

Lars Rensmann

The Politics and Ethics of Anti-Antisemitism: Lessons from the Frankfurt School

I Introduction: The Frankfurt School and Antisemitism in Our Time

In 1941, Max Horkheimer wrote:

As long as antisemitism exists as a constant undercurrent in social life, its influence reaches all groups of the population and it can always be rekindled by suitable propaganda.¹

The Frankfurt School philosophers and sociologists, in particular Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Leo Löwenthal, have dedicated a considerable part of their scholarly work and social research to the study of anti-Jewish politics—its forms, causes, and implications for critical thinking after the Holocaust. These scholars have thereby immensely contributed to our understanding of modern antisemitism and the origins of anti-Jewish politics in the nineteenth and twentieth century.² However, in so doing, they have also grounded new ethics and politics of anti-antisemitism, even if so, in part, *ex negativo*. Reconstructing central explicit and implicit arguments by these Critical Theorists, this article argues that the Frankfurt School provides important resources for the analysis of contemporary antisemitism but also for critical political and ethical responses to the persistent legacy of judeophobia after the Holocaust. Even though written in a different age—the context of mid-twentieth century “crises of humankind” and their aftermath—the thinkers offer some still relevant impulses, delineating the meaning of the struggle against antisemitism for democratic societies and

Note: Parts of this essay are a reproduction of the author’s *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

1 M. Horkheimer, “Research Project on Anti-Semitism,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 125.

2 See for a comprehensive analysis Rensmann, *The Politics of Unreason*; see also J. Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

ways to confront the ongoing, and once again resurgent, challenge of antisemitism in our time.

Proceeding in three steps, this article addresses some key “lessons” that can be drawn from engaging with Frankfurt School authors (most prominently the aforementioned three scholars), which can serve as a starting point for the discussion of ethical and political responses to the contemporary threat of antisemitism in democratic societies and beyond. Against the backdrop of, first, a brief reconstruction of some of the major analytical insights developed by the Frankfurt School, I elaborate on the task of enlightening about the causes of antisemitism and antisemitic myths. This “enlightenment project” entails understanding and analyzing a variety of new or accelerated and modernized forms (what I call “modernized antisemitism”)—including hatred of the Jewish state of Israel and Israeli Jews, as is manifest in ideologies of anti-Zionist antisemitism, which was initially radicalized by the Nazis in the 1920s; post-Holocaust equations of Jews and Israelis with Nazis; or the phenomenon of antisemitism denial.³

I will then outline, second, some ethical implications—though largely confined to “negative ethics”—from the Frankfurt School’s sophisticated understanding of both the general features of antisemitism as resentments against and projections toward a minority, and the particular features of antisemitism as a modern world explanation and conspiracy myth. The negative ethical response proposed by Adorno also entails, unconditionally, reflecting on the fact that the hitherto unimaginable crime of the Shoah has happened, and how it happened. The monstrous human failure and the catastrophe point to the collective and individual responsibility to make sure, in Adorno’s “new categorical imperative,” that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, that anything similar must not happen again,⁴ just as it points to the particular threats to the Jewish community and the fact that Jews were systematically persecuted and murdered, that *it did already happen*.

This negative ethics leads, third, to the foundations of—partly unacknowledged—“positive” political and legal responses to antisemitism in domestic society, politics, and international relations. In light of the Frankfurt School’s self-reflexive critique of authoritarian politics and antisemitic “politics of unreason,” I hereby sketch out some political and legal arguments and reflections that prepare a more robust response to the current threat of antisemitism. Such a response entails a defense of the rule of law and institutions of liberal democracy

³ On antisemitism denial, see M. Schwarz-Friesel and J. Reinharz, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind: The Language of Jew-Hatred in Contemporary Germany* (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 338 ff.

⁴ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 365.

as well unconditional solidarity with factual truth: The Frankfurt School thinkers recognize that in a demagogic populist and resurgent authoritarian political context, as in today's increasingly "post-liberal," "post-democratic," and "post-factual" public environments around the globe, antisemitism can especially flourish and become yet again a powerful social force.

II Understanding Antisemitism: Mapping Features, Origins, and Theoretical Frameworks

Turning to the Frankfurt School for philosophically grounding an ethics and politics of anti-antisemitism means, first and foremost, adopting their idea that it is important to fully recognize antisemitism as a socio-political force, in its blunt and its more coded forms. With the rise of liberal democracies after the Holocaust and the age of totalitarian antisemitism promoted by governments, Adorno warned of a shift from overt racial anti-Jewish propaganda to "innuendo" and more subtle verbal manifestations in public discourse. "The lure of innuendo," Adorno claimed, "grows with its vagueness. It allows for an unchecked play of the imagination and invites all sorts of speculation."⁵ Demagogues may refer to "dark forces" determined to "undermine" the nation's culture, "and the audience at once understands that his remarks are directed against the Jews."⁶

But for Adorno and his colleagues, the antisemitic "lure" could only so effectively be ignited and mobilized because of its character as an undercurrent socio-cultural phenomenon and because of its socio-psychological attractiveness in an inevitably complex and demanding modern world also shaped by superfluous, seemingly incomprehensible, and irrational forms of social domination. Critical Theorists researched and reflected upon both the societal origins of antisemitism—socio-economic, cultural, social, psychological—as well as the particular political and public conditions that allowed for antisemitism to become such a powerful ideological force in society, in other words: the political conditions inductive to antisemitic dynamics and norms. Moreover, "the underlying antisemitism of our cultural climate" persisted also in democratic societies, Adorno argued, and "proves in the more extreme cases to be stronger than either conscience

⁵ T. W. Adorno, *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 54.

⁶ T. W. Adorno, "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda," in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. S. Crook (New York: Routledge, 1994), 162–71.

or official democratic values.”⁷ The multi-faceted project of enlightening about the origins and conditions of antisemitism in the midst of modern society constitutes, in the view of the Critical Theorists, a primary, critically important task in order to combat antisemitism. This project finds its most advanced expression in the “Elements of Antisemitism” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁸

In Critical Theory’s view, modern antisemitism should hereby be conceptualized as a *distinctly anti-modern* ideology (or fragments thereof) that is both similar to and different from other group-specific discriminations. For the Critical Theorists, to be sure, antisemitism is not an entirely new or “modern” phenomenon. Rather, it has a long historical trajectory reaching back to antiquity, and it always included conspiracy myths and the projective denigration of Jews in society.⁹ Modern antisemitism absorbs centuries-old myths, religious discriminations, prejudices, and historically transmitted as well as free-floating projections. Yet, for the Frankfurt School thinkers *modern antisemitism* is also profoundly shaped by political modernity. In particular, it serves to “explain” and fantastically personify the latter’s abundant contradictions. In that sense, antisemitism functions as an empty vessel, a container for all kinds of projections of unfulfilled wishes and societal problems of the modern world. In the modern antisemitic imago, Jews control both capitalism and are made responsible for its nagging critique (as Jews are especially identified with money and the sphere of circulation, which people tend to make responsible for exploitation in a “socially necessary illusion,” in contrast to allegedly “productive capital” in the sphere of production);¹⁰ Jews are construed as all too civilized, too progressive, yet also all too uncivilized; they are regarded as “both backward and too advanced, like and unlike, shrewd and stupid”;¹¹ they are charged with being too submissive and too unyielding; too individualistic and too much focused on their closed community; seeking world domination and being all too powerful, yet ultimately physically weak and cowardly:

The fantasy of the conspiracy of lascivious Jewish bankers who finance Bolshevism is a sign of innate powerlessness, the good life an emblem of happiness . . . The banker and the in-

7 T. W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 608.

8 M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. G. Schmid Noerr and trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 137–72.

9 For the history of this “longest hatred,” see especially R. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010).

10 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 143.

11 Ibid., 153.

tellectual, money and mind, exponents of circulation, are the disowned wishful image of those mutilated by power.¹²

The Frankfurt School thinkers thereby point to both *general dimensions and particular elements*. The former suggest links between modern judeophobia and other hatreds or group-focused social resentments¹³—a general and generalizable stereotypical or objectifying logic vis-à-vis minorities and those who are identified as different from the social norm. The latter call attention to the need to reflect on the specificity of antisemitism as a modern political ideology and socio-psychological as well as cultural undercurrent. It is not, in the view of the Frankfurt School researchers, a mere prejudice like others. Rather, antisemitism constitutes a particular narratives serving particular socio-psychological and political purposes, as much as it grows out of more general trends, conditions, and objectifying ways of thinking. Both the general and the particular need to be recognized and understood in order to effectively combat antisemitism.

While the Critical Theorists explicitly draw connections between the general and the particular, at times they also, to be sure, oscillate between interpretations emphasizing either. However, Critical Theory ultimately provides a framework that allows for recognizing and theorizing both general dimensions of anti-Jewish resentments, analogous to other forms of racism, and structural principles social functions, and ideological shapes that are specific to modern antisemitism. Modern judeophobia, as pointed out by the Frankfurt School, is fundamentally contradictory. It incorporates century-old stereotypes yet it is almost infinitely mutable. It serves as a profoundly irrational container for free-floating projections and “objectifications run wild.” Antisemitism works well, one may add following the insights of the Frankfurt School, in the actual presence of Jewish minorities or Jews as political agents (as in the state of Israel); yet it works

¹² Ibid., 141.

¹³ Understanding the distinctiveness of antisemitism does not imply that there are no similarities between judeophobia and other racist or misogynist projections. The work of the Frankfurt School scholars points to both specific and more general features of antisemitism that can also be found in resentments directed against other minorities or women. Yet there are distinctions to be made. Racist and misogynist ideologemes usually do not portray women or minorities as the power controlling the global economy and the personified force behind imperialism, capitalism and “rapacious capital,” Wall Street, or ISIS. Conspiracy ideologies tend to directly point to fantasies about Jewish power, media, and lobbies, just as antisemitic constructs portray Jews or “Zionists” as the main obstacle to human emancipation and world peace. Cf. for instance K. Stögnier, *Antisemitismus und Sexismus: Historisch-gesellschaftliche Konstellationen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014).

even better without them. Projective in nature, it has nothing to do with actions by *actual* Jews. In that, to be sure, it is similar to other forms of prejudice.

Thus antisemitism could in principle victimize any minority, or could be replaced by other projective fantasies, ideologies, resentments, and objects, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest:

And just as, depending on the constellation, the victims are interchangeable: vagrants, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, so each of them can replace the murderer, in the same blind lust for killing, as soon as he feels the power of representing the norm.¹⁴

However, both authors also recognize that in reality, the image of Jews has never been replaced. Adorno and Horkheimer are aware that the social ideology and the force of antisemitism, past and present, old, modern, and modernized, continues to target Jews. And Jews are its primary victims.

In Critical Theory's understanding modern antisemitism, while ultimately being an empty vessel for all possible charges and fantasies, historically absorbs a set of specific historically disseminated features and tropes, of which some especially striking ones analyzed by the Frankfurt School should be mentioned here. First, it constitutes a topological worldview, separating Jews not *just* as "others" (or discriminating against them as a minority among others) but also viewing them as singular "enemies of humankind." This trope, that Jews are a group separate from the rest of humankind and responsible for preventing universal human salvation, can be traced back to ancient Christian antisemitism. Since the early years of modern antisemitism and culminating in Nazi ideology, "the Jew" was then singled out as a singular "destroyer of peace between the peoples."¹⁵ Second, antisemitism is always also a conspiracy myth and functions as such. It is generally only a small step from conspiracy myths to antisemitism. In this myth, Jews tend to appear as a hidden, cunning, powerful, cosmopolitan, globally operating cabal running the modern world and pulling the strings behind all that goes wrong, dragging countries into wars and constantly conspiring to advance a ruthless world conquest. Third, antisemitism objectifies Jews as representatives of the impenetrable sphere of circulation—money and finance, global trade, "rapacious capital," lawyers and salesmen, intellect and media, all of which are allegedly in control of the world or conspiring to take control of the world. Antisemitism thereby also identifies in its image of Jews all presumably abstract aspects and the inscrutable complexities of modern society. Fourth, modern antisemitism implies a fundamental, reified dichotomy between us and

¹⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 140.

¹⁵ J. Streicher, *Der Stürmer*, October 17, 1940.

them, or people and the (hidden, evil) elite. It thereby also implies the Manichean counter-image of idealized, autochthonous, “natural” ethnic or religious communities that would provide unlimited collective gratification and happiness if only purged from the negative influence of “the Jews.” Based on binary oppositions between the “good people” or “good gentiles” versus the “evil Jews,” or “humanity” and against “enemies of humanity” (the aforementioned trope that is also very popular in today’s anti-Zionist discourses), judeophobia therefore often combines extreme nationalist aspirations and megalomania with paranoid delusions of collective persecution.¹⁶ And fifth, accusing Jews of ritual murder and other grave crimes, antisemitism construes Jews as driven by insatiable, “barbaric” desires to ruthlessly fulfill their (economic) interests and (sexual) desires, even to poison, kill, and eat children; and, they are seemingly even ready to “abuse” in bad faith their own history of persecution. A persecution for which, antisemitic myth-making suggests, the Jews themselves bear responsibility.

The key to understanding these features and functions, the Frankfurt School shows us, is in analyzing the social and political afterlife of antisemitic resentments and their rationalizations—and to understand the political-psychological functions they serve as a kind of anti-enlightening “psychoanalysis in reverse,” in Leo Löwenthal’s phrase, which obscures and mobilizes rather than illuminates one’s unconscious feelings, traumas, fantasies, aggressions, and projections.¹⁷ As the Critical Theorists suggest, antisemitism is a specific form of “rationalized idiosyncrasy” that is ultimately directed against freedom and difference as such—against the very idea of “a better state in which people could be different without fear.”¹⁸

Critical Theory’s conception of the intimate links between an *anti-democratic syndrome*, authoritarian social conditions and politics, hatred of difference, and antisemitism also deserves particular attention today for ethics and politics of anti-antisemitism. Just as empirical studies have shown time and again that authoritarian attitudes and glorifications of authoritarian rule strongly correlate with homophobia, misogyny, and racism, they also continue to especially strong-

¹⁶ See Rensmann, *The Politics of Unreason*; modernized antisemitism often employs an equally stark dichotomy between the allegedly kind-natured, “good Palestinians” and the inherently “evil Israelis,” no matter what real actors of each group are actually doing or not doing.

¹⁷ Leo Löwenthal, cited in M. Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School, 1923–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 173.

¹⁸ T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 103.

ly correlate with antisemitism.¹⁹ The Frankfurt School theorists hereby identify underlying socio-psychological conditions forming an authoritarian syndrome reinforced in political modernity. This diagnosis seems to be regaining relevance, or at least merits renewed attention in the current age of global Islamism, new authoritarianism, and the full force of authoritarian populism—indeed an authoritarian revolt—now affecting Western democracies from America to Europe.²⁰

After Auschwitz, the Frankfurt School's imperative of critical enlightenment about the nature of antisemitism also implies understanding "secondary" motives of antisemitism, that is: forms of antisemitism motivated by the wish to downplay the Holocaust due to related, unprocessed feelings of (national) guilt and discredited national identity inducing unconscious defense mechanisms that can take antisemitic forms. Externalizing and projecting such guilt onto the image of Jews by identifying this historical guilt with them and making them responsible for the memory of past atrocities committed against them—instead of openly dealing with those atrocities—motivates, according to Adorno, such "*secondary antisemitism*."²¹ Using antisemitic clichés, Jews are hereby attacked and morally devalued for remembering, willingly or not, the history of the Holocaust: For instance, if it is claimed that "Jews use their own persecution for their own political and material purposes" or to "legitimate Israel," or if (-Israeli) Jews are compared with Nazis and called "today's perpetrators" committing awful crimes against (Palestinian) "victims of the victims." This secondary dimension identified by the Frankfurt School, and the underlying mechanism motivating it, may be also be at play outside of the German, post-Nazi context of historical guilt which Adorno analyzed it. On case of this may be called *post-colonial antisemitism*, for example in the UK: animosity and hatred against the Jewish state of Israel that is present in England—and often especially public in the radical left—could be interpreted as also motivated by secondary motives related to unprocessed, or continuously haunting, feelings of national guilt for colonial crimes. Jews living in Israel many of whom either escaped from the Hol-

19 See for instance A. Zick, C. Wolf, B. Küpper et al., "The Syndrome of Group-Focused Enmity: The Interrelation of Prejudices Tested with Multiple Cross-Sectional and Panel Data," *Social Issues* 64, no. 2 (2008): 363–83.

20 See L. Rensmann, "The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in the Digital Age," *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 123–35.

21 T. W. Adorno, "Zur Bekämpfung des Antisemitismus heute," in *Kritik: Kleine Schriften zur Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 105–33. See also L. Rensmann, "Guilt, Resentment, and Post-Holocaust Democracy: The Frankfurt School's Analysis of 'Secondary Antisemitism' in the Group Experiment and Beyond," *Antisemitism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 4–37.

ocaust or violent exclusion across the Middle East, are then identified and blamed as the (new) “colonizers” or even “the worst colonizers” perpetrating a genocide against Palestinians by means of “settler colonialism.” In so doing, the history of British colonialism and related guilt is relativized and delegated to the Jews in the Middle East.

Finally, as initially indicated and related to this last point, Adorno points to the need for ongoing, self-reflective critical enlightenment vis-à-vis modernized or coded variations of antisemitism in democracies and beyond, which Adorno calls “crypto-antisemitism” (and what I call *modernized antisemitism*):

This crypto-antisemitism is a function of the authority that stands behind the prohibition of openly antisemitic articulations. However, this concealed position contains a dangerous potential of its own . . . Whoever espouses this belief, this rumor, gives the impression from the start of belonging to a secret, truthful community that is suppressed by the superficial structures of the society.²²

Modernized antisemitism features a variety of forms of hatred of the Jewish state of Israel (often accompanied with the trope that criticism of Israel is “suppressed” or “taboo” in society). They include demonizing the state as illegitimate and particularly evil or equating Israel and Israelis with Nazism, as well as other new forms of antisemitism rationalization and denial. The latter is most frequently applied when anti-Jewish stereotypes occur in the context of discussions about Israel. Max Horkheimer already observed in 1969 that anti-Zionism provided a (thin) screen for both neo-Nazis and Communists.²³ Monika Schwarz-Friesel and Jehuda Reinharz calls this the “Israelization of antisemitic discourse.”²⁴ Anti-Jewish myths are applied to Israel and Israelis, and when called out, their antisemitic character is frequently denied as “only criticisms of Israel” that “must be allowed” (as if criticism of Israeli governments has been banned anywhere in the world). Such denial can entail charges of bad faith against Jews who allegedly exploit the problem of “antisemitism” and their own persecution when they address anti-Israel antisemitism, and allegedly use even the Holocaust for their own collective interests (or to justify Israeli policies).²⁵ However, neither the theory of secondary antisemitism nor the modernization claim should be overstretched in this context. It is important to remember that the widespread use of pseudo-cosmopolitan claims and tropes against Jews and Israel, portraying “the Zionists” as *unique* threats to world peace and human rights

²² Adorno, “Zur Bekämpfung des Antisemitismus heute,” 109.

²³ Horkheimer, quoted in Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School*, 140.

²⁴ Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind*, 192ff.

²⁵ See D. Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2018).

violators can also be traced back to centuries-old myths charging Jews with being enemies of humankind, or of “enlightened mankind.” Moreover, today’s widespread anti-Zionist antisemitism was first part and parcel of and radicalized by the Nazis in the 1920s. Alfred Rosenberg wrote an entire book attacking “Zionism,” and Adolf Hitler focused in his programmatic speech of August 1920, “Why we are Antisemites,” on attacking the “Zionist state,” allegedly designed to serve as “a spiritual center” for Jewish world conspiracies, and as nothing but the last, complete institution of their “international dirty tricks, and from there everything should be directed.”²⁶

Intuitively, Horkheimer and Adorno knew quite well that the claim that there are “no more antisemites” after Auschwitz, as Horkheimer and Adorno provocatively predicted in the seventh thesis of the *Elements of Antisemitism*, which also implies that virtually no one any longer identifies with every antisemite rather aggressively but denies being antisemitic, would possibly not hold in the face of the strong socio-cultural forces and lingering causes of antisemitism they described. This claim is by now also more than seventy years old. While few today would openly say they are antisemites when they make antisemitic claims about Jews, antisemitism has remained a societal undercurrent all along, and antisemitism has neither ever fully dissipated, nor been displaced by something else.

III Anti-Antisemitism after Auschwitz: Ethical Reflections

That antisemitism never went away even after Auschwitz, that it remains a threat that we will need to face in the present and most likely in the future, and that from now on it will always be a possibility that Auschwitz can repeat itself: these observations and insights have consequences for all ethical reflections—and for anti-antisemitism as an ethical imperative. As indicated in the introduction, in response to the Holocaust Adorno argued that a new categorical was forced upon humankind, namely that “Auschwitz must not be repeated, nothing similar should happen.” This is the constitutive backdrop for Adorno’s negative ethics and moral philosophy—and much of his work—after Auschwitz, as origi-

²⁶ See A. Rosenberg, *Der staatsfeindliche Zionismus* (Hamburg: Deutsche Völkische Verlagsanstalt, 1922); A. Hitler, “Warum sind wir Antisemiten?” in R. H. Phelps, “Hitlers ‘grundlegende’ Rede über den Antisemitismus,” *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 16, no. 4 (1968): 405–6.

nally and persuasively elaborated by Gerhard Schweppenhäuser.²⁷ Just as understanding antisemitism and its social meaning, such ethics entails several general and particular dimensions. On the one hand, this negative categorical imperative points to critical resources of a Jewish cosmopolitan ethics, grounded in a universalism that negatively reformulates the positive Kantian cosmopolitan idea by taking the indescribable suffering of Auschwitz as a starting point of ethical reflection. Individual and collective suffering, genocide and crimes against humanity hereby form the negative—even absolutely negative—basis for a general, indisputable, non-negotiable, that is, *categorical* ethical imperative: to advance human rights and to prevent genocides, anywhere and for good. On the other hand, Adorno's categorical imperative also contains and specifically points to anti-antisemitism: the need to prevent the paranoid politics, delusions, exclusions, and ultimately violence *targeting Jews*. Their persecutions should never happen again. But they do: anti-Jewish ideologies, regimes, and violence against Jews remains a reality in the twenty-first century, even if the monstrous crimes in Auschwitz have not been repeated.

Similar to the analytical level, both the general and the particular are inter-related in Adorno's and the Frankfurt School's work, concerning ethical imperatives and ethical failures: Both universal ethical claims and specific consequences, or moral commitments in relation to the particular persecuted group of Jews, are betrayed by antisemitism; for instance, when double standards are employed in relation to one group only, and Jews or Israel are singled out as criminal, at times cloaked in the language of "human rights," or when human rights violations, which abundantly happen in this world today, in Syria, in Russia, in Pakistan etc. are ignored. Another example of this link between anti-Zionist antisemitism and double standards refers to ethnic nationalism: if *only* the Jewish state is blamed for it, while the diverse, pluralistic, and multi-ethnic character of Israeli society is ignored, and ethnic nationalism does not appear to be a problem elsewhere in the region. The contradictions, hyperbolic speech, and anti-universalistic use of human rights vocabulary from the contemporary *Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)* movement, which ignores all human rights violations by Hamas against Jews and Palestinians, to the UN Human Rights Commission²⁸ show the nature of a widespread anti-Jewish pseudo-cosmopolitanism that only allows for an outcry about Palestinian suffering when Jews or Israelis are the alleged perpetrators but remains consistently silent if Pal-

²⁷ See G. Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. T. Huhn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 328–53.

²⁸ See recently A. Feuerherdt and F. Markl, *Vereinte Nationen gegen Israel: Wie die UNO den jüdischen Staat delegitimiert* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2018).

estinians are murdered by others, for instance in the Syrian “death camp” (a term used by Ban Ki-moon) of Yarmouk.

A key element of an ethical response after Adorno’s negative ethics is thus the development of self-reflective standards, sensibility and senses, and to recognize and address antisemitism (and racism) wherever and however it appears in this world—to name, address, and respond to antisemitism (and racism) wherever antisemitism (and racism) occur. While the origins and agents of antisemitism and racism can vary—they can be multiple, distinct, or overlapping—differences of causes and perpetrators should have no impact whatsoever on the ethical critique and refusal of all forms of antisemitism. Identifying or qualifying a social phenomenon, violent act, or subtle discursive denigration as antisemitic should not be less rigorous if the agents of such antisemitism come from a discriminated group, or an objectively antisemitic expression is allegedly subjectively not “intended” to be directed against Jews. Following Adorno, the analysis of different causes should not be ethically confused with a denial or downplaying of antisemitism. Yet this happens quite frequently when antisemitic discourses and violent acts are directed against Israel or Israelis. Antisemitism is antisemitism, and it needs to be confronted as such: the collective denigration, defamation, discrimination against Jews that includes the use of anti-Jewish tropes and stereotypes. Adorno emphasized early on the need to decipher the coded, subtle, modernized forms and antisemitic innuendo at play after Auschwitz, and the pressing need to speak up in the face of antisemitism in all contexts.²⁹ In Adorno’s view, antisemitism needs to be called out as such no matter what different causes and motives are at play. In reality, however, even today antisemitism often remains unrecognized, unacknowledged, downplayed, or rationalized as being something else, such as “legitimate protest.” This denial and rationalization, Adorno reminds us, enables antisemitism to grow unhampered and continue to seize the public imagination time and again.

Apart from radical-right groups and movements on the fringes of society, we, luckily, by now hardly hear laments about an overuse or abuse of “illegitimate racism charges” in bad faith—even though with the rise of radical-right populist actors and movement parties, such racism denial may soon celebrate a comeback.³⁰ By now and by and large, racism—including more subtle cultural rac-

²⁹ See T. W. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89–104.

³⁰ To be sure, as with almost any social phenomenon, there are cases where inappropriate use of racism claims do exist, for instance when students lament “racist cultural appropriations” when a cafeteria serves the wrong kind of ciabatta, or when any criticism of Islamism is por-

ism—has been broadly recognized as a persistent menace to democratic society that needs to be tackled, and when minorities and others raise the ongoing problem of racist exclusions, this is increasingly—though certainly not sufficiently—the subject of public attention. However, the charge of bad faith, of “overstretching” the term and illegitimate charges, is almost ubiquitous whenever Jews raise the issue of antisemitism or anti-Zionist antisemitism. This denial, which constitutes a profound ethical problem, reproduces the old antisemitic myth of Jews instrumentalizing antisemitism for their political and material interests, or seeking to exploit their own persecution. The aforementioned ubiquitous charge of “bad faith” motivating unjustified antisemitism accusations by Jews, as David Hirsh has shown in the case of the UK,³¹ is virtually without empirical evidence; many analyses of debates in continental Europe indicate the same.³² It is a chimerica that constitutes an ethical, discriminatory betrayal to universalism, like the related, equally ubiquitous antisemitic myth that Jewish lobbies control the media, the public, and therefore it is “taboo to criticize Israel”—while the Jewish state is, in fact, from the UN to the international public, arguably the most criticized country in the world, despite its tiny size and the limited scope of the conflict with its neighbors. Just like cultural racism, *cultural and institutional antisemitism* should be publicly criticized and condemned, where Jews or Israel as the “Jew among the states” are exclusively singled out, targeted, discriminated, defamed—on the UN level, in domestic and international public discourse, in national and transnational movements.

One of the biggest ethical challenges in relation to antisemitism today, following Adorno’s insights, is therefore the widespread tendency to deny antisem-

trayed as “Islamophobic racism.” See on the former C. Friedersdorf, “A Food Fight at Oberlin College,” *The Atlantic*, December 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/the-food-fight-at-oberlin-college/421401/>. On the latter see M. Walzer, “Islamism and the Left,” *Dissent*, Winter 2015, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/islamism-and-the-left>.

31 David Hirsh does a great job of analyzing manifold variations of this theme of antisemitism denial turning into an antisemitic charge. Jews and antisemitism scholars are thereby often attacked for allegedly not being “nuanced.” When Jews raise the issue of antisemitism, Hirsh shows, they are charged with allegedly really doing so for hidden and dishonest ulterior motives. Hirsh calls this the “Livingston formula.” See Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism*; see also R. Fine and P. Spencer, *Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

32 R. A. Elman, *The European Union, Antisemitism, and the Politics of Denial* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); P.-A. Taguieff, *Rising from the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2004); L. Rensmann and J. H. Schoeps, “Politics and Resentment: Examining Antisemitism and Counter-Cosmopolitanism in the European Union and Beyond,” in *Politics and Resentment: Antisemitism and Counter-Cosmopolitanism in the European Union*, ed. L. Rensmann and J. H. Schoeps (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3–79.

itism or define antisemitism away, to downplay it when it is experienced and raised by Jews and non-Jews, to attribute ulterior self-interested motives when the problem of antisemitism is addressed, and to keep silent in a climate of intimidation that has spread alongside eroding boundaries of public discourse. Today more often than not, those who address the problem are targeted by portraying them as allegedly swinging “the antisemitism bat” against innocuous “Israel critics” or “upset Muslim youth” in bad faith. Similarly, it is frequently suggested in public discourse that it is only “criticism of Israel” when synagogues and Jews are attacked with Molotov cocktails in Germany or France; when influential publicists like the German journalist Jakob Augstein claim that the Israeli government would keep “the entire world” in “leading strings” of an escalating war song,³³ or if the former Austrian foreign minister Karin Kneissl claims that Zionism is like the German blood and soil ideology, thus implicitly equating Israel with Nazi Germany.³⁴

The fear or failure to recognize and speak up against antisemitism even in our democratic societies, as well as the active denial of antisemitism by some policy-makers, judges, publicists, and even scholars after Auschwitz are, in the Frankfurt School’s lens, thus significant ethical failures of our time. So is the current inability to prevent or stop the erosion of antisemitic boundaries (alongside other collapsing boundaries in relation to resentments in civil discourse), the exponential growth of verbal antisemitism by means of social media and transformed public spheres, and the resurgence of antisemitic violence.

The fact that Jewish schools, restaurants, synagogues, and institutions must be protected by police in Europe epitomizes this ethical failure of post-Holocaust societies. That racial, eliminationist antisemitism has regained public spaces, and that Jews are attacked as “pigs” on European streets: this is a situation that many have thought to be unthinkable after what happened in Auschwitz but not so according to the Critical Theorists some fifty years ago.³⁵ This ethical challenge—the collective and individual failure to stop the resurgence of antisemitism in verbal, public, and physically violent forms and a lack of solidarity

33 Quoted in “Was hat Augstein eigentlich geschrieben?” Publikative.Org, April 1, 2013, <http://www.publikative.org/2013/01/04/was-hat-augstein-eigentlich-geschrieben/> [no longer available].

34 Quoted in M. Engelberg, “Don’t fixate on the Freedom Party,” *Haaretz*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-in-austria-muslims-not-nazis-are-the-real-anti-semitic-threat-1.5629027>.

35 See O. Aderet, “Anti-Semitic Slogans Chanted at Berlin Protest against Israel’s Gaza Operation,” *Haaretz*, July 18, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-protesters-in-berlin-come-out-jews-cowardly-pigs-1.5255993>.

with the victims of antisemitism—is thus also an eminently *political* challenge. The Frankfurt School thinkers understood this as well.

IV From Ethics to the Politics of Anti-Semitism: Political Implications after the Frankfurt School

It seems to be no coincidence that contemporary authoritarian political regimes, denying public freedom, civil rights, and democratic participation in public life, also often engage in politics of hate against ethnic minorities, and perpetuate Jewish conspiracy myths in particular—just as these regimes tend to simultaneously agitate against or even persecute gays and lesbians and deny women's rights. It is also no coincidence that antisemitism constitutes the ideological core of Islamist aspirations, which are simultaneously profoundly authoritarian, misogynistic, and driven by hatred against the deviation from the conformist norm. Anti-Jewish hatred and authoritarianism, the Frankfurt School suggests, arguably benefit from societal dependencies and forms of irrational domination, unfree conditions, and weakened public and private autonomy that are also a problem in increasingly post-liberal democratic societies. Yet they are especially engendered under conditions of authoritarian regimes, with their state-sanctioned political violence and unhampered propaganda while controlling the media.

In light of the Frankfurt School, political thinking and action therefore need to advance a rigorous critique of authoritarian social conditions, political regimes, and movements that undermine or violate human rights and dignity and public freedom. More often than not, they simultaneously promote antisemitism and engender what Adorno calls the “rumour about the Jews,”³⁶ whereas countries with robust democratic institutions and liberal constitutional frameworks granting civil rights are less susceptible to antisemitism and antisemitic violence. Politically speaking, the survival of democratic rule and of Jews is, according to the Frankfurt School, strongly correlated. Totalitarianism, on the contrary, translates into the threat of total persecution of Jews, “means knowing no limits, not allowing for any breathing spell, conquest with absolute domination, complete extermination of the chosen foe.”³⁷ Critical Theory's models and in-

³⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 110.

³⁷ Adorno, “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda.”

sights show how much such regimes and movements threaten the very condition of possibility of a humane, free, and just society that could be free of, or at least significantly reduce, antisemitism. Ethics and politics of anti-antisemitism, it can be concluded from that argument, are always also ethics and politics opposing all forms of authoritarian rule suppressing civil rights and democracy, as well as repressive social conditions (re)producing authoritarian longings and rebellions.

However, our liberal democracies are currently under pressure from inside and out. They are marked by levels of polarization and domestic conflicts unprecedented in the post-War period. Such accelerated political conflicts, currently boosted by authoritarian populists and polarized social media publics advancing liberal democracies' profound legitimacy crises, are bad news for Jews and other minorities—when there was a fundamental crisis in politics and society, historically conspiracy myths further flourished and Jews were among the first to be blamed. By contrast, Jews and other minorities are groups that have historically benefited from democratic inclusion and the granting of equal civil and political rights. But we live in a time where both racist and eliminationist antisemitic ideas about Jews have spread again the world over—in democracies and autocracies—alongside modernized variations and rumors. Today they are, for sure, more socially relevant, more public, more aggressive than in previous periods of the post-Holocaust era.

In view of this grim reality, a proactive politics and political frameworks that respond to this challenge requires, in light of the Frankfurt School, first educational programs advancing “critical enlightenment” about antisemitism and the conditions engendering judeophobia. In Adorno’s understanding, this should be supported by democratic “education to autonomy,” which means education that seeks to strengthen capacities for free and independent individual judgment, critical (self-)reflection, and conscience.³⁸

Second, a politics of anti-antisemitism inspired by the Frankfurt School points to a consistent, robust defense of liberal democratic values and human rights policy, at home and abroad—in contrast to double standards in human rights law and international law, including double standards that are often applied to the Jewish state of Israel.

38 T. W. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191–204. See also recently S. L. Mariotti, *Adorno and Democracy: The American Years* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), especially 67–88, and G. A. Mullen, *Adorno on Politics after Auschwitz* (London: Lexington, 2016), 107–14.

Third, such politics call for an active political intervention against seemingly “authentic” claims about groups and people,³⁹ which are social illusions and reifications that are mirrored in exclusionary identity politics, resurgent aggressive ethnic nationalism, and global Islamism, all of which currently threaten or undermine liberal frameworks and universalism and are often interspersed with, or shaped by, antisemitism. Where civil rights and laws are violated, this also requires the consistent application and exercise of political authority and legal rules protecting all, including the most vulnerable members of society.

Fourth, a politics of anti-antisemitism will have to engage in the larger struggle over relevant “boundaries of what can be said,” of what in part has become socially “acceptable” public discourse about Jews and other minorities in the public sphere and on social media—which increasingly includes open hate speech and disinformation about minorities, and especially conspiracy fantasies about Jews. Without overregulating free speech, social media should be held accountable for damaging a pluralistic, fact-based, and hate-free political debate, on the basis of transparent principles, and in similar ways as traditional media. The changes in the terms and boundaries of public discourse have immediate negative ramifications on Jews in society; so have the increased acceptance of post-factual discourses and fake news relativizing factual truth claims. Antisemitism, one may say, is the quintessential fake news about the Jews since ancient times. Antisemitism is the prototype of disinformation that any politics of anti-antisemitism will have to tackle.

A key step for more proactive politics of anti-antisemitism is helping to reverse the tide by achieving a broader recognition of the problem—of old and new antisemitic phenomena—on the basis of critical scholarship. The definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Association, which has been adopted as legally non-binding by the EU Parliament in June 2017 (rather than being legally ratified through the EU’s co-decision procedure), is a good example. It points to a variety of antisemitic resentments against the backdrop of current antisemitism scholarship. It establishes a political standard to which critics of antisemitism and policy-makers can appeal to.⁴⁰

However, that antisemitism and thus the need for ethical and political responses to and struggles against it, could become obsolete any time soon is

³⁹ See for a critique of these claims and the underlying “Heideggerian speak” T. W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁰ To be sure, a vast majority of the EU MEPs also applauded with standing ovations Abbas in Strasbourg after he had suggested in a talk that rabbis in Israel have said to their government that water should be poisoned in order to have Palestinians killed. Much is to be done in the face of an enormous emotional energy: antisemitism, Critical Theory has come to understand.

an illusion the Frankfurt School thinkers did not harbor. Neither should or can we today. As the challenge becomes, instead, ever more pressing again, the primary task may well be to limit and constrain it without giving up on reflecting on the conditions that seem to continuously make antisemitism so appealing to all too many citizens around the globe.

Lars Rensmann, PhD, is Professor and Chair of European Politics and Society and Director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Cultures and Politics at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, where he also serves as the Chair of the Department of European Languages and Cultures. He has held many other appointments at universities around the globe, including Yale University, the University of California at Berkeley, Haifa University, the John Cabot University in Rome, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of Vienna, and the University of Munich, and serves on several editorial boards of international journals, including Antisemitism Studies. He has published many books and journal articles on anti-semitism, including most recently The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism (SUNY Press, 2017).

References

- Aderet, Ofer. "Anti-Semitic Slogans Chanted at Berlin Protest against Israel's Gaza Operation." *Haaretz*, July 18, 2014. <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-protesters-in-berlin-come-out-jews-cowardly-pigs-1.5255993>.
- Adorno, Theodor W. "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda." In *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, edited with an introduction by Stephen Crook. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Adorno, Theodor W. "Education after Auschwitz." In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford, 191–204. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Adorno, Theodor W. "The Meaning of Working Through the Past." In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford, 89–104. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1974.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Adorno, Theodor W. "Zur Bekämpfung des Antisemitismus heute." In *Kritik: Kleine Schriften zur Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971.
- Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950.

- Elman, R. Amy. *The European Union, Antisemitism, and the Politics of Denial*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
- Engelberg, Martin. "Don't fixate on the Freedom Party." *Haaretz*, December 19, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-in-austria-muslims-not-nazis-are-the-real-anti-semitic-threat-1.5629027>.
- Feuerherdt, Alex, and Florian Markl. *Vereinte Nationen gegen Israel: Wie die UNO den jüdischen Staat delegitimiert*. Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2018.
- Fine, Robert, and Philip Spencer. *Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.
- Friedersdorf, Conor. "A Food Fight at Oberlin College." *The Atlantic*, December 21, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/the-food-fight-at-oberlin-college/421401/>.
- Hirsh, David. *Contemporary Left Antisemitism*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Horkheimer, Max. "Research Project on Anti-Semitism." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 124–43.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Jacobs, Jack. *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School, 1923–1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Mariotti, Shannon L. *Adorno and Democracy: The American Years*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.
- Mullen, Gary A. *Adorno on Politics after Auschwitz*. London: Lexington, 2016.
- Phelps, Reginald H. "Hitlers 'grundlegende' Rede über den Antisemitismus." *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 16, no. 4 (1968): 390–420.
- Publikative.Org "Was hat Augstein eigentlich geschrieben?" Issued April 1, 2013. <http://www.publikative.org/2013/01/04/was-hat-augstein-eigentlich-geschrieben/>. [no longer available]
- Rensmann, Lars. "Guilt, Resentment, and Post-Holocaust Democracy: The Frankfurt School's Analysis of 'Secondary Antisemitism' in the Group Experiment and Beyond." *Antisemitism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 4–37.
- Rensmann, Lars. "The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in the Digital Age." *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 123–35.
- Rensmann, Lars. *The Politics of Unreason: The Frankfurt School and the Origins of Modern Antisemitism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2017.
- Rensmann, Lars, and Julius H. Schoeps. "Politics and Resentment: Examining Antisemitism and Counter-Cosmopolitanism in the European Union and Beyond." In *Politics and Resentment: Antisemitism and Counter-Cosmopolitanism in the European Union*, edited by Lars Rensmann and Julius H. Schoeps, 3–79. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Rosenberg, Alfred. *Der staatsfeindliche Zionismus*. Hamburg: Deutsche Völkische Verlagsanstalt, 1922.
- Schwarz-Friesel, Monika, and Jehuda Reinharz. *Inside the Antisemitic Mind: The Language of Jew-Hatred in Contemporary Germany*. Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2017.

- Schweppenhäuser, Gerhard. "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, edited by Tom Huhn, 328–53. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Stögner, Karin. *Antisemitismus und Sexismus: Historisch-gesellschaftliche Konstellationen*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014.
- Taguieff, Pierre-André. *Rising from the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe*. New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2004.
- Walzer, Michael. "Islamism and the Left." *Dissent*, Winter 2015. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/islamism-and-the-left>.
- Wistrich, Robert. *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Zick, Andreas, Carina Wolf, Beate Küpper et al. "The Syndrome of Group-Focused Enmity: The Interrelation of Prejudices Tested with Multiple Cross-Sectional and Panel Data." *Social Issues* 64, no. 2 (2008): 363–83.