



“... based on the skewed theory building of the postcolonial movement”: Media conflicts surrounding postcolonial studies and antisemitism in Germany

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" ... BASED ON THE SKEWED THEORY BUILDING OF THE POSTCOLONIAL MOVEMENT": MEDIA CONFLICTS SURROUNDING POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND ANTISEMITISM IN GERMANY

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Antisemitism
Eurocentrism
historians' controversy
Holocaust
postcolonial studies
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The increasing recognition of postcolonial studies gave rise to a revisionist counter-movement on the conservative side in Germany, which went largely unnoticed until 2019. In the course of media conflicts over antisemitism in recent years, however, a majority opinion emerged in the liberal and left-wing camps that fundamentally suspected and criticized postcolonial studies as antisemitic. The essay traces some of these conflicts in the German public sphere (around Achille Mbembe, the so-called Second Historians' Controversy, the art exhibition documenta 15, and the reactions to 7 October 2023) and develops a model of three approaches (delimited concept of antisemitism, historical context of the Federal Republic of Germany, Eurocentrism) to explain this hegemony.

Introduction: the rise and fall of postcolonial studies in the German public sphere

Since post- and decolonial perspectives gained increasing recognition in the German-speaking humanities and social sciences at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the interest of the German public in colonialism and its aftermath has grown – certainly also influenced by the numerous postcolonial city initiatives, starting with *Freiburg Postkolonial* (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2005; Conrad, Randeria, and Römhild 2002; Freiburg Postkolonial 2025; Kerner 2012). This has intensified in the last decade, partly due to the reception of international debates on Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall – especially since the murder of George Floyd and the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020 – but also due to the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy on the restitution of looted art objects for the French president in the same year and the official recognition of the genocide of the Herero and Nama by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 2021. The historian Sebastian Conrad (2022, 31) speaks of an “explosion of attention”¹ for the colonial past. At the same time, however, a revisionist countermovement can also be observed, supported by conservative and right-wing journalists, politicians, and political scientists, who sometimes portray the liberation from colonialism as a catastrophe (Stein 2015), sometimes call for recolonization (Martenstein 2015), or generally regard colonialism as a legitimate form of rule that was beneficial to the colonized (Gilley 2019; Nooke 2018). Meanwhile, the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) has linked its call for a “nuanced reappraisal” of the German colonial era not only with a denial of the genocide in German South-West Africa, but also with an attack on “culturally Marxist-inspired post- and decolonialism” (AfD Parliamentary Group 2019b, 9), which allegedly is anti-Western, unrealistic, and unscientific and makes use of “intellectual terror” to undermine freedom of opinion and universality (2019b, 10). Nevertheless, these accusations from the political right went largely unnoticed and without consequences among the liberal and left-wing German public. However, this changed significantly in the following years, especially when the accusations against postcolonial studies were expanded to include a decisive element: antisemitism (AfD Parliamentary Group 2022). This occurred primarily as a result of the 2019 Bundestag resolution on the anti-Israeli Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign, although neither the motion by the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, and Alliance 90/The Greens itself (CDU/CSU et al. 2019), nor the preceding AfD motion (AfD Parliamentary Group 2019a), made the connection between antisemitism and postcolonial studies. This changed fundamentally in the course of the public conflicts surrounding antisemitism over the next few years. In many media – from *Faz* (Klein 2024) to *Focus* (Fleischhauer 2023), *Spiegel*

1 All translations from German are by the author (supported by AI).

(Pfister 2023), and *taz* (Cheema and Mendel 2020) – it is the order of the day to blame postcolonial studies for antisemitism. The German government’s antisemitism commissioner, Felix Klein (2024), is convinced: “The unabashedly flaunted antisemitism in German lecture halls is based on the skewed theory building of the postcolonial movement.” The fundamental criticism of postcolonial studies, previously reserved for the right-wing fringe, has apparently reached the centre of society and forms the prevailing opinion of large sections of the public and especially the government. This essay aims to get to the bottom of this development. It first traces some of the aforementioned conflicts and analyzes which understandings of antisemitism underlie the accusations. In the following section, three approaches are used to develop a model for understanding the newly gained hegemony of a fundamental critique of post- and decolonial studies as antisemitic and to make their theories productive for the investigation of the conflicts mentioned.nuanced

Conflicts about antisemitism in the German public sphere

Since 2019, there have been a large number of conflicts surrounding antisemitism, of which only a few are picked out here as examples, which have received national media coverage and have been – increasingly explicitly – associated with postcolonial studies.

Conflict case 1: antisemitism and Mbembe

The Cameroonian historian and social philosopher Achille Mbembe, a prominent representative of postcolonial studies who was due to give the opening speech on planetary solidarity at the Ruhrtriennale 2020, was among those confronted with accusations of antisemitism. The cultural policy spokesperson for the FDP parliamentary group in the NRW state parliament, Lorenz Deutsch, criticized Mbembe for supporting “the anti-Israel BDS movement,” while the German government’s antisemitism commissioner Felix Klein saw evidence of Mbembe’s antisemitism by relativizing the Holocaust, questioning Israel’s right to exist, and equating the state of Israel with South Africa’s apartheid system (“Protest gegen Auftritt von Mbembe” 2020). The publicist Saba-Nur Cheema, who belongs more to the left-liberal camp, and the director of the Anne Frank Educational Center, Meron Mendel, seconded that for Mbembe the problem was not the current Israeli government policy, which they themselves criticize, but

“the mere existence of the Jewish state” (Cheema and Mendel 2020). Going beyond Mbembe, they extended their criticism to postcolonial studies as a whole, which understood antisemitism “as just another form of racism” and led to the reproduction of antisemitic thought structures and the “inability to take antisemitism seriously as a problem” through a “continued, completely unreflected demonization of Israel” (Cheema and Mendel 2020).

Various justifications for the accusation of antisemitism were given in the discussion, some of which were also substantiated. Klein saw the Holocaust relativized by the fact that Mbembe, in his book *Necropolitics* (Mbembe 2019), understands the ideological background of the South African apartheid system and the racist ideology of the Nazis as manifestations of a similar pattern. On the other hand, he would equate South African apartheid with Israeli occupation policy. In this way, Klein argues, Mbembe would equate the crimes of Nazi Germany and Israel, which is generally regarded as Holocaust relativization.² In his “Ethics of Comparison,” Holocaust researcher Michael Rothberg suggested examining this stylistic device more closely in two respects (Rothberg 2024). First, does the comparison allow differences to be perceived or are they made to disappear? Second, does the comparison aim to create solidarity or division and conflict between victim groups? Anyone examining Mbembe’s texts according to these criteria will first notice that he emphasizes that the fight against antisemitism is “of absolute urgency” and postulates elsewhere: “In each of the countless places of dispossession, trauma and abandonment, the face of humanity as a whole is disfigured. Not just that of a race, a tribe or a religion” (Mbembe 2020). In this respect, his comparison is directed against racist ideologies of any kind and is not aimed at competition, but at solidarity between the victims of different inhuman regimes. So what about the question posed by Rothberg about dealing with differences? In fact, Mbembe writes that “the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories [...] is in some respects reminiscent of the notorious model of apartheid” in South Africa (Mbembe 2017, 84f.). The similarities rather than the differences are emphasized, but accompanied by the restriction to the occupied territories, not with regard to the state of Israel as a whole. Mbembe also sees the politics of apartheid at work not only in Israel, but everywhere “where social forces understand the political primarily as a deadly struggle against indomitable enemies” (Mbembe 2017, 117). The Holocaust is seen in the context of colonialism and fascism (114). Mbembe qualifies the incriminated comparison of the South African apartheid regime with National Socialist Germany, stating that they were both manifestations of racist politics, but “on a completely different scale” (89). Differences are therefore certainly perceived and named. Thus, based on Rothberg’s criteria, the comparison is characterized less by an erasure of differences and a division of victim groups than by solidarity and human rights universalism.

2 In the German public debate, either the “3D test,” according to which the demonization, delegitimization, or application of double standards to the state of Israel is antisemitic, or the definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) are often cited. In fact, the IHRA definition, which was never intended as a scientific definition and is controversial due to its strong focus on criticism of Israel, only contains two of the three elements of the common “3D test” for antisemitism – delegitimization is not mentioned there. However, comparing Israel to Nazi Germany is regarded as an unambiguous indicator of antisemitism.

3 However, there is no formal BDS membership.

With regard to the question of Israel's right to exist, Mbembe has taken a clear position: it is "fundamental to the balance of the world," according to the author in the article cited by Cheema and Mendel (Mbembe 2020). And even where Mbembe claims that the occupation of Palestine is "the biggest moral scandal in our times," he also emphasizes Israel's right "to live in peace" in the same paragraph (qtd. from Carp 2022, 29). As far as the BDS boycott campaign is concerned, Mbembe emphasizes that he rejects cooperation with institutions or individuals involved in violations of international or human rights in the Palestinian territories, but is explicitly not a member of BDS (qtd. from Carp 2022, 42).³ Some of the accusations of antisemitism are thus based on demonstrable positions (apartheid), while others are based on contingent interpretations (Holocaust relativization) or on inaccurate (BDS) or incorrect statements (Israel's right to exist). It needs to be stressed here that this statement is one about the foundation of the accusations, not their validity. Whether or not support for BDS (whose core demands are equal rights for Palestinians; an end of the occupation of the West Bank [including East Jerusalem], Gaza, and the Syrian Golan Heights; and the right to return for Palestinian refugees) or the non-recognition of the state of Israel (whose founding was based on the often violent displacement of 750,000 Palestinians and whose ethno-religious character was and is controversial among Jewish intellectuals) is antisemitic is another question altogether.

Conflict case 2: antisemitism in the second historians' dispute

Accusations of antisemitism were also raised in the course of the so-called second historians' controversy (Friedländer et al. 2022; Neiman and Wildt 2022; Zimmerer 2023), the debate about the singularity of the Holocaust. The dispute, which initially took place mainly in the feature pages, was triggered by postcolonial theses on the lines of continuity between the genocide of the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa and the National Socialist genocide (Zimmerer 2011), the call for a removal of taboos surrounding the comparison of the Holocaust with other, primarily colonial genocides (Zimmerer and Rothberg 2021), and for a "multidirectional remembrance" (Rothberg 2021) as well as the diagnosis of the existence of a "German catechism" in the politics of remembrance (Moses 2021). In the debate, accusations were again articulated that postcolonial studies were paving the way for antisemitism.⁴

4 Gerber (2021); Martini (2022); Sprügel (2022); Bauer (2022, 135); Reinprecht (2022);

Two arguments will be discussed here as examples. The journalist Tania Martini (2022) defends the thesis of the singularity of the Holocaust: "The mass murder of the European Jews was an industrialized mass murder and

Diner (2022);
Malinowski (2024);
Friedländer et al.
(2022, 20f.). Klävers'
(2019) work as a
differentiated
critique of
postcolonial studies
does not raise this
accusation.

precisely not primarily driven by economic or territorial interests. It was not about making others submissive or subjugating them, but about translating a delusion into senseless murder using the greatest resources. This is what fundamentally distinguishes the genocide of the Jews from colonial crimes.” Denying this qualitative difference, as postcolonial studies do, trivializes or relativizes the Holocaust, she argues, and adds that this also had consequences for the current discussion about Israel, which was wrongly understood as a settler colony and apartheid state.

To capture the difference between the Holocaust and other genocides, Dan Diner coined the term “civilizational rupture.” For him, Auschwitz and the Shoah refuted the assumption of a civilization based on rationality, which would exclude “purposeless mass killing [...] already for reasons of calculating interests and self-preservation of the perpetrators” (Diner 1988, 7). For this reason, the Shoah emanated an “extra” horror, an additional dimension of cognitive horror that did not occur in other genocides (Diner 2022, 79). For the postcolonial side, however, Diner argues this fact would constitute “a presumption that is perceived as intolerable” (78) and therefore the denial of singularity in the second historians’ dispute was thus argumentatively almost identical to that in the first (77) – in which it was politically aimed at trivializing the National Socialist crimes.

The postcolonial theses are therefore antisemitic in this view because they deny or trivialize the singular quality of the Holocaust and understand Israel as a settler colony and apartheid state instead of a refuge for survivors. This argument is problematic in various respects. On the one hand, it completely ignores the dimension of “Aryanization” (the term designates the appropriation of Jewish property by so-called Aryans) and material interests with regard to the supposedly unprovoked extermination (Aly 2005). It also ignores the rational-purpose pattern often found in genocides of achieving the security of one’s own group through the annihilation of another group that (really or supposedly) threatened it (Moses 2008) – which can also be applied to the National Socialist view that the Jews would endanger the survival of a “pure” Aryan race. Secondly, it is easy to see a naturalization of utilitarian or utility-maximizing action in Diner’s argument. According to Diner, the cognitive horror stems from the fact that the Nazis were not deterred from murder by material interests either; for him, this is the irrational break with civilization. Thirdly, against the background of non-European experiences of violence and genocide, Diner’s speech appears Eurocentric. Why should the centuries-long treatment as subhumans, the enslavement, the torture, the arbitrary and cruel everyday violence, the destruction of entire cultures and the genocides in European colonialism (see Plumelle-Urbe 2004; Todorov 1999) have caused less horror which would shake assumptions about humanity? As far as – fourthly and fifthly – the questions of Israel as an apartheid

5 B’Tselem (2024);
Shakir (2021);
Amnesty
International (2022);
Israeli human rights
organization
B’Tselem concedes
the differences to the
South African regime
but concludes: “the

Conflict case 3: antisemitism at documenta 15

Israeli regime, which
controls all the
territory between the
Jordan River and the
Mediterranean Sea,
seeks to advance and
cement Jewish
supremacy
throughout the entire
area. To that end, it
has divided the area
into several units,
each with a different
set of rights for
Palestinians – always
inferior to the rights
of Jews. As part of
this policy,
Palestinians are
denied many rights,
including the right to
self-determination.
... A regime that uses
laws, practices and
organized violence to
cement the

state and settler colonialism are concerned, the ambivalence described by the Palestinian intellectual Raef Zreik must first be stated: “The Europeans see the Jewish refugee on the run, fighting for his life. The Palestinian sees the face of the colonial settler taking over his land” (qtd. from Goldberg and Confino 2020). Zionists such as Jabotinsky and Kaplan openly stated in the 1920s and 1930s that Zionism was about the colonization of Palestine and the expulsion of the Palestinians (Goldberg and Confino 2020; cf. Rubin 2024). The Israeli director of the Simon Dubnow Institute, Yfaat Weiss, confirms this: “Of course, all Zionists who were involved in the colonization of Palestine were aware that it was a colonial enterprise” (qtd. from Brumlik 2021, 119). And the different legal norms for Palestinians and Israelis underpinning the accusation of apartheid, especially in the territories occupied by Israel, have been extensively documented by international and Israeli human rights organizations alike.⁵ Both terms – apartheid state and settlement colonialism – are entirely compatible with the observation that Israel was and is a refuge for numerous traumatized Holocaust survivors, even if the various political camps like to ignore the uncomfortable side (refuge on the one hand, settler colony on the other).

A wide range of media, from *Spiegel* (Lobo 2022) to *taz* (Fanizadeh 2022), made accusations of antisemitism against the programmatically postcolonial art exhibition documenta 15 in Kassel even before its opening on 18 June 2022, prompting German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to issue urgent warnings in his opening speech. For reasons of space, not all aspects of the accusations and their justification can be discussed here (see Deitelhoff et al. 2023; Hauenstein and Weizman 2023; Ziai 2024a), but two of the most prominent works of art criticized will be examined in more detail: the painting *People’s Justice* by the Indonesian artists’ collective Taring Padi and the series of paintings *Guernica Gaza* by the Palestinian artist Mohammad Al Hawajri. *People’s Justice* is a painting in the form of an 8 × 12 m banner that was installed in front of the Documenta hall. In addition to a Mossad agent with a pig’s snout, the depiction of an obviously Jewish banker with temple curls, a cigar, vampire teeth, and SS runes on his hat caused fierce outrage and widespread public protests, which first led to the artwork being covered up and then taken down a day later. Two elements of antisemitic imagery were combined here: the Jew as a blood-sucking (exploitative, parasitic) capitalist and as a Nazi. The latter depiction is also linked to the conspiracy theory that Jewish people supported and financed the Holocaust – a “prime example

supremacy of one group over another is an apartheid regime.”

of perpetrator-victim reversal” (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 32). In the *Guernica Gaza* series, well-known European works of art are modified and placed in the context of the territories occupied by Israel, so that, for example, Van Gogh’s painting *The Potato Eaters* is supplemented by an injured person on the dinner table and a bombed city. The title of the series refers to Pablo Picasso’s 1937 painting *Guernica*, which depicts the German air raid on a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War. The pictures in the series mostly show the contrast between everyday scenes of a peaceful civilian population and the actions of an occupying army. Mohammad Al Hawajri’s artwork was accused of antisemitism due to demonization – the works spread “the Manichean idea that Jews are profoundly evil and their victims thoroughly innocent” (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 56) – and again a perpetrator-victim reversal; the work “equates the Israeli Defence Forces with Nazi troops” (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 54). While the panel’s accusation of antisemitism against *People’s Justice* is plausible, the perpetrator-victim reversal diagnosed in *Guernica Gaza* is questionable. When it is fantasized that Jewish people are partly responsible for the Holocaust, such a reversal exists: the victims are turned into perpetrators. In the bombing of Gaza, however, the perpetrators are actually Israeli soldiers, so the comparison between the Israeli and German air forces has a real basis – even if the objection that no missiles were fired at Germany from *Guernica* is correct (Deitelhoff et al. 2023). The distribution of roles between victims and perpetrators is more complicated in this case. And according to Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, Director of the Center for Research on Antisemitism in Berlin, the “Manichean” juxtaposition of good and evil is not antisemitic, but a common propaganda technique in armed conflicts (Schüler-Springorum 2023). The specially convened committee for the scientific monitoring of documenta 15 came to the conclusion that visual antisemitic codes can be found in two artworks and Israel-related antisemitism in three others (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 71) – among at least a four-digit number of artworks presented at the documenta. Nevertheless, it claims that documenta fifteen functioned “as an echo chamber for Israel-related antisemitism, and sometimes for proper antisemitism” (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 71) and at one point describes the Middle East conflict as a “sequence of events characterized by (Israel-related) antisemitism” (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 17). This formulation suggests that hatred of Jewish people, not the Zionist settlement and competing claims to the territory of the Palestinian Mandate, was responsible for the conflict. The resistance of the colonized is thus reinterpreted and delegitimized as hatred of Jewish people. And even actual antisemitism on the Palestinian side, antisemitism as defined by the Jerusalem Declaration (Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism 2021), must be read against the background of the conflict as its consequence, even if this does not make it legitimate (Bartal 2024).

Conflict case 4: antisemitism in the reactions to 7 October

Following the massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas and other armed groups as part of the military offensive on 7 October 2023, it was justified on social media by a number of people with actual or attributed anti-, post- or decolonial positioning. Probably the most famous instance was a post by US-Somali publicist Najma Sharif (2024) who wrote, “what did y’all think decolonization meant? vibes? papers? essays? losers.” There were other examples of positive reactions that interpreted the action as a liberation struggle, or at least as an understandable reaction to decades of occupation (Sadovnik 2023). In some cases, reference was made to Frantz Fanon, who had described violence as a necessary means of overcoming violent colonial rule (Fanon 1965). These reactions were not only interpreted as a lack of empathy with the (mostly Israeli and often Jewish) victims of the massacre, but also as antisemitism. At the same time, hatred of Jews was associated with postcolonial theory or seen as its consequence (Klein 2024). The arguments regarding antisemitism are based on the previously discussed understanding of Israel as a settlement colony and apartheid state. Linked to this, postcolonial theory is accused of racially dividing the world into white perpetrators and non-white victims and only allowing empathy for the latter. Furthermore, it is said to brainwash students at German universities, preach hatred of the “West,” especially of Jewish people and Israel, and regard the idea that “Western values” (tolerance, human rights) are superior to violent religions that stone women as colonial thinking (Fleischhauer 2023; Klein 2024; Pfister 2023). On closer examination of postcolonial theorists such as Stuart Hall, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Edward Said, these accusations are entirely unfounded and at best worth discussing with regard to vulgar postcolonialism in social media (Ziai 2024b). In the case of Edward Said, who was born in 1935 in the British Mandate of Palestine, the accusation of antisemitism is also based on the statement he made in an interview that “the Palestinians under Israeli occupation are just as powerless today as the Jews were in the 1940s” and Said’s “reinterpretation” of the “Zionist project as colonial racism,” i.e. the “denial” of Israel’s right to exist (Matthies 2024). What often goes unmentioned is that Said clearly advocated mediation between Zionist and Palestinian claims to the disputed land (Said 2003) and strove for Jewish and Arab people to live together as equals in a democratic secular state (Said 1979, 52). He also recognized the function of the state of Israel as a refuge from Nazi terror, but denied that the expulsion and disenfranchisement of Palestinian people constituted justifiable compensation for Jewish suffering (Said 1979, 48). He thus equated the victims – Jewish then, Palestinian today – but not the perpetrators. And with his criticism of the Nakba, he questioned Israel, which is clearly perceived as antisemitic by the hegemonic public. The media

6 Kirlidokme (2025);
“Max-Planck-
Gesellschaft trennt
sich von Ghassan
Hage” (2024); Flocke
(2023);
“Antisemitismus-
Vorwurf: Adidas
stoppt
Werbekampagne mit
Bella Hadid” (2024).

outrage over postcolonial studies was closely linked to that over pro-Palestinian activism, especially in the context of the distribution of sweets in the streets of Neukölln after 7 October (Fröhlich 2023). The German government reacted not only by banning the Palestinian organizations Hamas and Samidoun (Bundesregierung 2023), but also by criminalizing Kufiyas (Schleiermacher 2023) and the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” (Rath 2023), which is seen as antisemitic due to a (perceived) denial of Israel’s right to exist; in some cases, it is understood as an expression of genocidal intentions. The Bundestag’s BDS resolution was also increasingly applied against Jewish intellectuals who were pro-Palestinian or critical of Israel, the most prominent of whom were Nancy Fraser and Masha Gessen (Reinecke 2024). Among others, journalists in public broadcasting, an ethnologist, a Bundesliga footballer, and a model were dismissed,⁶ two girls’ centres were closed due to “anti-Zionist and antisemitic” statements made by the management on Facebook (rbb24 2024). In November 2024, the Bundestag passed a resolution on the “protection of Jewish life in Germany,” against which constitutional lawyers expressed serious concerns regarding the curtailment of fundamental rights – just like they did against the BDS resolution of 2019 (Jäckels 2024).

Hermeneutic reconstruction

In the last part of the essay, I will attempt to hermeneutically reconstruct or understand the conflict constellation described above – a condemnation of postcolonial theories and arguments in various areas as antisemitic across all camps in recent years. Three approaches will be used, which complement each other. The first is an unbounded concept of antisemitism based on the IHRA definition, the second is the specifically (West) German context (partly as a result of the first historians’ dispute), and the third is Eurocentrism, and here, the contribution of postcolonial theoretical concepts will be demonstrated.

Approach 1: unbounded concept of antisemitism based on the IHRA definition

In a number of cases, reference has already been made in the previous section to the fact that a very broad definition of Israel-related antisemitism was applied in the discursive conflicts, which is often based on the working definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) (2016). According to Thomas Haury, Israel-related antisemitism is a “detour

communication” that “circumvents the communication taboo of explicit anti-Jewish statements” by criticizing the state of Israel as a kind of substitute, but does so on the basis of antisemitic attitudes and projections (Haury 2024, 42f.). The IHRA defines antisemitism as “a certain perception of Jews that can express itself as hatred towards Jews. Antisemitism is directed in word or deed against Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, as well as against Jewish communal institutions or religious bodies” (2016). However, the “particular” perception is not defined in more detail, but instead illustrated with a series of examples, most of which concern the state of Israel. One of these examples of antisemitism is: “The denial of the Jewish people’s right to self-determination, for example by claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor” (IHRA 2016). The accusation of racism (and the related accusations of settler colonialism and apartheid state) is thus interpreted here as a denial of the right to self-determination of Jewish people. Despite the extensively documented evidence of these accusations, they are presented here as antisemitic and therefore unjustified. The possibility that Jewish self-determination could also be guaranteed in a state with full equality for Palestinian people is not considered. As a further example of antisemitism, the IHRA definition designates: “Comparisons of current Israeli policy with Nazi policy” (2016). It is therefore assumed that all comparisons of this kind must firstly be false, and secondly motivated by hatred of Jews – regardless of possible war crimes committed by the Israeli army or the fundamentally different balance of power in general (Jewish people as a defenseless minority in the Nazi regime versus the Jewish state as a superior military and occupying power in today’s Middle East conflict). According to the IHRA definition, there is also no need for a discussion about artistic freedom in connection with images from the *Guernica Gaza* series: they fulfil the definition of antisemitism according to the IHRA definition – at least if a comparison of the victims is inferred to be a comparison of the perpetrators. The possible instrumentalization of the definition for unbounded accusations of antisemitism becomes clear when, for example, it is implied that the entire Middle East conflict is characterized by (Israel-related) antisemitism (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 17). This suggests that hatred of Jewish people, rather than the Zionist settlement movement and competing claims to the Palestinian Mandate, are responsible for the conflict. In this way, all negotiated solutions can be ruled out; only the expulsion and annihilation of the other side will bring peace (Netanyahu 2024). In his report on the IHRA definition, antisemitism researcher Peter Ullrich comes to the following conclusion: “The attempt to solve problems of general conceptual clarification and universal practical applicability with the help of the ‘working definition of antisemitism’ must be regarded as an overall failure. The use of the ‘working definition of antisemitism’ cannot be recommended, above all due to its technical weaknesses, its deficient application practice, its

nevertheless partially binding legal status and its political instrumentalizability with problematic implications for freedom of opinion. ... [It is] in fact an instrument that invites arbitrariness. It can be used to curtail fundamental rights, especially freedom of expression, in relation to unpopular Israel-related positions” (Ullrich 2019, 21).

Approach 2: the specific (West) German historical context

As a second approach to understanding the relatively sudden onset of cross-camp and hegemonic opposition to postcolonial studies, I would like to cite the (West) German engagement with the crimes of National Socialism and the efforts, especially by liberals and leftists, to distance themselves from the crimes of the Nazis through a serious confrontation with this past and a corresponding political positioning (Neiman 2019). This took place only from the 1960s onward; Adenauer’s policy of reconciliation with Israel during the 1950s was geopolitically motivated and characterized by antisemitic stereotypes and can certainly not be considered a serious confrontation (Marx 2022). In contrast to the state-ordered anti-fascism of the GDR, critical distance from National Socialism and an unreserved rejection of antisemitism had to be “hard-won” (Conrad 2022, 35) in the FRG over decades, or rather fought for against resistance – a process that has not been fully completed to this day. I would like to mention four of the “battlefields” of this process as examples: (1) the speech by Federal President Weizsäcker in 1985, who for the first time as a high-ranking politician of the FRG characterized the end of the Second World War not as a defeat but as a liberation; (2) the (first) historians’ dispute, in which Habermas accused Nolte and other historians of trivializing the Holocaust because they placed it on a par with Stalin’s crimes or characterized it as a reaction to them, and countered their views with an affirmation of the singularity of the Holocaust (Neiman and Wildt 2022); (3) the exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, which was accompanied by counter-demonstrations everywhere (Reemtsma 2022); and (4) the controversy surrounding the book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* by political scientist Daniel Goldhagen (1996). These conflicts can be seen as cornerstones “for the establishment of a post-fascist consensus in Germany” (Spehr 1999, 95), which strongly influenced the politics of remembrance in reunified Germany. My thesis is that many liberals and leftists in this country have been socialized in these conflicts and have internalized the idea that questioning the singularity of the Holocaust and comparing it to other crimes against humanity (but also, as a consequence of the politics of remembrance, fundamentally questioning the existence of Israel) is a strategy of the political right that must be fended off at all costs

7 This may be related with new subject positions for migrant Germans without familial ties to the Holocaust.

from the progressive side in a politics of remembrance. In doing so, they fail to realize that the postcolonial side is not concerned with questioning this post-fascist or post-National Socialist consensus, but with extending it to other racist crimes and colonial genocides – in the sense of “never again must apply to all.”⁷ It is, so to speak, a misguided defensive reflex that is, in the context of the Middle East conflict, supported by the Israeli government, the Central Council of Jews in Germany, and other pro-Israeli actors to the best of their ability. Since 7 October in particular, this has been done, among other things, with the stylistic device of equating Hamas with the Nazis, or equating or at least parallelizing the first historians’ dispute with the second (Diner 2022, 77) – and also with the branding of postcolonial criticism of Israel as a settlement colony or apartheid state as antisemitic.

Approach 3: eurocentrism and colonial patterns

A third approach to understanding the cross-camp condemnation of postcolonial studies as antisemitic is Eurocentrism, from which liberals and leftists are not always free, not even from colonial patterns of thought and action. This can be seen in the indignant defense of the superiority of the West in both scientific and moral terms: “Those who think in a postcolonial manner regard empirics and rationalism not as ways of generating knowledge but clubs in the hands of a white, male ruling caste. This is obviously absurd. Artificial fertilizer and penicillin have saved millions of lives in Africa and Asia, despite being the product of Western research. And the Sharia is not getting better by refusing Western conceptions of rights. But the unconditional respect for everything which is not part of ‘Eurocentric thinking’ is one of postcolonialism’s central pillars – and the reason why its followers turn a blind eye to the worst of crimes” (Pfister 2023). “Obviously,” the West has invented science which benefits the whole world, its political concepts are benign, and opponents of colonialism also oppose reason and embrace crimes against humanity. One wonders why so little of all this became apparent in five centuries of European colonial rule (Plumelle-Uribe 2004; Shohat and Stam 1994).

Yet the Eurocentrism shows also in more specific patterns of argumentation that can be identified with the help of postcolonial theory. I would like to demonstrate this in the following.

The West and the backward Rest: One of the fundamental theorems of postcolonial studies assumes that the subject construction of the West as enlightened and progressive in the hegemonic discourse is dependent on the counter-image of a backward Other that needs to be civilized (Hall 1994, 173f.).

Especially in the context of the accusations of antisemitism made against documenta 15, voices were raised saying that one should not be surprised about antisemitism if responsibility for the exhibition was left to artists from the Global South. According to *Spiegel*, the fact that “the Germans” had given up “control” of the exhibition had led to the “greatest cultural-political catastrophe in the history of Documenta” (Knöfel 2022). So had the Europeans not entertained the curious idea that non-Europeans were mentally and morally capable of curating the world’s greatest art exhibition, all problems could have been avoided. Other contributions to this debate were also characterized by the contrast between the enlightened, antisemitism-conscious, morally superior self and the backward others, by an Othering.

This was also visible in the excessively harsh persecution of and police brutality against pro-Palestine protests and solidarity actions which was often targeting migrant populations in Berlin and other cities in a racist manner (Mauthofer and Grimm 2025, 161). The legitimation to “prevent antisemitism” allowed for civilizing violence against the backward other.

The West as the bearer of universal knowledge and universal norms: According to the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Europe” is implicitly the “theoretical subject” in the humanities and social sciences: “For generations, philosophers and social scientists have put forward theories which claim to be valid for the whole of humanity. However, these statements have been formulated [...] in relative and sometimes absolute ignorance of the experiences of the majority of humanity, that is, of those people who live in non-Western cultures” (Chakrabarty 2002, 283f.)

A similar attitude was also evident in the controversies surrounding documenta fifteen. In the end, the ad hoc committee that had been formed to provide expert scientific support and deal with the accusations of antisemitism against the postcolonial art exhibition consisted exclusively of people with a European or “Western” background. The only members with a non-Western background (and expertise in postcolonial studies), the colonial historian Facil Tesfaye and the Southeast Asian historian Elsa Clavé, who were later included, left the committee because they did not feel that their perspectives were represented there. This did not prevent the rest of the commission from trying to censor the politically controversial “Tokyo Reels” already during the documenta, and from drafting the final report without including any perspectives from the Global South (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 11; Detjen 2022). Their own ideas, values, and definitions (of what is and is not antisemitic) were assumed to be universal without engaging in a dialogue about different understandings of antisemitism. This was made possible by the assumption that the West was capable of recognizing and formulating universally valid norms on the basis of particular experience.

Hegemonic listening and ignoring: As the literary scholar Gayatri Spivak has shown using the example of an Indian freedom fighter whose suicide was misunderstood by her family, against all evidence, as the result of a tragic love story, certain patterns of perception are so well practiced that articulations by subalterns that contradict them are simply not heard or are reinterpreted as something else (Spivak 1993, 104).

Such cases can also be found in conflicts surrounding the antisemitism of postcolonial studies. Achille Mbembe’s multiple affirmations of Israel’s right to exist (e.g. “Israel’s right to exist is fundamental for the world’s balance,” Mbembe 2020) have (as shown above) simply been overlooked – or deliberately ignored – in the media debate. Cheema and Mendel (2020), authors usually regarded as coming from the liberal left, are suggesting that for Mbembe, it was “not Israeli policy from Sharon to Netanyahu that was the problem, but the sheer existence of the Jewish state” – while in the same text they quote Mbembe’s article in which he affirmed its right to exist.

Another example. The BDS call for a boycott is identified with the slogan “Don’t buy from Jews!”, which was a staple of National Socialist propaganda during the Third Reich, although it is explicitly directed against the state of Israel and not against Jewish people as such (CDU/CSU et al. 2019, 2).

Similarly, the call “Free Palestine from German guilt,” with which pro-Palestinian groups call on Germans not to pay for the guilt of National Socialism through unconditional solidarity with Israel and thus make the Palestinians pay for it, is lumped together with a “guilt-deflecting antisemitism” (Deitelhoff et al. 2023, 83, 89, 92), e.g. embodied by the far-right slogan “Stop the cult of guilt.” While the first statement does not question the guilt of the Germans per se (and is sometimes also advocated by Jewish Holocaust survivors [see Hass 2023]), the second is clearly aimed at defending Germany against accusations of guilt following the Holocaust. Another example. The slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” (Sayram 2024) is understood as an antisemitic call for genocide, although Israeli Holocaust researchers draw attention to the multitude of its interpretations, which clearly include a one-state solution with equal rights for Palestinians and Jews (Goldberg and Confino 2020). Further, the Ministry of the Interior declared the slogan to be a sign of the banned organizations Hamas and Samidoun, although it is much older than these. And in the context of reporting on documenta fifteen, the antisemitic figure in the artwork *People’s Justice* was reported on in at least a three-digit number of national newspaper articles, but in very few of them its actual subject – the indictment of the genocidal regime under Suharto (whom German Chancellor Kohl called his friend) – was even mentioned.⁸ The subalterns were unusually often ignored or misunderstood in the antisemitism conflicts.

Silencing: This term was used by the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot to describe how the historical event of a successful anti-colonial

8 One exception is Knöfel (2022).

revolution by enslaved black people in Haiti, which was unthinkable for contemporary people in Europe at the time, was strategically hushed up or silenced (Trouillot 2002).

The active prevention of the articulation of Palestinian (e.g. Al-Taher 2024) and postcolonial voices by means of countless disinvitations, performance bans, and dismissals with reference to the Bundestag’s BDS resolution goes one step further than being ignored. Among other things, the series of events on artistic freedom, racism, and antisemitism entitled “We Need to Talk” planned for documenta fifteen in May 2022 was cancelled after the Central Council of Jews criticized that it had not been involved in the planning (Albrecht 2022). A book discussion with Amos Goldberg, Bashir Bashir, and Charlotte Wiedemann entitled “Understanding the Pain of the Others,” planned by the Goethe-Institut in Tel Aviv, was also cancelled in November 2022 in response to the Israeli government’s protest (Poppe 2022). And last but not least, the exhibition on the Nakba – the expulsion of the Palestinian population as part of the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 – which was created in 2008 with funding from the Protestant Church, was not allowed to be shown at the Protestant Church Congress 2023 (before 7 October) without there being justified professional objections (Benz 2023).

As mentioned, the silencing also was manifest in the cancelling of numerous public talks by intellectuals, some of them Jewish, who were perceived as “too critical of Israel,” like Gessen, Fraser, or Hage. The warnings of a “new McCarthyism” articulated after the BDS resolution by Brumlik (2019) proved far-sighted indeed. The fear of being silenced or facing repercussions in the public climate after 7 October led to self-censorship among scholars on the Middle East in Germany, as a recent study has proven: 48 percent of the scholars stated that the threat to academic freedom has “significantly increased,” an additional 37 percent that it has “increased” (Grimm et al. 2025, 9).

Colonial difference: As early as 1955, Aimé Césaire argued that, from the perspective of “Western civilization,” Hitler’s unforgivable crime was not the crime against man per se, but “the crime against the white man,” the application of colonial practices to which previously only people in Europe’s colonies had been subjected in Europe (Césaire 1968, 12). He denounced the double standards and the different weighting of human lives, which led, among other things, to colonial genocides not being answered with a general declaration of human rights.

This pattern is also criticized in the Middle East conflict. While Israel’s right to exist is considered inviolable despite its violent founding history (Pappé 2006), a sovereign Palestinian state has always been and continues to be prevented, decades of occupation contrary to international law tolerated, and so is, according to the International Court of Justice, a possibly genocidal war supported by German arms deliveries (“Deutsche Rüstungsexporte nach Israel fast verzehnfacht” 2023). In the current Gaza war,

anthropologist Ghassan Hage recognizes “all the hallmarks of the colonial punitive expedition”: after the natives react to displacement and destruction of their livelihoods by murdering colonizers, the colonizers “use the most advanced killing techniques against a vastly inferior military force and proceed to a genocidal massacre with the aim of teaching the natives a lesson ‘they will never forget’. This is the way the colonizers have always mourned their very special dead” (Hage 2024, 181). The approximately 1,200 Israeli deaths on 7 October have since been “avenged” by around 71,000 Palestinian victims of the Gaza war (as of January 2026; Statista 2026).

Conclusion: a postcolonial perspective

With regard to the question of how the view that postcolonial studies are antisemitic could become hegemonic across different political camps, the approaches mentioned here (unbounded concept of antisemitism, historical context of the FRG, Eurocentrism and colonial patterns) can contribute to understanding the constellation. In particular, the perspective of postcolonial theory proves to be productive for understanding its own marginalization and the current discursive constellation: “one should not talk of the rope in the hangman’s house, otherwise one harbours resentment,” Adorno (1977, 555) once wrote. In our context, this could translate to: one should not talk about the legacies of colonialism or the Nakba in Israel, otherwise one may be accused not only of resentment, but also of antisemitism – few people like to be confronted with the blind spots of their own self-image. And while postcolonial and decolonial perspectives have gained increasing recognition in the last two decades, this has usually been confined to the crimes of colonialism of the past – discussing neocolonial exploitation in present-day global capitalism (Hickel, Hanbury Lemos, and Barbour 2024) seems out of the question even for progressive governments (Ziai 2025). And discussing Israeli crimes and colonial practices seems even much more sensitive in today’s German public debate.

However, a postcolonial perspective should be aware, with Stuart Hall, that clear lines between good and evil are difficult to draw, and reject the politics of binary oppositions (Hall 1996, 222). For our topic, this would mean, in my opinion, that the differences between European and Zionist colonialism, above all antisemitism as a motive of the latter, must not be ignored, just like the unique aspects of the Holocaust, for example in the form of the bureaucratic-industrial machinery of extermination. With regard to the Middle East conflict, the share of Arab actors (including Hamas) in the suffering of the Palestinian people should of course not go unmentioned, but

9 Gabriel Winant (2023) has pointed to the instrumentalization of grief for Israeli victims as a weapon, designating Israel as “a machine that turns grief into power” and

also the suffering of the Jewish or Israeli people through terrorist attacks and, last but not least, the massacre and hostage-taking on 7 October. The asymmetry of the conflict and taking sides with the side that is militarily inferior and more legitimate under international law must not lead to a lack of empathy with Israeli victims, as in some examples of vulgar postcolonialism on social media.⁹ From a postcolonial perspective, ways out of the violence are only conceivable if an understanding of the pain of the victims of the other side (Wiedemann 2022) and a solidary linking of the narratives of suffering (Rothberg 2021) take the place of a competition between victims¹⁰ and lead to empathy and justice beyond colonial difference.

Disclosure statement

pointing out the political dimension of mourning, I would certainly agree to that. Yet to conclude not to mourn Israeli civilians appears to me – and here I side with Leifer (2023) – morally disastrous and politically rekindling the divisions that racists and nationalists impose on humanity which have to be overcome.

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10 Consequently, this would also have to include refraining from comparing casualty figures, which was done here to illustrate the asymmetry of the conflict.

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