contributions of New York-based writer Najma Sharif on X: "What did y'all think decolonization meant? vibes? papers? essays? Losers"; or by Cornell University Assistant Professor Russell Rickford, who claimed that despite abhorring violence, "They [the Palestinians] were able to breathe, for the first time in years! It was exhilarating" (both quoted in Omer-Jackaman 2024).

The denial of rape and sexual atrocities in the aftermath of 7 October manifested in both overt and oblique forms. A striking example occurred during a public gathering in Munich on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (25 November 2024), where a speaker declared: "That is why we stand firmly against all those who actively support systems of oppression. This includes female soldiers in the Israeli occupation army, such as Agam Berger, Daniela Gilboa, Liri Albag, and Naama Levy" (quoted in RIAS Bayern 2025, 32). At that time, all four women remained in captivity in Gaza, their physical condition and even survival uncertain until their eventual release in early 2025. In May 2024, *The Times of Israel* released video footage taken by Hamas terrorists on 7 October, showing these four terrified and bloodied women being taken hostage, with one of the captors referring to them as "sabaya", a term denoting women who can be taken as sexual slaves or made to bear children (TOI Staff 2024). The widely

circulated video of Naama Levy, showing her with blood-stained trousers as she was dragged into a car, became emblematic of the sexualised terror inflicted on women that day and underscored the profound brutality of the violence (Glazer 2023). The speaker at the rally in Munich, however, denied these women solidarity and compassion, and instead blamed them by portraying the raped and abducted as agents of oppression, thus grotesquely inverting and perverting the rally's explicit purpose – to oppose violence against women. Yet by positioning Israeli victims as representatives of a "system of oppression", the speaker effectively rationalised, and thus symbolically legitimated, the violence done to them (RIAS Bayern 2025, 32).

The statements made at the Munich rally are consistent with comments made by more prominent figures, such as Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In the days following the Hamas massacre, she warned against "divulging unverified information" about rapes committed by Hamas terrorists (Albanese 2023), even though Hamas terrorists themselves had left their murdered victims at the Nova Festival in a way that clearly indicated the sexual nature of the atrocities. On 8 March 2024, International Women's Day, and after months of silence on the sexual violence committed by Hamas, Albanese posted:

> My thoughts today are with the women and young girls of Gaza. May they find the "second of safety" they desperately need. My thoughts also go to the Israeli women, especially the soldiers: what have you done, what have you become. Dears, when you realise it, you will be haunted forever.
>
> *(Quoted in Anti-Defamation League 2024)*

Here as well, Israeli women's suffering is erased, and the victims are recast as perpetrators (see Markl 2025).

To grasp the deeper ideological structure of such rape denial, it is necessary to read it – despite all obvious differences – in continuity with the history and discursive mechanics of Holocaust denial. Holocaust denial does not merely entail the negation of empirical evidence; it functions as an ideological apparatus aimed at the erasure of Jewish suffering, the inversion of moral positions between victim and perpetrator, and the delegitimisation of the Jewish people's claim to historical memory and collective self-determination.

As antisemitism scholar Balázs Berkovits argues, the "non-recognition of the victim status of Israelis and Jews" doubles the antisemitism in that it "yields the most extreme antisemitic consequences". This view, he writes, "strips Jews of their humanity" and legitimises the harm done to them by seeing "the concepts of 'Jew' and 'victim' […] as mutually exclusive". Moreover, this logic absolves those "who in any other context would be considered as the enemy of humanity as a whole". For Berkovits, this is "worse than Holocaust denial – it is the outright justification of all potential Holocausts" (Berkovits 2024).

Holocaust denial or distortion is most commonly associated with the far right, where its most extreme manifestation, the so-called 'Auschwitz lie', operates

through outright denial, minimising the scale of atrocities and the number of victims, reversing the roles of victims and perpetrators, and advancing conspiracy claims that Jews invented the Holocaust to sustain their supposed global influence or to keep Germany subdued. Within right-wing extremist discourse, the link between Holocaust distortion and antisemitism directed at Israel also becomes evident (Schreiter and Rensmann 2025). Since the founding of the State of Israel is inseparable from the Shoah, and Israel is therefore the state of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi narratives have repeatedly sought to delegitimise Israel as an artificial and illegitimate state. In this sense, recognition of Israel is directly tied to the recognition of the Holocaust itself.

Holocaust denial and distortion also serve as key ideological strategies among many Islamists. The Iranian regime has made Holocaust denial a recurring and highly visible element of its state-sponsored propaganda. Through international cartoon competitions, conferences, and animated films, Holocaust denial is normalised, globalised, and embedded in transnational networks of antisemites and conspiracy theorists. These activities function not merely as symbolic provocation but as a deliberate strategy to retrospectively delegitimise the founding of Israel and to ideologically prepare the ground for its envisaged destruction (Grigat 2021, 159–163).

What is often regarded as the exclusive domain of Islamists as well as neo-Nazis and other extreme right-wing groups, however, finds a counterpart within parts of the radical left, particularly in discourses that demonise and delegitimise Israel (Rajal 2025b). While explicit Holocaust denial by neo-Nazis is widely condemned in both academia and the public sphere, the use of Holocaust distortion to undermine Israel's legitimacy continues to circulate under the guise of so-called criticism of Israel, for example when Gaza is equated with the Warsaw Ghetto and hence Israel with National Socialism (as, e.g., in Gessen 2023). This form of delegitimising and demonising Israel also includes the distortion of rape: as survivor testimonies and forensic investigations documenting acts of rape and sexual violence on 7 October accumulated, a counter-discourse emerged in which activists, intellectuals, and public figures systematically dismissed these reports as "Israeli propaganda", as a "Zionist narrative" (Loy 2024, 18), or as examples of Israel's "weaponisation" of sexual violence. This rhetorical pattern closely mirrors the mechanisms of Holocaust denial: overwhelming evidence is ignored, distorted, or reinterpreted to serve ideological ends. The denial of sexual violence makes antisemitic and misogynistic aggression invisible by being reframed as a form of 'resistance'.

Consider, for instance, the marginal Austrian party *Liste Gaza*, which stood in the 2024 national elections but failed to attain parliamentary representation.[8] Its social media output provides a paradigmatic instance of how rhetorical strategies of doubt and delegitimation are mobilised to erase sexualised violence: posts asking "Where are the rapes?"[9] performatively reposition the burden of proof. Elsewhere the insinuation is more explicit. Karoline Preisler, a former German

politician affiliated with the Free Democratic Party (FDP), has frequently appeared opposing anti-Israel demonstrators, wearing a "Bring Them Home" T-shirt and carrying a placard reading "Believe Israeli Women". For her visible stance, she has faced intense public hostility and sustained harassment, to the extent that she can now exercise her right to free speech and political expression only under police protection. Liste Gaza published a photograph of her and commented:

> While people in Gaza are dying of hunger and lack of medical care, Germans are donating 10,000 so that a woman who plays the victim, surrounded by umpteen police officers at demos, can continue to spread the rape lie of 10/7.[10]

Labelling documented sexual atrocities a "rape lie", a term that resonates with the neo-Nazi term 'Auschwitz lie', is not only antisemitic, but also profoundly misogynistic. The interconnection of both ideologies becomes evident when dismissal of gender-based violence concerns the suffering of Jewish and Israeli women.

In Berlin, for example, Yasemin Acar, an anti-Israel activist with 500,000 social media followers, publicly denied the sexual violence committed by Hamas during the 7 October attacks and was heard screaming at pro-Israel demonstrators in Berlin, "You are not human beings! Where are your women who were allegedly raped?" (quoted in Mettler 2024, 12). Her case demonstrates how fantasies of annihilation and sexual domination can converge within anti-Israel activist discourses. She released a video of herself dancing in her Berlin apartment during the Iranian missile strikes on Israel in October 2024 and screaming "Fuck Israel!" and "Israel is a bitch!" – language that, as Miriam Mettler (2024) notes, metaphorically represents Israel as the "Western slut" to be "fucked" by Iranian rockets. Such rhetoric epitomises the intersection of antisemitism and misogyny, wherein the humiliation of a feminised "Israel" becomes both a political and gendered act. Moreover, this type of expression frequently performs a social function: it signals radical commitment and seeks validation within male- and hetero-dominated milieus. In this manner, queers, lesbians, or women in general can "compensate for their social predicament […] by acting as vocal critics of the 'Zionist colonizers'" (Blackmer 2024b).

For women and girls from traditional or fundamentalist Islamic backgrounds in Europe, participation in anti-Israel and pro-Hamas demonstrations can indeed represent a form of liberation. Islamist ideology can serve as a platform and a means of escaping the repressive confines of the home. Going out into the streets to demonstrate for Palestine and demanding death to Israel, too, can be understood as an act of distorted emancipation. Hence, within these environments, to display antisemitic misogyny can confer symbolic capital and access to public space. Here it becomes apparent what the feminist Critical Theorist Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2012, 13) termed the "dialectic of emancipation" – i.e., a form of emancipation that deepens unfreedom. An antisemitic background, when framed within anti-Western discourse, renders misogyny targeting Jewish or Israeli women acceptable. In this exclusive solidarity, feminism becomes subordinated

to the political imperative of 'liberating Gaza', while the repression of women, LGBTIQ* individuals, and other political dissidents under Hamas and Islamic Jihad remains conspicuously ignored. Feminist antizionist writers and activists thus participate in an ideological inversion, celebrating misogynistic and antisemitic actors in Gaza as 'freedom fighters'. Such romanticisation goes hand in hand with an exoticisation of terror as legitimate resistance of an oppressed people (Hoffner 2025) and of terrorists as authentic 'noble savages' resisting Western-imperialist commodification (Mettler 2024).

Furthermore, the denial or minimisation of Hamas's sexual violence also serves the function of sustaining the image of the 'resistance fighter' as heroic and morally unimpeachable. Within this narrative, a hero cannot commit rape; so activists must erase, relativise, or discredit the victims' accounts. Such deliberate concealment or even denial of atrocities in order to maintain the image of the heroic fighter is well known from the history of left-wing apologetics for Stalinist terror or the terror of the Khmer Rouge (Omer-Jackaman 2024). To acknowledge sexual violence against Israeli women would necessitate recognising its dual character as both antisemitic and misogynistic – an admission that would undermine the ideological coherence of projective antizionist positions.

This denial can also be understood as an expression of a cultural relativism, which selectively applies human rights principles according to political or cultural context (for a critical view, see Benl 2025; Taiwo 2022). Under this logic, Western academics and activists are discouraged from criticising non-Western actors for fear of reproducing colonial hierarchies. For instance, slogans such as 'Free Gaza from Hamas' are denounced as colonial impositions of Western ideals of freedom upon Palestinians, whereas calls to dismantle Israeli statehood are embraced as legitimate expressions of anticolonial struggle. In an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Yasemin Acar said that Palestinians should choose themselves whether they want to be liberated from Hamas or not (Wahba 2025); anything else would be a neocolonial act. Such statements raise critical ethical questions: would these same activists have condemned efforts to liberate Nazi Germany as colonial overreach, on the grounds that Germans had not initiated their own liberation? Such critical interventions are blocked through inappropriate comparisons between Gaza and, for instance, the Warsaw Ghetto (like Gessen 2023; or Acar, see Wahba 2025), which ultimately result in Jews being equated with the murderers of their families. The dehumanising legitimation of antisemitic and misogynistic violence, however, is starkly illustrated by a sign carried by a girl veiled in a keffiyeh at a demonstration in London in 2024, declaring, "You don't get to choose how we resist", written in black letters with drops of blood painted on them (New English Review 2024).

The cultural relativism underpinning such discourse homogenises the Palestinian population and silences those Palestinian voices that oppose Hamas and advocate for liberal democratic values, gender equality, and individual freedom. It is conspicuous, though by no means surprising, that Hamas's killings

of political and other opponents in Gaza in the days immediately following the ceasefire in October 2025 did not provoke any noteworthy protest on the part of pro-Palestinian activists in the West. Their self-referential activism primarily relies upon racialised binaries that depict Israel as White, colonialist, and Western, despite the ethnic diversity of its majority non-White population (Mazzig 2019; State of Israel 2023), while construing Palestinians as victimised people of colour. This Manichean framework legitimises hostility towards Israel while effacing internal conflicts within Palestinian society. The denial of rape on 7 October must therefore be understood not only as a refusal to acknowledge gendered and antisemitic violence, but also as symptomatic of an epistemological shift towards a post-truth era, wherein ideological allegiance supersedes empirical evidence (Rensmann 2025).

The slogan 'Rape is not resistance', coined by pro-Israel feminists in the aftermath of 7 October, encapsulates the ethical imperative to confront and repudiate such denialism. That such a statement is even necessary underscores the erosion of moral clarity in parts of contemporary feminist political activism and academic discourse alike. Addressing this crisis requires more than empirical rebuttals; it demands a sustained critical interrogation of the theoretical, political, and cultural conditions that permit denial to flourish.

## Queer BDS

Reactions of this kind from feminist movements, be they queer or intersectional, in the United States and Europe in the aftermath of 7 October are alarming, though not entirely unexpected. They reflect a broader international trend, ongoing for more than two decades, within feminist solidarity movements for Palestine. Meanwhile, it seems to be commonplace that intersectional and queer-feminist groups openly endorse the BDS campaign, thereby supporting a strategy that, through academic, cultural, and economic boycotts, seeks to pressure Israel into ending the "occupation and colonization of all Arab lands" and "respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties" (BDS 2005). According to its own narrative, BDS was founded in 2005 as an initiative of numerous Palestinian organisations, presenting itself as an authentic outcry and an act of empowerment on behalf of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories. However, as David Hirsh has demonstrated, BDS did not in fact originate with Palestinians but was first initiated in 2002 by British academics (Hirsh 2018, 100). In any case, BDS is antisemitic as it denies the State of Israel the right to exist, as Omar Barghouti, founder of BDS, clearly stated: "Definitely, most definitely we oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine. No Palestinian, rational Palestinian, not a sell-out Palestinian, will ever accept a Jewish state in Palestine" (Barghouti 2014).

The specific alliance between intersectional and queer-feminist movements and BDS operates under the label Queer BDS or Queers for BDS (AlQaws 2012;

Schulman 2012). The foundation of this alliance lies in a particular interpretation of intersectionality, which posits that women must combat not only sexism but also other forms of oppression. Antiracism, accordingly, becomes a central feminist concern. This demand is justified by the recognition that women do not constitute a homogeneous group but are affected by diverse forms of discrimination, exploitation, and subjugation across the globe. While this approach is conceptually sound insofar as it highlights the multidimensionality and complexity of domination and oppression on a global scale, it entails problematic consequences in practice. In public and academic debates, the protection of patriarchal (often minority) cultures frequently overrides and sometimes silences critique of patriarchal gender inequality within those same cultures. When this occurs, the discourse slips into forms of cultural relativism that legitimise gender inequality as a quasi-authentic expression of cultural identity and obscure systematic violence against women and sexual minorities (see, e.g., Buck-Morss 2006; Vergès 2021; for a critique, see Tamzali 2020).

Queer BDS relies centrally on the accusations of 'homonationalism', 'femonationalism', and 'pinkwashing': it claims that Israel's liberal legislation on LGBTIQ* rights serves merely as a façade and strategy to distract from human rights violations and the occupation. As with the allegation that Israel would weaponise sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad on 7 October, the pinkwashing allegations also serve the function of delegitimising Israel's LGBTIQ* policies as deceptive, merely neoliberal instruments of power, and eventually as a neo-imperialist strategy designed to impose Western liberal values of sexual self-determination on Arab and Muslim communities, while simultaneously branding these communities as homophobic due to their lack of LGBTIQ* rights (Puar and Mikdashi 2012; Schotten and Maikey 2012; see also Blackmer 2019 for a critique). This framing not only erases decades of struggle by Israeli LGBTIQ* individuals (both Jewish and Palestinian) for their rights but also suppresses the aspirations of Palestinian LGBTIQ* people in Gaza and the West Bank for freedom and recognition.

Queer BDS has gained particular traction in the United States and the United Kingdom. An increasing number of gender studies departments, along with individual feminist scholars, have declared support for BDS, thereby excluding queer and feminist Israeli academics and artists who receive any form of funding from official Israeli institutions – a near inevitability in academic and artistic contexts today – and who do not explicitly distance themselves from Israel or Zionism. Since 7 October and the war in Gaza, an increasing number of Israeli scholars have faced exclusion from international conferences, research collaborations, and professional associations. Even when they take a critical stance towards the Israeli government and criticise the conduct of the war in Gaza, this offers no protection. They face exclusion solely because they are Israelis and work at Israeli universities. A particularly significant case concerned an Israeli feminist scholar, who after years of collaboration was barred from participating

in a conference of the European Association of Gender Research, Education and Documentation (AtGender) after the organisation had endorsed BDS, solely on the grounds that she was Israeli (Hesselink 2024). The particularly disturbing detail was that the organisers sought to appropriate the thematic streams on violence against women in Israel and Gaza that Herz Levi had previously organised, deliberately omitting her name.

BDS has thus come to function as a cultural code (Volkov 1978) within much of the global left: to identify as a leftist, anticolonial, antiracist, and intersectional feminist now almost automatically entails support for BDS. Followers rarely inquire into the movement's actual premises or the historical and political complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Israel is denounced as a settler-colonial apartheid regime, the broader historical context of global antisemitism that distinguishes Israel's founding from any settler-colonial projects is ignored, as is the fact that Arab and Muslim antisemitism and antizionism is not a consequence of Israeli politics but clearly predates the foundation of Israel (Bensoussan 2019). Also overlooked is the historical fact that Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem and mastermind of the Muslim Brotherhood (umbrella organisation of Hamas), supported the Nazis and shared their exterminationist antisemitism (Cüppers 2025; Herf 2009; Küntzel 2024; Motadel 2014). Such selective contextualisation is symptomatic of a postcolonial framework that reduces all conflicts to the relationship coloniser-colonised (Elbe 2024).

Ideologically, BDS rests upon a specific conception of anti-imperialism, one that involves the demonisation and rejection of 'the West', which becomes an imagined construct and container for all that is bad in modernity, while the liberating moments of the West are simply ignored. Within this Manichaean worldview, the West is bluntly positioned as the antithesis to the purportedly authentic, oppressed peoples in the Global South. A sense of communal belonging is valorised against a cold Western individualism. In this schema, not only are cultures and peoples treated as monolithic entities, but global sociopolitical asymmetries are also ignored. These include the fact that Muslims constitute a minority in Western societies, where they may face racism, but form majorities in the MENA region and parts of Southeast Asia and Africa. In these contexts, religious minorities like Christians, Jews, and Bahá'ís, ethnic groups like Black Africans (Atasoy 2025, 71), or women and LGBTIQ* people are subject to oppression, discrimination, and marginalisation on the part of Muslim-majority societies and politics. A truly intersectional perspective needs to take into account these complexities instead of narrowing them down to a single-issue policy.

In such a one-dimensional worldview, the focus is on 'the oppressed culture' or 'the oppressed people' as a collective, rather than on the individuals within those cultures who experience overlapping and intersecting forms of oppression and exploitation. BDS, accordingly, is not concerned with individual rights, such as sexual self-determination and equality before the law, but rather with collective

interests framed as national self-determination. A universalist conception of individual rights, which may conflict with collective group claims, is ideologically reinterpreted as Western paternalism, against which a cultural struggle must be waged. This occidentalist view depicts 'the West' as utterly superficial and materialistic (Fine 2010). BDS positions itself as both anti-universalist and anti-liberal, manifesting in collectivist tendencies and in its denunciation of individualism as a product of neoliberal atomisation intended to erode an authentic sense of community. The West's focus on individualism encapsulates, for Angela Davis, the "tyranny of the universal" (Davis 2016, 87).

The strategy of Queer BDS consists of employing a sloganised and reductive interpretation of intersectionality both to legitimise and to obscure its own political agenda. The campaign has proven adept at appropriating uprisings in the Global South, particularly in Latin America, against repressive political systems and patriarchal cultures, linking them to the political program of BDS. Queer BDS rests upon the claim that the global struggle of LGBTIQ* communities for sexual self-determination is intersectionally connected to the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination against Israel. Davis claims that struggles are intersectionally entangled even if they occur in different parts of the world, in different historical and social contexts, and in different political systems (Davis 2016; for a critical view, see Nelson 2016). When Davis claims an intersectionality of struggles – "From Ferguson to Palestine" – which Queer BDS would lead, however, her primary concern is obviously not the well-being of Palestinian queers but rather promoting hostility towards Israel, as she explicitly acknowledges:

> Queers for BDS not only directs its message at people who identify into LGBTQ communities and it's important to direct our messages in that direction. But it is not a question of saying simply support queer individuals in Palestine, and in fact it's clear about not wanting support from those who refuse to see that cynicism and that contemptuousness behind Israel's pro-gay image, but rather it directs its message at anyone who is a potential supporter of BDS.
>
> *(AlQaws 2012)*

This approach renders global solidarity between queers impossible, while simultaneously instrumentalising Palestinian queers. A telling example is that of the Brazilian queer artist Linn da Quebrada, who, in May 2018, heeded Angela Davis's public call to boycott a queer film festival in Tel Aviv, where her work was to be honoured. She did not explicitly express solidarity with Palestinian queers, whom she referred to merely as "Palestinian bodies", but rather with "Palestine" as such, thereby extending her solidarity implicitly to the Palestinian leadership and to Islamist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are notoriously hostile towards queer existence and pose an existential threat to the lives of Palestinian queers (da Quebrada 2018).

Jasbir Puar, a Rudgers University professor and central figure in American postcolonial studies, likewise confirms that Queer BDS is not primarily concerned with the protection of queer Palestinians from homophobia:

> Palestinian Queers for BDS members point out that it is irrelevant whether Palestinian society is homophobic or not, and that the question of homophobia within Palestinian society has nothing to do with the fact that the occupation must end.
>
> *(Puar 2012)*

This stance not only pushes individual rights to sexual self-determination into the background but also transforms queer individuals into abstract tokens of antizionist activism. The 'Israel question' thus takes precedence over the questions of sexuality and gender. In so doing, Davis and Puar attempt to reconcile the evident contradictions and internal inconsistencies inherent in an alliance between LGBTIQ* activism and BDS.

Such thinking revives old debates about primary and secondary contradictions, which were prominent in Western leftist theories in the 1960s and which relegated the feminist struggle for equality to a secondary position compared to the working-class struggle against capitalism: a Marxist orthodox view asserted that once society was liberated from capitalism, what was called 'the women's question' would automatically be resolved. This predominant orthodox Marxist view was challenged by intersectional feminists who fought to overcome this hierarchisation of social contradictions. After decades, it now reappears in Queer BDS, where this logic implies that insisting on the supposedly secondary axis of gender and sexuality would weaken the movement for a free Palestine as a whole. The implicit argument runs as follows: first national liberation must be achieved, only then questions of gender and sexuality can be addressed. Only the demand for national self-determination is deemed revolutionary, whereas the demand for individual self-determination is dismissed as reactionary and delegitimised as a Western or Zionist imposition. This reveals that (postcolonial) nation-building not only requires external violence but also entails internal repression. Rather than using these contradictions as a point of critical reflection, Queer BDS ideologically conceals them in order to construct a repressive sense of unity.

The misogynist and homophobic oppression of Palestinian women and LGBTIQ* people by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and the everyday sexism of secular Palestinian liberation groups, is consistently described as a result of Israeli occupation, whose colonial, militaristic, and masculinistic oppression would lead to sexist violence and oppression directed inwards. To call this dynamic sexist, misogynist, or homophobic would further orientalist defamation and demonisation of Palestinian men. By implication, women's liberation cannot take place within a colonial system. Hence, women would have to fight the colonial system first (Schönenbach 2023).

Prominent postcolonial theorists such as Joseph Massad and Jasbir Puar claim that criticism of Arab or Muslim homophobia imposes upon the 'Muslim Other' the homonormative and homonationalist assumptions of what Massad calls the "Gay International", which "produces gays and lesbians where they do not exist" – namely within Arab and Muslim cultures (quoted in Dhawan 2015, 43; see also Puar 2007; Schulman 2012). Notably, the 'Muslim Other' is constructed in purely abstract terms here. From Massad's perspective, homosexuality as a sexual identity associated with self-determination and individual rights is a distinctly Western phenomenon, alien to the Muslim and Arab world. Writing from Columbia University in New York, Massad contends that in Muslim societies, sexuality is not linked to identity but understood as a cultural composition of practices and desires that remain non-identical (Dhawan 2015). In other words, such practices remain unnamed and clandestine. Homosexuality, Massad argues, has always existed in Arab countries, but Arabs and Muslims do not openly identify as such or construct an identity around it, as doing so would be individualistic, Western, and thus un-Islamic. Consequently, homosexuals, lesbians, and queers themselves appear as Western, alien, and hostile to Islam, while the introduction of their individual rights is framed as a neocolonial act.

The postcolonial accusation against the so-called Gay International posits that in a new form of imperialism and colonialism, 'White queers seek to save Brown queers from Brown homophobic men'. This perspective epitomises an identity-political house arrest that actively restricts solidarity. Cultural relativism thus produces a form of empathy deficit towards the specific suffering of individuals within cultures considered as Other.

Queer BDS seeks to protect the idea of an authentic Arab/Muslim sexuality from Westernisation and, consequently, from identification as gay or queer – without regard for the lived realities, struggles, and experiences of LGBTIQ* individuals in Arab and Muslim societies. The notion of a pure non-Western Arab sexuality is, in fact, a construct of Western neo-Orientalism within which an anti-Western culture fatigue and longing for authenticity finds expression.

This fervent logic of negative essentialism juxtaposes a supposedly authentic Muslim sexuality with a purportedly artificial, individualistic, and Western queer or gay sexuality, particularly as represented by Tel Aviv. It mobilises Arab 'authenticity' to counter Israeli 'artificiality' – a dichotomy mirroring the antisemitic trope that Israel constitutes an artificial political entity and alien element within an otherwise 'authentic' Arab or Islamic world. Throughout the history of modern antisemitism, Jewish life has been constructed as inauthentic and artificial, in opposition to the supposed rootedness of the antisemitic *Volksgemeinschaft* or Umma. This binarity reinforces a racist, homophobic, and sexist narrative of the supposed incompatibility between Arab/Muslim and queer identities and serves as a projection screen for accusations of homonationalism and pinkwashing.

Similarly, the discourse on women's rights and feminism is regarded as "anti-revolutionary, as it relies too much on notions of tolerance, equality, and normality",

as stated by Palestinian BDS activist Haneen Maikey (Hochberg et al. 2010, 609). Yet even if one questions and critically examines the notion of normality, as Nikita Dhawan aptly notes, "one cannot *not* want rights" (Dhawan 2015, 61).

To attack feminists who demand equal rights in family law as "immoral" and "agents of Western conspiracy" is a common feature in the Palestinian territories and evidence for the political and ideological struggles within Palestine (Kreile 2003b, 40). Palestinian queers find themselves stripped of legitimacy when asserting their individual rights to sexual self-determination. On the contrary, they face demands to remain 'authentically Muslim'. To be queer, they are told, is un-Islamic and a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. For Samira Saraya, an activist in the Palestinian queer-feminist group *Aswat*, these demands constitute an "abuse of the occupation as an excuse for not supporting our fight" (Hochberg et al. 2010, 606). She elaborates:

> Cultures don't exist in isolation from each other; there is always mobility of ideas, concepts, and terms across cultures. So to me this kind of argument functions so as to delegitimize our struggle as Palestinian LGBTQ, not really to save any authentic sexuality. It harms our struggle against homophobia. […] For those of us who are worried about the negative impacts of the imperial West on Arabic culture I say, too late. Arab queers are already here. So you can stop worrying.
>
> *(Hochberg et al. 2010, 606)*

Queer activists worldwide often find themselves instrumentalised by BDS for a cause that is not truly their own. They are subjected to intense pressure to conform to the movement's single-issue, anti-Israel agenda. Against this background, even the Palestinian theorist and queer activist Sa'ed Atshan, who, like Samira Saraya, cannot be accused of pro-Israel bias, offers a fundamental critique of pinkwashing rhetoric for its erasure of queer lived realities:

> Just as it is a form of epistemic coercion to attempt to impose queer discourses on particular individuals, it is also presumptuous to assume that such individuals must forgo queer politics in the name of anti-imperialism. I am weary when the latter impulse elides the cry for the amelioration of queer suffering. Such neglect contributes to the normalization of structural homophobia and the bolstering of the social and political pressures of heteronormativity.
>
> *(Atshan 2020, 213)*

Contrary to Jasbir Puar's (2007) assertion, Muslim homophobia is not merely a Western imposition or stereotype; rather, it often functions as a self-assertive mechanism through which parts of the non-West define themselves in opposition to the West. To address this reality would mean, above all, recognising non-Western actors as political subjects. As law and gender researcher Carl F. Stychin observed,

Western postcolonial activists tend to interpret opposition to homosexual rights in non-Western societies not as homophobia in the classical sense, but as resistance "grounded in communitarian claims of difference, specificity, cultural authenticity, and history". These claims, in turn, "are grounded in the language of rights of self-determination of a people" (Stychin 2004, 957). This reasoning presupposes a homogeneous ethnic national identity, erasing internal social conflicts. The sovereignty of such a supposedly unified nation or people is asserted not only in relation to other nations but also against the freedom claims of individuals. As Max Horkheimer once wrote, "the sovereignty of a country […] is something other than the freedom of those who live in it" (Horkheimer 1996, 491).

Palestinian LGBTIQ* activists face constant threats in the West Bank. In 2019, for instance, the queer-feminist organisation AlQaws was banned by the Palestinian Authority for allegedly violating "traditional Palestinian values". The police called on "citizens to complain about any 'suspicious' activities and for the persecution of *AlQaws* staff and activists" (AlQaws 2019). The group responded: "This recent backlash is in direct response to the dismantling of societal denial regarding the existence of LGBTQ Palestinians!" (AlQaws 2019). The group was subsequently forced to relocate from the West Bank to Israel, where it operates in Haifa.

Such statements by queer Palestinians must not be misinterpreted as pro-Israel or pro-Western positions. On the contrary, these activists are often deeply critical of Israeli policies and, in some cases, of Israel's existence as a state. Nevertheless, their advocacy for sexual self-determination is construed as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

## Intersectionality's Theoretical Pitfalls

Against the background of the strange alliances of some important strains of feminist activism both inside and outside academia with antisemitic movements, it is now time to take a closer look at the theoretical foundations these feminisms rely on. Here, it is especially the intersectionality paradigm and queer feminism that stand out, as most feminist activists showing a propensity for projective antizionism and antisemitism in debates on 7 October situate themselves in one or both of these paradigms. While intersectionality and queer theory are by no means antisemitic in and of themselves, it is necessary to critically engage with those moments within these theories and their development that enable the contradictory and strange alliance of feminism with Islamism and/or antisemitism. I will focus on a few (interconnected) themes that I think are responsible for the recent development of antisemitism within intersectional and queer feminism: restricted identity politics, postcolonialism, the Whiteness frame, and cultural relativism.

The concept of intersectionality has steadily gained influence since the 1990s and functions as a basis for global solidarity in many Western feminist and antiracist movements and organisations. One of its principles is that feminists ought not

turn a blind eye to other forms of oppression. An intersectional view recognises that in modern society, different forms of oppression and discrimination occur simultaneously rather than separately, that they are mutually entangled, and that social categories like gender, race, and class must be analysed as multifaceted and dynamic social processes that intermingle and intertwine. The concept of intersectionality initiated a critique of a monolithic understanding of gender. Feminism, in this intersectional understanding, is not only about demanding gender equality, but about criticising the whole structure of a society that puts women in subordinate positions. And since women are oppressed and disadvantaged not only because of their gender, but their ethnicity and class position, a holistic view demands the integration of all these dimensions.

Not so obvious, however, is which forms of oppression find entry into the intersectionality framework. Most often, the spectrum is tied to the classical triad of race, class, and gender, and more recently age, ability, or religion, whereas antisemitism is rarely considered. There are several reasons for omitting antisemitism in the intersectionality framework. One reason is that antisemitism is often simply subsumed under racism, which hides the specificity of antisemitic ideology and thus makes it undetectable (Stögner 2026). In addition, however, an antizionist political agenda may become effective here. In a projective antizionism, which has become a cultural code in mainstream antiracist intersectionality, activists apply double standards when they defame women's and LGBTIQ* rights in Israel as 'pinkwashing' and 'homonationalism'. Long before 7 October, intersectional antiracist and feminist initiatives and platforms such as the Women's March on Washington, the Chicago Dyke March, and Black Lives Matter have routinely excluded Jewish experience with global antisemitism (Stögner 2021). Hence, the question arises to what extent a gender-sensitive and feminist critique of antisemitism can rightfully and reasonably refer to intersectionality.

From the outset in the 1970s, intersectionality has been associated with political activism in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Second Women's Movement, and Black Feminism in the USA (Davis 1983; Hill Collins 2015). The term was originally coined by the Combahee River Collective (2014) in 1978, followed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal essays (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). The Combahee River Collective advocated early on for identity politics based on the experience of complex oppression and discrimination as Black (lesbian) women. Starting from their own particularity, however, they intended to think of a common interest in liberation that goes beyond that particularity. The early writings in intersectionality focused on a critique of suprapersonal power relations and of the structures of domination in modern societies. Thus, if we read in *A Black Feminist Statement*, "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (Combahee River Collective 2014, 273), then we realise that the liberation of Black lesbian women is grounded in the universal category of humanity.

In recent years, however, a shift in intersectional identity politics can be observed in which domination is not perceived as a social structure, but personalised and seen primarily as the oppression of one group by another, often leading to hierarchies of victimisation. Consequently, objective and abstract social relationships and the way different forms of discrimination and domination intertwine are increasingly lost from view. The demand for empowerment on the part of marginalised groups has led to ever more talk about cultural, religious, and other identities instead of focusing on the structures of domination and power that are effective in society. Marginalised groups are not exempt from and do not stand outside these structures, which, however, is widely ignored in identity politics. As a result, the issue of power and domination *within* marginalised groups, particularly violence against women and extreme patriarchal structures, but also antisemitism and racism, is increasingly hidden for fear of further marginalising those who are already hit by racism. This paternalistic identity-political erasure of social structures, however, eventually leads to a form of anti-intersectionality that hardly foregrounds the objective relations between different forms of oppression and discrimination – for example, how antisemitism operates with moments of sexism or how sexism can be structured by moments of racism and in what way these entanglements are produced by the antagonistic society itself and not only by culturally, racially, or economically opposed groups within society. Instead, society disintegrates into homogeneously conceived groups that are set against each other, which leads to an almost tribalistic understanding of social conflicts, resulting in a view of society familiar from antisemitism: abstract power relations and domination are reversed into personalised and unmediated forms of domination – one group (ethnic, religious, cultural, etc.) is set against the other.

This development includes the discursive fragmentation of society into seemingly unrelated parts, accompanied by a loss of a common goal and interest beyond the special group interest and beyond the immediate experience of being a member of an ethnic, cultural, or religious group. We can see in this development a reaction to the neoliberal trend to dissolve society into isolated communities and individuals, a principle expressed by Margaret Thatcher in 1987: "Who is society? There's no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families" (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 1987) – a view implying atomised and abstract, completely self-responsible individuals (Brown 2018). To this abstract and hollow individualism, intersectional feminists increasingly respond by strengthening collectives and cultural and religious communities – which needs to be seen as the flip side of neoliberal withdrawal from social politics. Neoliberal abstract individualism and intersectional collectivism are two sides of the same coin. While the recognition of cultural and religious dignity of communities is brought to the fore, the idea of equality and of individual rights that need to be protected against and within cultural and religious communities is increasingly relegated to the background and even considered an example of the "tyranny of the universal", as Angela Davis (2016, 87) put it. However, counteracting neoliberal abstract

individualism requires not an indiscriminate anti-individualism and identity-political collectivism, but rather strengthening individuals' awareness that their individualisation arises in a field of tension between difference and equality, i.e., that they are not completely independent of communities, but neither do they merge into them.

Intersectionality not only shows an uneasiness with individualism but also with universalism, and regards both concepts as neoliberal and colonialist imposition that constantly reproduces the oppression of non-White and non-Western peoples, cultures, and communities. This is where postcolonialism comes in, or rather: the postcolonial concept of racism that relies primarily on the juxtaposition of White and Western colonial oppressors on the one hand, and non-White, non-Western oppressed people on the other hand (Elbe 2024).

This development, crucial to intersectionality, dates from the 1970s, when global class struggles increasingly became ethnicised, and some Western leftists, in the context of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, started to view Islam as a purportedly social revolutionary moment. Whereas it is reasonable to criticise a monolithic understanding of gender and a perspective on society limited to the lens of a simplistic gender dichotomy, this necessary criticism in intersectionality theory was accompanied by an equally simplistic dichotomy between the Global South and the West (as, e.g., Buck-Morss 2006; Vergès 2021). Consequently, the gender dimension of domination increasingly faded into the background, while categories like ethnicity, culture, or religion dominated. As a result, the feminist demand to liberate women worldwide from patriarchal oppression step by step lost ground in intersectional critique compared to the demand for cultural, religious, and ethnic dignity, with the consequence that intersectionality paradoxically served the function of holding women in the subordinate positions assigned to them by patriarchal cultural or religious norms. Instead of individual rights, intersectionality increasingly advanced patriarchal rites. The women's question became marginalised compared to the supposedly overarching goal of liberating the Global South from Western exploitation and patronisation, which also entailed the strengthening of Islam against Western secularism.

But what does this have to do with antisemitism? Why do cultural relativistic feminists who fundamentally criticise universalism as a form of racism often show a propensity for antisemitism? One major reason for this is that they perceive Jews and Israel as representatives of the very universalism that they equate with Western supremacy. This long-standing myth found official expression in 1975, when the UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 declared "that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination" (UN General Assembly 1975), revoked only in 1991 by Resolution 46/86 (UN General Assembly 1991). Just as Zionism was equated with racism, the universalist feminist demand to liberate women from all forms of patriarchal oppression is relegated to a White, liberal, actually Zionist feminism. Overcoming racism is connected to overcoming universalism. The loss of a feminist consciousness in cultural relativism opens the gateway to antisemitism as an

ideological and psychodynamic outlet. The purpose that once united feminism – to liberate women worldwide – was replaced by a common foe: Israel and Zionism in particular, the West in general. The common foe ideologically fills the gap that followed the erosion of feminist solidarity through cultural relativism.

A recent example of this instrumentalisation of intersectionality to delegitimise Israel is the Palestinian Feminist Collective (PFC), a US-based network of Palestinian and Arab feminists. In October 2023, the PFC failed to condemn the antisemitic pogrom and rapes of Jewish women by Hamas. Instead, it portrayed the attacks as "legitimate resistance" and denounced Israel's response as "genocide" (PFC 2023).

Already in 2021, the PFC had called for "a truly intersectional and decolonial feminist vision" linking "Palestinian, Black, Indigenous, Third World feminist, working class, and queer communities" (PFC 2021). It opposed "liberal and Zionist feminisms" for allegedly weaponising feminist discourse against Palestinians. For the PFC, "Palestine is a feminist issue", yet its engagement with "structural forms of gendered and sexual violence" (PFC 2021) does not include criticism of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, or patriarchal structures in Palestinian society – critique essential to any genuine feminism.

Within this framework, "Palestine" becomes an empty signifier, imagined as a pure victim of global evil in the form of imperialism, capitalism, racism, and sexism, all identified with Israel. As the PFC declares, "We are re-imagining and recreating a world free from systems of gendered, racial and economic exploitation. […] We pledge […] to recognize Palestine as a feminist issue" (PFC 2021). The liberation of Palestine thus becomes synonymous with the redemption of humanity, echoing antisemitic tropes that conflate Israel with the world's ills.

There is yet another, corresponding reason why antisemitism is erased or even instrumentalised in the intersectionality framework. Since the major goal of intersectionality today is fighting racism, feminist demands fade into the background. But the foregrounding of racism simultaneously raises the question of why antisemitism is not also considered a form of racism worthwhile of intersectional critique.

In intersectionality discourse, antisemitism is indeed viewed as a form of racism, but as one of bygone times that had its historical climax in National Socialism. With the foundation of Israel and in a postcolonial constellation, the argument implies, antisemitism has lost its importance and has been replaced by other, more virulent forms of racism – those against the Global South and Islam in general. This rhetoric has several theoretical and practical pitfalls: firstly, it effectively erases contemporary forms of antisemitism that are connected to projective antizionism and which have become the most dominant forms of antisemitism on a global scale at least since 7 October. By locating antisemitism solely in the National Socialist past that is considered overcome, it is effectively tucked away and turned into a museum piece with no contemporary relevance (Fine 2009; Seymour 2013). Hand in hand with this goes a legitimation of antizionism that blames Israel for the same

crimes as the Nazis. Secondly, however, this rhetoric ignores a key difference between racism and antisemitism which lies in their opposing ideological structures. Racism constructs hierarchy: racists see themselves as *superior* to the racialised 'other', who is imagined as primitive, backward, and exploitable. Racism legitimates domination and exploitation, thus justifying colonialism, slavery, and social inequality by casting the oppressed as naturally inferior. Antisemitism, by contrast, reverses this logic. It imagines Jews not as lacking civilisation but as possessing excessive, hidden power. Antisemites feel *subordinate* to an abstract and omnipotent Jewish force supposedly controlling finance, media, and politics. As Moishe Postone (1980) argued, antisemitism projects the exploitative dimensions of capitalism onto 'the Jews', turning them into personifications of modernity's abstract domination. While racism *naturalises* exploitation, antisemitism *mystifies* it and displaces structural social tensions onto 'the Jew' as a conspiratorial enemy made responsible for global capitalist exploitation. In this sense, antisemitism is not merely another form of racism but an ideology of resentment towards modern civilisation itself, expressing hatred not of the 'inferior other' but of a fantasised, all-powerful one.

Antisemitism and racism stand in a relationship of mutual mediation. They are not identical, but they are closely connected (Stögner 2026). This raises the question of whether antisemitism receives little attention in intersectional analyses because it is too rigidly conceptualised as racism, or because it is not sufficiently theorised in relation to racism. This question can be addressed by adapting a feminist paradox that intersectionality itself has brought into focus: we cannot grasp the life situations and social conditions of women and men if we consider them only through the category of gender, yet we understand them just as little if we do not also analyse them through the category of gender (Knapp 2005). Applied to antisemitism, this means that we fail to comprehend its complexity if we view it solely as a form of racism, but we likewise fail to understand it if we do not also recognise it as a form of racism. This complex intersectional relationship between antisemitism and racism is obscured in those forms of intersectionality that exclude antisemitism from their analytical agenda. These approaches operate with a narrow concept of racism that cannot accommodate forms of racism beyond the Black/White or Global South/West divide. Within this rigid framework, Jews are classified as White or privileged. Israel, consequently, is identified with the most oppressive aspects of the West. The binaries of White versus Black/Brown and West versus Global South, however, have become so central to dominant academic and activist understandings of racism that Muslims with light skin are often positioned on the Black or Global South side of the divide, while Jews or Israelis with dark skin are nevertheless identified with Whiteness.

The Whiteness frame – designed to expose and analyse structural racism – proves not only inadequate for understanding antisemitism but in fact reinforces it. The privileges associated with Whiteness – such as power, influence, wealth, property, education, dominance, participation, having a voice, and access to networks – can

illuminate entrenched racist hierarchies within majority White societies. Yet when this frame is applied to Jews, it confirms the antisemitic stereotype of Jewish overrepresentation, omnipresence, and omnipotence in politics, media, and finance. David Schraub puts it pointedly:

> The hope in applying the Whiteness frame to a gentile White is to unsettle received understandings of the White experience – to make people see things they had not seen before. By contrast, the effect of applying Whiteness to Jewishness is confirmatory: "I always thought that Jews had all this power and privilege – and see how right I was!"
>
> *(Schraub 2019, 393)*

Against this backdrop, the exclusion of global antisemitism from antiracist and intersectional analyses becomes intelligible. Applying the Whiteness frame to the Jewish condition results in Jews no longer being recognised as a minority that has been subjected for centuries to racialised persecution and extermination. Israel is no longer perceived as a postcolonial state of refugees and a refuge for Jews worldwide threatened by global antisemitism. Instead, Jews are depicted as representatives of an exploitative, structurally racist regime, and Israel is cast as a bastion of Western imperialism in the Middle East – a supposedly artificial and alien entity amid autochthonous Arab nations. From the beginning of modernity, antisemitism viewed Jews as representatives of abstract, unaccountable elites who control and exploit the world. Similarly, wide parts of today's intersectional discourse portray Israel as a settler colonial instead of postcolonial state, which allows left-wing antisemitism to appear as the outcry of the oppressed. Not only Jews and Zionists are regarded as White and imperialist in this context, but also feminists who insist on individual rights and the universal idea of freedom and emancipation.

To understand intersectionality's theoretical pitfalls, it is finally necessary to briefly recapitulate the very tension between the universal and the particular that has accompanied modernity all along. During the Enlightenment period, the 'Jewish question' was directed at Jewish particularity: gentile majority society viewed Jews as failing to meet the standards of the universal and therefore required them to relinquish their distinctiveness in order to gain civil rights (Fine and Spencer 2018). Yet the universal to which Jews were expected to assimilate was implicitly coded as White, male, and Christian, revealing that the Enlightenment ideal of universality rested upon a hegemonic particularity. The 'Jewish question' thus concerned an undesired particularity that had to be absorbed into, or eliminated by, the universal.

In contemporary discourse, this dynamic reverses. Jews – and Israel in particular – are no longer cast as an unwanted particularity but as embodiments of the universal itself, now condemned as a vehicle of Western imperial, colonial, and patriarchal domination. Hence, within certain anti-imperialist and postcolonial frameworks,

critiques of universalism frequently translate into attacks on Israel, imagined not as one nation among others but as the representative of the antagonised nation form and of White, male supremacy itself.

This reversal has become particularly evident within strands of intersectional and decolonial feminism that distance themselves from liberal and individualist traditions. Within these frameworks, Israel functions as a symbolic target for the critique of universalism and Western hegemony. Universalism has become one of the primary objects of suspicion in such intersectional approaches, where it is often undialectically construed as nothing more than a "hegemonic particularity" (Butler 1995; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) that imposes itself violently upon the oppressed. Consequently, the very idea of the universal – and universalism itself – tends to be equated with Western imperialism and Zionism.

Theories of intersectionality emerging from this fundamental rejection of the universal frequently retreat into the domain of particularism, privileging discrete positionalities or "special interests" (Davis 2016). The negative moment within the concept of the universal, central to Critical Theory, is lost: namely, that the universal does not only affirmatively express a hegemonic particularity but also embodies, negatively, the not yet fully realised idea of freedom and equality. Critical Theory demands that the universal become truly universal. Following this dialectical insight, Gudrun-Axeli Knapp argues that it is inadequate to characterise the West purely in terms of domination and exploitation, since Western societies "owe their political constitution and self-understanding also to struggles against oppression and inequality" (Knapp 2013).

The universal, therefore, is not an empty form to be filled by whichever group holds power. It retains within itself the notion of a general humanity – one that has not yet prevailed historically but continues to assert itself, critically and subversively, against false or exclusionary universalisms. At the same time, as Knapp (2013) reminds us, ideals such as emancipation and freedom may, under specific historical conditions, turn into their opposites. Critical Theory exposes these dialectics within universality yet simultaneously undertakes a rescuing critique of universalism. Adorno, for instance, reinterpreted the universal not as a hegemonic category that suppresses difference, but as a framework for its unfolding and recognition – what he called "the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences", from which one can conceive "the better state […] in which people could be different without fear" (Adorno 2005, 103).

The "tyranny of the universal" that Angela Davis (2016, 87) deplores cannot be overcome through a crude anti-universalism. Concepts such as the individual, the subject, or human rights undoubtedly bear the marks of historical domination and have, over time, been variously ethnicised and gendered. For centuries, Black people and women, and Jews, were not recognised as persons entitled to what Hannah Arendt called "the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity" (Arendt 1976, 298; cf. Benhabib 2007). They were not the ones meant when Enlightenment discourse spoke of man and his inalienable rights.

Nevertheless, abandoning the very notion of universal humanity in favour of a mere plurality of unrelated particularities would be misguided. It is precisely through appeal to a universal category – one that claims generality, however imperfectly – that the excluded can demand inclusion. Only against the backdrop of such a universal does the humanity of those historically denied it become visible. In this sense, the very concepts rightly criticised for their complicity with domination can be re-read as categories of struggle against inequality and degradation.

There is yet another notion of universalism, one that constructs Jews and Israel as the other of the universal (Fine and Spencer 2018). This form of universalism, positively invoked, for example, by Judith Butler, does not view Israel as a representative of Western imperialist universalism that oppresses a Palestinian particularity; rather, it delegitimises Israel for its very particularism and thus for its alleged violation of the universal value of cohabitation. As Stephan Grigat (2014, 128f.) elaborates, this version of universalism is abstract and ahistorical insofar as it is detached from the reality of antisemitism, which constitutes the very particular condition of this state. It removes the productive tension between the universal and the particular, in the same way as the apparently contrary view that dismisses the universal outright.

In contrast to these exclusionary conceptions of the universal and the particular – both of which can be directed against Israel – Critical Theory advances a concrete universalism: one that begins from the particular but, unlike deconstructivist approaches, does not remain particularist. Instead, it seeks the imprint of the general within the particular. This double movement embeds individual, lived experience within broader social contexts and traces the connections between specific interests and particularities. In this way, particularities lose their isolating particularist character, and their position within the social constellation becomes visible. From this perspective, "the particular is mobilised in the name of the universal", that is, in the name of emancipation (Benhabib and Stögner 2022, 61).

Any critique of the universal must remain aware that the affirmation of marginalised and exploited particularities must not lapse into particularism (Fine and Spencer 2018, 108). As with the dialectic of identity and non-identity, the tension between the universal and the particular cannot – and should not – be conceptually dissolved.

Like other ideologies, antisemitism is primarily an expression of contradictory social structures and unequal socioeconomic relations that it both conceals and legitimises. As these structures become increasingly autonomous from individuals, ideologies themselves gain independence from personal experience, so that the structural dimension outweighs the individual one. The Critical Theory tradition has diagnosed this development as the predominance of the system over the lifeworld (Habermas), a process through which social structures increasingly shape individual consciousness and affect without mediation – people become reaction centres in an administered world, described in *The Authoritarian Personality*. This development necessitates analytically

transcending the level of seemingly immediate experience and directing an intersectional gaze towards the structural plane as one that extends into the very psychic constitution of individuals. This is why the realm of experience and judgement is so central to the intersection of antisemitism and sexism. It will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

## Notes

1 Antisemitism among feminists is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to the early women's movement, at least in Germany and Austria. It has appeared in shifting forms, each adapting to prevailing configurations of antisemitism. Early feminism, for example, reproduced antisemitic stereotypes already present on the left, and in the 1920s some women's groups excluded Jewish women altogether. Antisemitic motifs also appeared within the second women's movement and feminist theory. Particularly salient were currents of so-called goddess feminism, alongside certain strands of ecofeminism within the left-wing political spectrum and forms of esoteric feminism associated with the right, all of which partly drew on antisemitic myths. Also here, antisemitism serves as an integrative ideology that is capable of bridging otherwise opposed feminist positions. At the same time, just as the left is not inherently antisemitic, feminism as such cannot be characterised as antisemitic in its entirety. Correspondingly, feminist antisemitism – like its left-wing counterpart – has been most rigorously and extensively criticised by feminists themselves (see, e.g., Gehmacher 1998; Kohn-Ley and Korotin 1994; Plaskow 1991; Radonić 2015; Schmidt 2007; Siegele-Wenschkewitz 1988; Stögner 2019; 2021).

2 As, for instance, by *Philosophy for Palestine*, 01.11.2023: "Civilian deaths, regardless of nationality, are tragic and unacceptable. Yet to act as though the history of violence began with Hamas's attacks on October 7, 2023 is to display a reckless indifference of history as well as to both Palestinian and Israeli lives."

3 See, as representative of many similar statements made against Israel, those that supported Hamas, enacted a virulent reversal of victim and perpetrator roles, and described the massacre as a legitimate anticolonial act of resistance: the Joint Statement by Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups on the Situation in Palestine (https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/10/10/psc-statement-backlash/), the Brown Students for Justice in Palestine's Statement on the Recent Events in Palestine (https://www.instagram.com/p/CyRiOLyp2Ge/?img_index=1), the Statement in Solidarity with the Palestinian People at the University of Gent from 10.10.2023 (https://www.ugent.be/ps/conflict-ontwikkeling/en/news-events/news/statementpalestinianpeople); the Palestine Digital Action Toolkit of the Palestinian Feminist Collective: "All Out for Palestine. Stop the Genocide! End U.S. Aid to Israel! Free Palestine! October 2023" (https://actionnetwork.org/user_files/user_files/000/098/772/original/All_Out_Palestine_Toolkit_3.0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3efON7vRJz560yXzlL-G86FGNsfl8vto1cK4OlvuxNZ-DBS3ZY8_pYE0), or "An Open Letter from the Art Community to Cultural Organizations (https://www.artforum.com/columns/open-letter-art-community-cultural-organizations-518019/), as well as the Statement by the AG Intersectional Anti-Discrimination UdK Berlin (https://synthmeetfilms.wixsite.com/udkpsg).

4 At this point in their intervention, Butler gave a sceptical grimace that underscored their disbelief.

5 Both versions of the charter – the original from 1988 and the revised version from 2017 – make it unequivocally clear that Hamas's aim is not opposition to Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank, but to the very existence of Israel as such. The Jewish state is not to exist in the region, regardless of the policies or conduct of its respective governments (Hamas Covenant 1988; Center for Israel Education 2017). What is to

happen to the Jews living there is explicitly formulated in the Hamas Charter of 1988: it invokes precisely those *hadiths* and Qur'anic *suras* that threaten Jews with annihilation, while omitting those that allude to the possibility of reconciliation between Muslims and Jews (Küntzel 2023b, 82; see also Herf 2024).

Thus, while criticism of Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank is both necessary and vigorously articulated, especially within Israel itself, it does not alter the antisemitic ideology and exterminatory intent of Hamas. This also becomes evident in the fact that on 7 October, Hamas did not target right-wing settlers but primarily attacked left-wing Israelis and kibbutzniks committed to coexistence and peace with Palestinians.

6 The existing English translation is highly inaccurate; I therefore translated directly from the German original.

7 A similar lose-lose situation is created in the pinkwashing allegations against Israel saying that Israel's protection for LGBTIQ* people should not be thought of as positive, but as a strategy to divert attention from its treatment of Palestinians and as a form of racism used to portray Arabs as homophobic (Blackmer 2024a).

8 Liste Gaza's top candidate Astrid Wagner, who discovered her passion for Gaza right after her passion for animal welfare, is a prominent Austrian lawyer whose clients include Josef Fritzl, one of the most brutal rapists in Austrian postwar history. As a young aspiring lawyer, she is said to have fallen in love with Jack Unterweger, a multiple femicide perpetrator (Payerl 2014). See also Astrid Wagner's website https://anwalt-wagner.at/astrid-wagner/

9 The original tweets on the X account @listegaza from 27 September 2024 were deleted meanwhile; see https://x.com/Bini_Guttmann/status/1839981466106597384/photo/3

10 The original tweet on the X account @listegaza from 27 September 2024, meanwhile deleted, reads as follows: "Während in Gaza Menschen an Hunger und mandelnder (sic!) medizinischer Versorgung sterben, spenden Deutsche 10k dafür, dass eine Frau, die auf Demos von zig Polizisten umgeben das Opfer spielt, weiterhin die Vergewaltigungslüge vom 7/10 verbreiten darf. Ist Deutschland okay?!" See https://x.com/Bini_Guttmann/status/1839981466106597384/photo/3

# 10

# EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY IN CRISIS

## Reflections Within Critical Theory

The mystery of why intersectional feminist and queer activists and theorists are increasingly joining movements that promote barbarism characterised by an antisemitic masculinism that prioritises death over life remains unresolved. The vehemence with which many anti-Israel demonstrators in the West have asserted since 7 October that the liberation of Palestine was an intersectional, feminist, and queer issue – yet that Gaza must be liberated from Israel, not from Hamas rule – constitutes a phenomenon that encapsulates a central challenge for both, contemporary critiques of antisemitism and feminist theory. Western activists who support this agenda exercise sexual self-determination in their daily lives and would certainly face severe restrictions, if not violent death, if they did so under Hamas rule. Nevertheless, some of them demonstrate in Western cities with the slogan 'Free Gaza' on their bare breasts or wearing an 'I love Hamas' sticker. Others wear the red triangle, apparently unaware that this is not a self-identification of Hamas, but a sign that Hamas uses to authorise and direct the killing of their opponents.

The previous chapter showed that the alliance between queer and intersectional feminism and anti-Israel agitation is not new and tried to find an answer for why this is so by focussing on the theoretical pitfalls of intersectionality. But that alone does not do enough to explain the phenomenon. As Corinne Blackmer puts it,

> it is not at all obvious why the progressive academics […] who see themselves as champions of LGBTQ rights, have come to regard Israel – which has a sterling record of civil rights for gay people, ranging from housing and workplace protections to adoption and inheritance rights – as the "heteropatriarchal", homophobic, and "homo-nationalistic" enemy of queers.
>
> *(Blackmer 2024a)*

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The sheer vehemence with which anti-Israel views circulate in queer milieus, and the emotional and hypermoral tone that drives debates far from both historical facts and empirical evidence, suggest that more is at stake than a flawed theory or a misreading of an analytical framework.

The most immediate answer to this riddle would be that these activists, who enjoy the benefits of LGBTIQ* rights in their own societies while simultaneously endorsing the agenda of Hamas, are haunted by self-hatred. And there is indeed much to suggest that this phenomenon plays a role, evident, for instance, when the acronym LGBT is transformed into *Let's Go Bomb Tel Aviv,* a song by the punk band *Unite*, performed at a Madrid music festival (Roya News English 2024). Punk concert goers and party people in the West call to level the party city of Tel Aviv to the ground. Such nihilistic provocation may appear as a gesture of taboo-breaking yet belongs to a reactionary mode of rebellion. For, as Adorno reminds us, "the destruction of taboos does not mean liberation, but rather self-hatred" (Adorno 2004, 458). "Only the crippled mind needs self-hatred", he writes in *Minima Moralia,* it needs it "in order to demonstrate itself its intellectual essence, which is untruth, through brute force" (Adorno 1997c, 151).[1]

Following Adorno's words, self-hatred alone does not suffice as an explanation; rather, it is itself implicated in the very pathology it seeks to explain. It forms part of the deeper structure underlying contemporary antisemitism. From the vantage point of Critical Theory, this structure reveals itself as the decline of the capacity for experience (*Erfahrungsfähigkeit*). As the earlier reflections on enmity towards mind and body have shown, alienation from experience is a decisive symptom of this condition. Anti-intellectualism feeds not only on hostility towards the mind but attributes to the intellectual a defective corporeality. The paradox that anti-intellectualism is itself a nihilistic intellectual enterprise has already been addressed in Chapter 6. The same paradox returns in this chapter, which critically examines the loss of experience manifest in Queer BDS. I will first briefly reconstruct the theoretical background of the loss of experience, as developed in Critical Theory, before applying this negative critique of knowledge to the manifestations of Queer BDS and feminist support for Hamas outlined above.

## "But There Are No Longer Any Antisemites"

In "The Elements of Antisemitism", the final chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where Horkheimer and Adorno trace the reversal of Enlightenment into barbarism, the last thesis – added in 1947 – opens with the striking sentence: "But there are no longer any anti-Semites" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 165). What, only two years after the Shoah, sounds like a provocation is in fact a description of the stage of development that antisemitism had reached. It had largely detached itself from the subject as a conscious agent and had become a full-fledged ideology, even a worldview, so deeply embedded in the mental and cultural DNA that it perpetuated itself almost automatically, without direct intention or deliberate action on the part of individuals.

Horkheimer and Adorno thus describe a form of antisemitism largely severed from the experiential horizon of the subject. It is an antisemitism without conscious antisemites in the sense that it no longer rests on any concrete encounter with Jews, but entirely on stereotypes of Jews. In essence, it is therefore also an antisemitism without Jews.

The analyses of *The Authoritarian Personality* consequently focus on a decline of independent judgement and meaningful personal experience. As Adorno observes:

> Our high-scoring subjects do not seem to behave as autonomous units whose decisions are important for their own fate as well as that of society, but rather as submissive centers of reactions, looking for the conventional "thing to do", and riding what they consider "the wave of the future".
>
> *(Adorno et al. 2019, xlii)*

Horkheimer and Adorno explain that the very possibility of the antisemitism which led to the Shoah arises from the fact that human beings, on a mass scale, have forfeited both experience and the capacity for judgement. They no longer form conscious judgements based on personal experience, but instead follow, unconsciously and en masse, prefabricated patterns of thought – what Horkheimer and Adorno call "tickets" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 166). Ticket mentality signifies a mode of thinking that has been replaced by schematism, drawing upon clusters of stereotypes directly borrowed from the ideological inventory of society itself. Antisemitism, but also sexism, constitute central components of this ideological household of modern societies.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* we read accordingly:

> When the masses accept the reactionary ticket containing the clause against the Jews, they are obeying social mechanisms in which individual people's experiences of Jews play no part. […] Experience is replaced by cliché, the imagination active in experience by diligent acceptance.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 166)*

The authors go on to describe how, in a mass-produced world, people no longer think or judge independently but rely on fixed stereotypes and prepackaged mental models. As a result, genuine perception and critical judgement disappear, replaced by mechanical pseudo-thinking that can no longer distinguish truth from falsehood. At this stage, antisemitism becomes "a carefully pondered, rationalistically concocted doctrine, promoted from above, that utilizes powerful socio-psychological dispositions in the masses" (Adorno et al. 2019, xliv). This was the diagnosis of mass society in the 1940s that guided *The Authoritarian Personality*. At that time, mass culture functioned almost exclusively in a top-down manner: cultural goods, commodified as products, were presented to individuals, who consumed them unreflectively. Under National Socialism, antisemitism was state-driven and thus "promoted from above" and fell on fertile ground among the population. It was a

bureaucratic and administrative tool of manipulation. Similarly, in the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran, antisemitism functions as a top-down ideology.

This differs from contemporary Western mass society, in which projective antizionism, as an ideological cultural commodity, is not so much imposed from above but has instead become a form of bottom-up rebellion against the state, often carried by cultural elites in opposition to political elites. This is particularly evident in Germany, whose governments have declared solidarity with Israel to be a matter of raison d'état, albeit without drawing the practical consequences of adequately confronting global state actors of antisemitism, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, through economic and political means. Against this, however incomplete, raison d'état, academic and cultural elites rebel through an openly articulated projective antizionism, which represents a cultivated variant of the annihilatory fantasies against Israel voiced by Islamists on the streets of Berlin during anti-Israel demonstrations.

In the age of social media and artificial intelligence, of echo chambers and algorithms, antisemitism has become an omnipresent bottom-up ideology. Resisting it requires the full effort of the subject. Those whose subjectivity is too weak for this, however, adopt antisemitic ideas in a prepackaged form, often without reflecting on them or genuinely believing in them. Then as now, antisemitism remains external to them and becomes more extreme and fanatical because it is never disrupted by reflection or personal experience. Those who subscribe to such ideologies lack genuine emotional engagement; they rather "mechanically accept given ideological patterns" (Adorno et al. 2019, lxiv). This passive acceptance mirrors the complete transformation of antisemitism into a cultural code (Volkov 1978) that is available at any time. It becomes increasingly abstract and transforms into a broad and overarching ideology – a kind of worldview, in which contradictory realities that are difficult to grasp, such as the simultaneity of political equality and economic inequality, or the general dialectic of freedom and repression in global society, are irrationally projected onto Jews or Israel and thus repressively disposed of their true ambivalence. This process involves a false concretisation of abstract social forces (Postone 1980), where complex societal issues are simplified and personified in an imaginary figure that serves as a projection screen – the 'Jew' as capitalist, Bolshevist, imperialist, colonialist, bloodless intellectual, gender-bender, conspiracist, universalist, internationalist, hypernationalist, etc.

This false concretisation requires that the emotional connection between antisemites and Jews is severed. The result is "the functional character of anti-Semitism, that is to say, its relative independence of the object" (Adorno et al. 2019, 608). Stereotypes about Jews are completely detached from reality and take on a life of their own, spreading unchecked and running "wild" (Adorno et al. 2019, 613). It is essentially the appearance of an antisemitism without antisemites and without Jews, even though, of course, real antisemites continue to victimise real Jews and people they consider to be Jewish.

In *The Stars Down to Earth*, Adorno (1997b, 16) described this kind of antisemitism as "secondary superstition" because it is not based on any personal experience with the target of hostility. It reflects that individuals lack genuine object relationship (Adorno et al. 2019, 404), which is part of an alienation from experience. In his seminal essay "Anti-Semite and Jew", first published in 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre

(1995) explained that antisemitism was entirely a projection, thus not based on reason and logic. In this view, what drives the antisemite is passion and emotion. But with Adorno we must add to Sartre's analysis that it is also not about real passion and real emotions. Just as hostility towards the mind coincides with a reified relationship to the body, the loss of the capacity to experience implies an alienation from one's own emotions. In this dynamic, antisemitism works as a compensation and replacement for the inability to feel real emotions. Just as thinking declines to stereotypical reactions, the emotions expressed in antisemitism are distorted and received secondhand. Accordingly, Samuel Salzborn (2020b) described antisemitism as the "inability to think abstractly and feel concretely". In antisemitism, emotions are abstract – the passion and excitement which the antisemite shows are expressions of manipulation rather than genuine feelings. Hence, a disconnection from the object of hatred also takes place. After the Holocaust, this alienation contributed to the derealisation of both victims and perpetrators, which has been identified as a central psychological mechanism for defending against feelings of guilt (Schönbach 1961; Adorno 2005a). After 7 October, this mechanism gained new momentum.

The diminished capacity for genuine experience (of one's own feelings as well as of one's own situation in the world) is both a cause and an effect of manipulation that occurs in an openly authoritarian manner as in National Socialism or Islamism, or in more subtle ways through peer group pressure or the culture industry. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 94–136) analysed the culture industry as a form of mass society that produces cultural goods not for genuine enjoyment or use, but as commodities for profit. This alienation from individual needs and fetishisation of abstract values deeply influences how people perceive the world. Instead of engaging with the world in a tangible and meaningful way, individuals consume it in a schematic, abstract, formulaic, and stereotypical manner. Perception itself comes to be shaped by industrial and technological processes of production. Just as commodity production dissects its processes into discrete and isolated stages, social reality confronts individuals as a succession of disjointed and disconnected events rather than as a mediated totality of alienated relations. Subjects thus become increasingly unable to synthesise the dispersed moments of perception into a meaningful whole. This erosion of experience has far-reaching consequences for subjectivity and intersubjectivity alike, reshaping how individuals relate both to themselves and to others. The resulting fragmented mode of perception renders subjects solitary and isolated (Benjamin 1991a, 214), condemning them to an existence marked by loneliness and a condition of profound disorientation. For Benjamin, the modern masses were trapped in a diabolical dynamic that he, drawing on Nietzsche, described as the eternal return of the same (Benjamin 2003; Stögner 2022a).

This diagnosis has now, in the digital present, come fully into effect, and alienation assumes new forms (Rensmann 2025). Artificial intelligence dissolves constellations of meaning altogether and operates according to probabilistic logic, producing the recurrence of the ever-same at an unprecedented level. Such a technologisation of the social world scarcely engenders the critical mind

required to resist the resurgent ideologies. The fetish character that Marx and Adorno diagnosed in the commodity now fully extends to experience itself – even to subjectivity. Reality is no longer lived and experienced but is instead created and consumed online in a stereotypical and abstract manner. Algorithmic personalisation that reduces the personality to the difference of 0 and 1 reinforces this fetish character by producing a world of ready-made meanings and identities that appear autonomous yet are entirely dependent on systemic mediation. The self becomes a commodity among commodities, its individuality defined by marketable traits, likes, and other measurable engagement. With AI, even the other with whom one interacts can be moulded at will, expressing the contemporary apex of a long-standing delusion of omnipotence, in which subjects themselves become ever more streamlined and the intolerance of ambiguity deepens. In this sense, the fetish character of individualism in neoliberal society mirrors the very logic of commodification: the appearance of autonomy masks a profound dependence. The inevitable reaction to this abstract demand for self-production and self-branding and the resulting loneliness and social isolation is a turn towards collectivism – a search for belonging that compensates for the exhaustion and fragmentation of the neoliberal subject.

The nationalist and ethnocentric collective is, in fact, the flipside of this (post-) neoliberal pseudo-individualism, which consists of abstract autonomy and social atomisation. Individuals thus conditioned can no longer reach an understanding about any common, meaning-giving, emancipatory goal. They see themselves reduced to abstract and scattered particularities and attempt to mend their rupture with the whole in an authoritarian way, by identifying with a collective that promises to end their loneliness, isolation, and meaninglessness.

Yet this, too, is not an individual failing but a general social disposition. The more individualisation is propagated within a society that continuously and profoundly devalues the individual, the stronger becomes the desire for collectivisation. Through its abstract form of individualism, neoliberal society itself produces the anti-individualistic need for complete identification with a group. This also accounts for the current rise of Islamism and other authoritarian forms of community. Even beyond such extremes, there remains a discernible desire to belong to groups with strict normative frameworks, adherence to which alleviates the burden of everyday individual moral judgement and decision-making. These are forms of adaptation to the prevailing irrationality. Individuals rebel by further weakening subjectivity and enthroning a collective in which the universal ideals of Enlightenment – rationality, autonomy, freedom, and equality – are either openly denied, transformed into ideology, or dissipate in a simulacrum of debate, where truth recedes behind an intensely felt self-righteousness and moralising posturing.

Horkheimer and Adorno focused in their critique on the conflictual and contradictory relationship between society and the individual in advanced modernity, which manifests as the overwhelming dominance of the social system over the

individual. As a result, social pressures increasingly act directly upon individuals, making it ever more difficult for them to act reflectively or to cultivate a sense of genuine individuality. For the authors of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the loss of experience is intimately connected to the very logic by which modernity categorises the world, a logic in which the particular is eclipsed by the false universal:

> If, even within the field of logic, the concept stands opposed to the particular as something merely external, anything which stands for difference within society itself must indeed tremble. Everyone is labeled friend or foe.
>
> *(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 167)*

This insight, which seeks to give voice to the particular in relation to the general, is strongly affirmed within feminist theory. Yet its truth can be inverted and turned against the Jews and against feminism when it is reduced to a mere schema – that is what we have seen since 7 October. "The secret of advancing stupidity" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 167) consists above all in stereotyped thinking, which reduces even the most intelligent insights to formulae, thereby neutralising them and even turning them upside down. Such schematism lends itself to antisemitism and sexism. This general dulling of thought does not stop short of feminism either, a sign of which is the blind division of the world into friends and enemies of the particular. Jews, stereotypically regarded not as representatives of the particular but of the universal, are cast as enemies within certain feminist discourses. The problem, however, does not lie in feminism itself, but in its reduction to stereotyping and schematism.

## From the Body to the Collective: Queer Alienation and the Projective Turn Against Israel

Antisemitism without antisemites and without Jews – such is the phenomenon that has reemerged after 7 October, notably in academic, feminist and queer milieus. The Gaza encampments at Western universities and the demonstrations staged in the name of Palestine reveal a curious abstraction: Gaza and Israel, friend and enemy, have become mere emblems, emptied of substance, detached both from lived experience and from historical truth. What presents itself as moral passion is in fact the expression of *Erfahrungsarmut*, an impoverishment of experience, in which reality is replaced by narratives and the concrete other by a sign.

The syndrome of antisemitism without experience also means that those who reproduce antisemitic stereotypes deny doing so with the greatest vehemence. The accusation of antisemitism itself becomes the true scandal, while antisemitism as ideology and practice risks to vanish behind the indignation provoked by its mere naming. Thus, the reflex to reject the charge functions as a defence mechanism: by declaring themselves innocent yet critical, the agents of ideology preserve the very structure they claim to abhor. A telling example is provided by the controversies

surrounding the antisemitism scandal at *documenta 15* in Kassel in the summer of 2022 (see the section "The New Intellectual Anti-Intellectualism: Anti-Western Resentment and Postcolonial Antimodernism" in Chapter 6 of this book). When an Indonesian curatorial collective aligned with the BDS movement exhibited antisemitic artworks from the Global South, a notable countermovement emerged in Germany, including within antisemitism research itself. Rather than confronting the antisemitic content of the works, this response redirected attention towards those who had named the antisemitism. Crystallising around the now widely circulated notion of the *Antisemitismusvorwurf* (accusation of antisemitism), the debate centred on whether identifying the antisemitism of others – implicitly Muslims – was itself a form of projection that served to conceal one's own (e.g. Quindeau 2025). While this question is not without justification in the German context, its inflation had the effect of once again displacing and neutralising Islamic, postcolonial, progressive, or tricontinental antisemitism. As the critique of antisemitism was reframed primarily as an 'accusation', sustained engagement with it could be effectively deferred.

This discursive strategy accelerated once again after 7 October. That the incapacity to feel concretely and to think abstractly plays a decisive role becomes evident in the fervour and excitement with which protest against Israel turns into a demand for its annihilation. Most striking is the enthusiasm with which queer, trans, and intersectional feminist activists side with a Palestine that has become a totem, a rallying symbol through which alienation seeks relief. In this identification, the misogynistic and antisemitic agenda of Hamas is not only downplayed but at times celebrated as a gesture of liberation – but from what? What presents itself as empathy for the oppressed becomes complicity with the logic of domination.

The affective intensity of these gestures is curiously abstract, detached from both their ostensible object and from the subject's own experience. As Corinne Blackmer (2024b) suggests, such emotions operate as substitutes for an affectivity and corporeality that has become unbearable or altogether lost: the capacity to sense one's own embodied existence and inner nature, together with its irreducible ambivalence. Corporeality, the scene of lived contradiction, solidifies into an ideological projection. In this process, denied bodily nature returns in the phantasm of the collective. Subjects fail to reconcile their own divisions and instead repeat them in enmity towards the other. The damaged social relationship to nature expressed in sexism and antisemitism also manifests as a damaged relationship to the body.

Following Blackmer, trans and queer individuals often experience a sense of disconnection from their bodies, which gives rise to the desire to "jump outside their corporeality" (Blackmer 2024b). Consequently, the body becomes a "site of dis-ease" (Blackmer 2024b) and discomfort – a locus of tension that may be externalised through symbolic identification or projection. Within this dynamic, Israel, conceived as a particularist Jewish identitarian body politic, can serve as a projection screen for one's own unease with identity and embodiment. Against the backdrop of antizionist propaganda, which has become a pervasive cultural code in these milieus, Israel functions as a catch-all for resurfacing bodily anxieties.

Butler's queer theory can be read as an expression of this repudiation of nature, identity, and the body, a repudiation that reemerges in damaged form in queer antizionism. It conceptualises the body not as a pre-social or natural substrate but entirely as an effect of power relations, produced, regulated, and sustained through normative regimes (Butler 1990). It therefore critically interrogates the social and discursive processes through which bodies are constituted, governed, and rendered intelligible. From this perspective, within the heteronormative regime of constraint, the body appears as always already constituted through power-laden discourses. While this approach is able to expose the domination inscribed in bodily norms, it risks evacuating physical nature as an autonomous reference point. As a result, the critique of bodily domination turns against corporeality itself, insofar as the body comes to possess substance only as an effect of discourse (Butler 2011). Whereas under capitalist relations of exploitation the body becomes an appendage of machinery, within queer theory it appears as an appendage of discourse. The body risks once again being stripped of any remaining natural-material dimension and rendered effectively anti-nature. Nature, rather than being reconciled, is thus turned into a non-thing that domination only ever constructs, exploits, and appropriates. Such critique dissolves first nature into second nature and collapses both into an undifferentiated unity, instead of engaging with the dialectical relation between the two, as Horkheimer and Adorno did in a process they termed the "remembrance of nature in the subject" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 32). This is arguably one of the most complex motifs in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It can be described as the mind reflecting upon itself as nature that has become separated from itself, and as recognising that dominant reason banishes its other – body, desire, lust, and fear – rather than reconciling with it. First and second nature thus emerge as an entangled dynamic in which thinking superimposes itself on nature through strict identity logic, hardening in the process to the point that it ossifies into second nature – the social coercion of the either-or. The reflective subject, on the other hand, recognises identity logic, opposed to the manifold of nature, as "that same nature, unreconciled and self-estranged" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 31). To escape identity logic, as queer theory aims to do, is therefore neither to erase nature nor to fall back into it, but to reconcile it within the reflective subject, as inner nature and material corporeality.

In queer activism, this dialectic is dissolved, with the either-or logic simply collapsing: the body and its boundaries are treated as radically deniable or infinitely malleable. Yet the unease with body and nature, from which subjects are divided and which they struggle to experience and integrate, persists and invites the displacement of this conflict elsewhere. As a result, a renewed search for identity, unity, and belonging may emerge in the form of strong political identifications, with pro-Palestinian activism offering a space for this. What presents itself as a refusal of identity therefore risks reproducing identity logic in displaced form, externalising it into collective political allegiances.

Indeed, the queer fetishisation of non-identity links Butler's queer theory with their projective antizionism. Butler rejects Zionism above all because any form of Jewish statehood, in their view, violates the "ethics of dispersion", which they see preserved in the Jewish diaspora as a negative, anti-identitarian principle (Butler 2012; for a critique, see Grigat 2014, 125–129; Gruber 2025). Butler's view is that, in the diaspora, Jews embody a form of national and civic negativity that is lost in the positivity of the nation-state of Israel, where Jews become entangled – like anyone else – in the dynamics of maintaining state borders through the exercise of state violence. In short, through Israel, Jews forfeit their status as victims and become perpetrators themselves. This logic draws on long-standing antisemitic stereotypes on several levels: from the anti-national Jew and the Jew lacking identity – both stereotypes here recoded positively – to a more covert reversal of victim and perpetrator. While Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were likewise aware that Jews had adapted to the "state of the world", they nonetheless defended the Jewish state as a necessary refuge from global antisemitism (Jacobs 2015, 142). They acknowledged the constraints of historical reality, whereas Butler, who maintains that ethical Judaism can flourish only in the diaspora as a negation of the principle of identity, regards Zionism as an obstacle to the moral progress of humanity (cf. Butler 2012).

Here, the connection between projective antizionism – which turns Israel into the "Jew among the nation-states" (Poliakov 2022, 33) and Jews into negative "exceptional specimens of humanity" (Arendt 1976, 58) – and queer theory, which likewise rejects positive references to identity and seeks a state of bodily and personal dispersion, is already apparent. It becomes even more evident in Jasbir Puar, who exceeds Butler in radicalism. In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar declares Islamist suicide terrorists to be the latest incarnation of queerness (Puar 2007, 14). The jihadist suicide bomber, through the "dissolution of bodily boundaries [and] the erotic ballistic event of death" (Puar 2007, 220), disrupts Western constructions of identity by transforming the act of destruction into a site of meaning. In this way, violence becomes intertwined with non-identity, and terrorism thus becomes a surface for negative identification, which mirrors a perverse mode of belonging (Hoffner 2025). Within this inhumane irrationality, queerness – hitherto understood as resistance to fixed identity – is radicalised into a form of idolised and nihilistic anti-identity. Pushed to its extreme, this identitarian form of non-identity culminates in the apotheosis of the Islamist-masculinist, sexist-homophobic, and antisemitic death cult. The destruction of the body, one's own as well as that of the other, becomes a heroic deed in the fight against identity coercion.

Butler's ethics of dispersion fetishises the non-identical to such an extent that it culminates in an affirmation of antisemitic stereotypes of the Jew as one who transgresses all boundaries: the rootless and anti-national Jew; the Jew as a gender-bender marked by pathological corporeality; the Jew as anti-nature. Within Butler's ethics of dispersion, the Jews seem acceptable only insofar as they conform to these stereotypes. As Israelis or Zionists, Jews are vilified as embodying utter evil.

The queer outcry against Israel can therefore be read as an expression of an unreconciled relationship between nature, society, and subjectivity, to which many adherents of queer theory and activism respond in antisemitic and sexist forms. This constellation may be interpreted as follows: while diasporic Jews embody anti-nature in a positively valorised form, Israelis are identified with a falsely regained nature and thus negatively framed. Palestinians, by contrast, are naturalised as the ideal-typical indigenous subject, thereby reaffirming a racialised conception of nature. Accordingly, Butler's rejection of the Jewish state does not amount to a rejection of statehood as such, and especially not of a Palestinian state.

The influence of Judith Butler, Jasbir Puar, and others on queer milieus and their anti-Israel activism can hardly be overstated. The depiction of Israel as an identitarian yet artificial 'Frankenstein state' echoes the alienation from one's own physical self as experienced by many queer individuals who reject fixed identity and corporeal boundaries. The queer challenge to identity initially contains an emancipatory impulse, seeking to overcome the coercive structures of heteronormativity and identity compulsion that pervade modern subjectivity. Yet the response reinstates the identity logic of the either-or: either identity coercion or detachment from identity and bodily demarcation. From a queer perspective, one can escape from the dilemma of confinement and fixation in identities only through the renunciation of identity as such.

In contrast to this, a dialectical approach conceives of identity as the tensional field of identity and non-identity and conceptualises identity in such a way that it pays due regard to non-identity within identity. An achieved identity would be one that does not exclude the non-identical. As the Critical Theorist Christoph Menke emphasises, the non-identical "does not coincide with being different", but rather constitutes "the moment of differentiation within an identity, the modality of the differentiating process of a subject identical with itself. In the broadest sense, this can be described as the successful variant" (Menke et al. 2016, 37). From this perspective, identity is successful when it remains mindful of the non-identical and when "a differentiating going-beyond-itself of an identity, of an identical subject, takes place, namely through the interplay of activity and passivity, without tipping over into dissociation or dissolution" (Menke et al. 2016, 37).

Critical Theory's critique of all-encompassing identity logic does not enthrone the non-identical as closer to freedom but situates it within the social relationship of domination. Non-identity is not in itself emancipatory, nor is it simply the opposite of reified identity; rather, it belongs to identity in a negative way. Within the tension of identity logic, both identity and non-identity are equally damaged. Strictly speaking, the non-identical itself emerges as a consequence of unreconciled identity under conditions of unfreedom and may assume grotesque, cruel, and violent forms in the eruptive return of the repressed. In response to National Socialism's distorted and barbaric release of repressed drives, Horkheimer spoke of a "revolt of nature" (1947). Today, this dynamic extends to the nihilistic cult of death displayed by Hamas and other Islamist terror groups, while some queers celebrate this terror as a projection

surface for unacknowledged longings for identity. Within queer theory itself, this logic becomes particularly visible in Jasbir Puar's apotheosis of suicide bombers, which appears as a reprise of the "revolt of nature": an authoritarian rebellion of denied bodily claims that culminates in the destruction of life.

For some, antizionism appears to offer an escape from the dilemma of identity and non-identity through negative identification. Masking a form of self-alienation, Israel is imagined as the embodiment of unnatural or failed corporeality and identity, onto which experiences of misaligned embodiment and fractured self-recognition are projected. In this schema, Palestinian 'authenticity' is idealised as a space of redemptive identification, promising relief from a non-identical fragmentation that is difficult to endure and holding out the fantasy of a secretly desired wholeness.

The dynamic, however, can also operate in the opposite direction. Precisely because Zionism is framed as an unauthentic nationalism and Israel as an artificial 'Frankenstein state', it may become a site of conscious, affirmative identification for trans and queer individuals. Here, artificiality and non-identity are neither denied nor elevated to an abstract principle, but embraced as modes of self-determined transformation, aligning with queer and trans valorisations of fluidity, multiplicity, and the subversion of normative corporeality. Such positions are not marginal, as initiatives like "Queers Against Antisemitism" or "A Wider Bridge" demonstrate. Yet formations such as "Queers for Palestine" or "Queers for BDS" have attained greater public visibility, as they can draw on established cultural codes of projective antizionism within queer milieus while simultaneously offering a means of repressing the ambivalence of artificiality itself. The symbolic rejection of Israel thus functions as a displaced strategy of reorientation, responding to an unresolved tension between the critique of fixed identity and the persistent longing for existential coherence under conditions of systemic unfreedom.

This dynamic radicalises the alienation from experience that Adorno and Horkheimer identified as a central feature of modernity and a constitutive element of antisemitism. Under contemporary liberal yet still unfree conditions, unresolved unease with identity and corporeality may erupt into a nihilistic and destructive ideology that is at once antisemitic, misogynistic, and antifeminist. Where experience collapses and nihilism spreads, projective antizionism can appear to offer a distorted form of moral clarity, transforming the Israel/Palestine conflict into a vessel for displaced moral aspiration. The result is what Seyla Benhabib has described, in her critique of Butler, as a "morality without normativity and without historicity" (2013): a paradoxical configuration in which alienation from embodied experience hardens into rigid, essentialist, and ultimately destructive ideology.

## Note

1 The existing English translation is highly inaccurate; I therefore translated directly from the German original.

# 11

# EPILOGUE

## Antisemitism as an Intersectional Ideology

At the end of this long analytical journey through the historical constellations of antisemitism and sexism, during which queer and intersectional feminism have also been subjected to critical examination, the question remains: how can feminist Critical Theory respond? This concluding chapter is devoted to this question.

In light of theoretical developments and internal tensions within intersectionality, as well as its political instrumentalisation in projective antizionism and antisemitism, significant strands within contemporary antisemitism studies regard intersectionality less as an analytical framework than as a political slogan and argue that it should be abandoned altogether. In contrast, I argue for a critical reclaiming of the idea. The reason for this is firstly that intersectionality, alongside queer theory, has become so important in feminist academic and political discourses that it is imperative to confront and correct its blind spots with respect to antisemitism. This implies that I do not think that intersectionality as such is antisemitic. Secondly and more importantly, I am convinced that the core idea of the intersectionality framework – that modern society is a complex interplay of social relations of domination that cannot be reduced to one single denominator – is enormously helpful in analysing modern forms of sociation and therefore we should not hastily abandon it but rather productively reclaim it from its antisemitic and antifeminist abuse.

The complex challenges of intersectionality concern its contextual embeddedness, as it originated in the analysis of the specific social and legal predicament of Black women in the United States against the backdrop of pervasive structural racism and sexism. Initially developed as a critique of both White-dominated feminism and the male-centred civil rights movement, intersectionality has since evolved into a broader analytical and political framework. Today, Kimberlé Crenshaw defines intersectionality far more expansively as "a way of seeing, thinking, and acting" (quoted in Maan 2019). If, however, antisemitism – one of the most

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consequential and murderous systems of ideological delusion in global history – cannot be adequately captured by the concept of intersectionality, then this raises a fundamental question about the concept's analytical value for studying relations of domination and oppression in post-National Socialist and postcolonial societies. Hence the crucial inquiry: can intersectionality be conceived and theorised as an analytical tool that entails a fundamental critique of all forms of antisemitism? Is it possible to develop an understanding of intersectionality that not only avoids the pitfalls described above regarding antisemitism and misogyny, but that actively works against these ideologies?

I argue that this requires reconceptualising intersectionality as a tool for analysing ideologies rather than (cultural, religious, gender, ethnic, etc.) identities. In doing so, we can start with a critical analysis of antisemitism itself to reveal its own intersectional structure. Thus, even though antisemitism is left out of most intersectional political practices and discourses, and sometimes, as illustrated, is even advanced under the guise of an intersectional antiracism and decolonial feminism, there are ways of fruitfully connecting intersectionality and antisemitism critique.

Given that intersectionality's formative history lies within the Black women's rights movement in the United States, it is often assumed that the critique of antisemitism has never played a role. Yet from the 1980s onward, critical feminists analysed National Socialism from a gender-critical perspective and challenged a hitherto normalised homogeneous category of woman. In explicit criticism of feminists declaring women as a gender group to be victims of National Socialism, these critical feminists (see Gehmacher 1992; Heschel 1994; Jacoby et al. 1994; Jacoby and Lwanga 1990; Kohn-Ley and Korotin 1994) asked what was actually meant by 'the woman' under National Socialism or in postwar German society: did this category refer to mainstream German, so-called Aryan women, or to female SS guards in concentration camps, to bystanders and profiteers, or rather to Jewish women, Romnja and Sintize, and women in the resistance? Though marginal within the academic landscape, such voices can be read as a subtle beginning of an intersectional discussion rooted explicitly in criticism of National Socialism and antisemitism.

As shown in the previous chapters, antisemitism and sexism appear in multifaceted historical and social constellations and can best be analysed as mutually interrelated ideologies. Adorno and Horkheimer already analysed antisemitism in connection to unequal gender relations. The empirical studies *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 2019) embedded antisemitism in the broader framework of the authoritarian attitudinal syndrome, which included other ideologies such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and class bias. I interpret this finding as an early anticipation of later intersectional approaches that analyse domination as a multifaceted system. Ideologies serve the function of veiling and legitimating domination and therefore rarely operate in isolation; rather, they emerge in entangled configurations in which they overlap, reinforce, and reshape one another, acquiring a specific interpenetrating form that accounts for both their durability and adaptability. Moreover, depending on political expediency, one

ideology may come to the fore while the others continue to operate in the background and can be recalled at any time. Thus, ideologies are mobile and processual social phenomena that cannot be viewed in isolation from each other.

Due to its inherent contradictions and complexity, antisemitism lends itself particularly well to intersectional analysis, not only because it is pervasively intertwined with sexism, homophobia, racism, or nationalism, but also because it reflects economic class relations in a pathologically distorted manner and disguises itself as a critique of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. In this sense, I understand antisemitism as the *intersectional ideology* par excellence and thus not as one ideology (or prejudice) among others, but rather as a worldview that encapsulates the contradictions characterising modernity (Stögner 2017).

The starting point for this analysis lies in the anti-categorical nature of antisemitic stereotypes which portray Jews as pervasively crossing all borders. This characteristic sets antisemitism apart from other ideologies which more directly follow the social categorisations along binary markers such as high/low, inside/outside, White/Black, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and strong/weak. While ideologies such as racism, sexism, homophobia, nationalism, and ethnocentrism assign people of colour, women, homosexuals, 'foreigners', etc., to clearly demarcated positions within these binary codes, antisemitism is characterised by a persistent ambivalence with respect to these markers. Antisemites do not position Jews unambiguously on one side or the other of these binary constructions but instead ascribe to them an interstitial or even transcendent position beyond the binary order. This produces the contradictory structure of antisemitic stereotypes, rooted in the fact that antisemitism – more than other ideologies – operates as a delusional response to unresolved ambiguities and ambivalences across social and psychological levels.

As has been elaborated in the previous chapters, antisemitism constructed Jews as fundamentally unclassifiable within the three dimensions central to classical intersectional analysis: gender/sexuality, class, and race/ethnicity/nation. The figure of the 'anti-national Jew' that allegedly undermines the principle of the nation-state, as well as stereotypes of 'Jewish gender confusion' that destabilise hierarchical gender relationships, can be taken as evidence for the profound anti-identical and thus anticategorical character of antisemitic stereotypy. Additionally, antisemitism places Jews ambiguously within the social class structure, associating them simultaneously with communism and capitalism, especially 'abstract' finance capital. By eluding clear categorical classification, Jews do not represent merely an 'other' or an 'alien' identity opposed to that of the antisemite; rather, they embody non-identity itself, i.e., the threat of the dissolution of identity and unity.

This anticategorical dimension of antisemitic stereotyping renders any analysis of antisemitism incompatible with identity-political approaches to intersectionality that merely demonstrate the interdependence of categories like race, class, and gender without interrogating categorisation itself as a mechanism of domination. When binary categories such as gender/sexuality, class, or race/ethnicity/nation are

affirmed within identity politics, antisemitism is excluded from analysis precisely because it cuts across these categories. By contrast, anticategorical approaches to intersectionality, particularly prominent in queer theory (Butler 1995), hold that every act of categorisation establishes, reproduces, and subtly reinforces specific relations of power. These approaches oppose categorisation and identification as authoritative gestures, envisioning resistance to categories as a path towards greater freedom and the recognition of lived multiplicity. Yet, in a distorted and inverted form, a comparable dynamic can be identified in antisemitism, which draws its force from the refusal to accord Jews a stable identity or to situate them within the categories structuring social order. This specificity constitutes a major difference from racism, especially anti-Muslim racism, which attributes to Muslims a rigid and homogeneous identity that mirrors racists' own essentialised self-image and their envy of identity (Maani 2015). By contrast, antisemitism casts Jews as embodying anti-identity: rootless, shifting, fluid, and ambivalent.

This anti-identity delusion took a radical form in Nazi ideology that viewed Jews as the "antirace, the negative principle as such; on their extermination the world's happiness depends", as Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 137). The Nazis' annihilatory obsession is connected to positioning Jews *beyond* all categorical belonging – they are assigned a non-place that threatens every fixed collective identity. The same anti-identitarian motif reappears in exterminatory antizionism, which depicts Israel as an illegitimate, artificial yet racist and particularistic construct.

As shown throughout the book, this non-identical status attributed to Jews particularly extends to gender and sexuality: antisemitic and antifeminist discourses depict Jews as sexually indeterminate beings who blur gender boundaries and subvert heteronormative roles. Women's emancipation was consequently branded a 'Jewish conspiracy', fusing misogyny with the fear of identity dissolution.

In sum, antisemitism's anticategorical and anti-identity structure renders it uniquely intersectional. It negatively integrates and distorts dimensions of race, class, gender, and nation, constructing Jews as the symbolic negation of stable identity itself. Its internal contradictions and ambiguities, its fluid boundaries, and its multiple intersections with other ideologies have enabled antisemitism to develop into a comprehensive and delusional worldview designed to forcibly uphold faltering value systems and norms. Antisemitism has come to function as a negative foil through which coercive and rigid identity logics are reinforced. More than most other ideologies, antisemitism serves to uphold the structures of capitalism, patriarchy, and the nation-state by being simultaneously sexist, homophobic, nationalist, and racist, while at the same time presenting itself as anticapitalist and anti-imperialist.

The consistently anticategorical dimension of antisemitism poses a challenge to queer-feminist approaches that locate emancipatory potential in a position beyond categories, arguing that such a stance resists the formation of repressive identities. Antisemitism indeed transcends categorical divisions, but turns this transgression into something evil and derives its efficacy from it. The anticategorical dimension

of antisemitism also contains a negative aspect in the sense that in a very distorted manner it represents a protest against the division of the world into races, classes, and genders – though disfigured beyond recognition. Wherever the overcoming of class, racial, and gender domination becomes socially conceivable and where it emerges as a real potential for transformation, antisemitism functions as the expression of society's inability to make this potential a reality in political, economic, or social terms. Antisemitism owes both its genesis and its distorted plausibility to conditions of profound social inequality – inequalities that are felt and rejected but insufficiently understood and instead ideologically obscured and thereby legitimised.

The two main approaches to intersectionality that leave an open flank to antisemitism both revolve around the problem of identity. While identity-political approaches to intersectionality tend to reproduce the antisemitic denial of Jewish identity, thereby excluding Jews from the intersectional framework, queer and anticategorical approaches instead reassign the rejected identity categories to Jews, as seen in queer theory's rejection of Israel and Zionism as an identitarian particularism. This is consistent with the well-known observation that, within antisemitic discourse, anything can be construed as evidence against Jews. What is therefore needed is a rethinking of intersectionality in an ideology-critical manner that moves beyond identitarian constrictions, be they affirmative or negative, and instead focuses on how ideologies intersect at motivational, structural, and functional levels.

This intersectional perspective, informed by Critical Theory, is also politically consequential. When Angela Davis speaks of an "intersectionality of struggles" (Davis 2016), the formulation initially appears conceptually persuasive; however, insofar as she understands heterogeneous struggles worldwide as intersectionally intertwined through BDS, intersectionality is transformed into an ideological instrument of convergence rather than a mode of critical analysis. Heterogeneous struggles are subordinated to a unifying framework of antizionism, within which the promise of liberation for oppressed peoples in the Global South is located. In doing so, Davis reproduces a redemptive trope long central to antisemitism, in which peace in the world is imagined as requiring liberation from Jews, or today from Zionists. If, by contrast, we reconnect emancipation with the universal values of the Enlightenment, while simultaneously acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between freedom and equality; if, in a feminist sense, we place women's sexual, political, and economic self-determination at the centre of emancipatory projects; and if we focus on the emancipation of individuals rather than collectivities or peoples as our primary point of reference, then alternative analytical parameters for an 'intersectionality of struggles' emerge. From this vantage point, Islamism and its desire to destroy Israel no longer appear as a resolution to the dilemmas of modernity, but rather as their intensified manifestation.

Accordingly, an emancipatory account of intersectionality must align with women's struggles opposing Islamism and antisemitism, insofar as Islamist ideologies are radically antisemitic, racist, misogynistic, and fundamentally hostile to sexual and

gender diversity. From a Critical Theory perspective, Islamism can be understood as a syndrome of authoritarian domination, in which the repression of women, the violent persecution of LGBTIQ* people, and antisemitic projection function as mutually reinforcing mechanisms for stabilising a repressive collective identity oriented not towards freedom and equality of individuals, but towards the idea of a unified Umma. As Adorno and Horkheimer argued, domination reproduces itself through the externalisation of social contradictions and the construction of absolute enemies, onto whom aggression is displaced in order to preserve an illusory unity.

This critical-theoretical conception of intersectionality contrasts sharply with dominant postcolonial intersectionality frameworks, which tend to prioritise axes of colonial oppression and geopolitical power, and in doing so often misrepresent these dynamics by marginalising and relativising antisemitism while framing Islamist movements as forms of anticolonial resistance. As a result, the analysis of misogyny, homophobia, and antisemitism risks being subordinated to a geopolitical logic that privileges opposition to the West or to Israel over a sustained critique of authoritarian and eliminatory ideologies.

By contrast, a Critical Theory-informed intersectional approach refuses to hierarchise forms of domination according to geopolitical allegiance. It insists that resistance to the Iranian Islamist regime and its proxies, as well as to movements such as the Taliban, ISIS, and the different factions of the Muslim Brotherhood must be understood as struggles against authoritarian social formations in which gender apartheid, anti-LGBTIQ* violence, and antisemitism are structurally intertwined. In all of these cases, antisemitism functions not as a contingent prejudice but as a central ideological principle that legitimises violence and repression.

One of the most pressing contemporary examples is the feminist movement opposing the Islamist regime in Iran and its proxies, together with efforts to confront global antisemitism and eliminationist antizionism; these can therefore be understood as intersectionally connected struggles (Stögner and Sahebi 2025). In contrast to postcolonial intersectionality's tendency to seek redemption in collective identities or anti-imperial alignments, this perspective locates emancipation in what Adorno described as the determinate negation of the false whole: the refusal of those ideological totalities – whether national, religious, or 'anti-imperial' – that demand the sacrifice of women, sexual minorities, and Jews in the name of a supposedly higher liberation.

Given the current urgency of liberating Iranians from the Islamist regime, opposition to gender apartheid is thus intersectionally linked to resistance against eliminatory antizionism. More broadly, feminist and anti-antisemitic struggles against Islamist domination converge not through a politics of alignment or equivalence, but through a shared commitment to dismantling authoritarian forms of domination wherever they emerge.

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