

Wounds of Democracy

Adorno's *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* and the German antisemitism debate

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Scholars of European history and critical theory observing American politics in recent years have often found themselves experiencing *déjà vu*. History, the truism goes, does not repeat itself, but last summer, with calls for 'law and order' and armed right-wing militias clashing with anti-racist protestors across America, many asked, what more are you waiting for?¹ Then came the Capitol riot of 6 January 2021. The historian of fascism Robert Paxton declared that while he had until then hesitated to call Trump a fascist, the failed insurrection pushed him to do so.² Other historians demurred, emphasising major differences between contemporary America and interwar Europe (war, economic ruin, untested democracies): 'You can't win the political battles of the present if you're always stuck in the past', declared Richard Evans.³ While Trump 'performed' fascism or 'aspired' to it, he did so out of weakness, not strength.⁴

The riot nevertheless bore out Sinclair Lewis's quip that when fascism comes to America it will be wrapped in the American flag and carrying a cross – or wrapped in a Confederate flag with the cross being used as a battering ram. Paxton, in fact, suggested years ago that the Ku Klux Klan could be considered the first fascist movement.⁵ More recent analysis by Sarah Churchwell and Alberto Toscano confirms what many Black Marxist intellectuals have said for decades: 'American fascism: It has happened here'.⁶

The fascism analogy is not without its critics. Peter E. Gordon stressed the logical and moral necessity of analogies in all historical thinking, but cautioned that analogies can stymie analysis as much as inform it.⁷ Samuel Moyn and Daniel Bessner have consistently argued that

the fascist label conveniently 'Trump-washes' recent history of deeper currents of racism and inequality of which Trump is more a symptom than a cause, and thus enabled the quietist narrative of a 'return to normal' once the aberrant Trump was removed from office, playing into the hands of America's neoliberal and imperialist 'never Trump' centre.⁸ In a particularly egregious analogy, Timothy Snyder compared the 'rapid deployment teams' Trump sent to cities like Portland to the *Einsatzgruppen* or 'taskforces' that perpetrated the Holocaust by bullets.⁹

More circumspect historians like Christopher Browning argued that if there is an analogy to be made with the rise of Nazism, it is not one of a dramatic seizure of power but of conservative elites like senate majority leader Mitch McConnell selling out democracy to a would-be strongman.¹⁰ David Bell likewise argued that Trump is not a fascist but a run-of-the-mill 'racist demagogue' and 'charismatic authoritarian'.¹¹ This hardly offers reassurance. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have shown, there are countless ways besides fascism for a democracy to die.¹² But defeated at the polls and in the courts, Trump did ultimately leave office on 20 January. Beleaguered as it undoubtedly is, America passed Joseph Schumpeter's elegant, if reductive test of a democracy, a political system in which the people choose their own leaders. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez memorably told her Instagram followers, 'there's no going back to brunch'. Conspiracy theories, racism, transphobia, and voter suppression continue to drive mainstream Republican politics and inspire many a gun-toting American.

Fascism within democracy

Analysing the nature of imminent right-wing threats to democracy was the *raison d'être* of the Institute for Social Research upon its founding in Frankfurt in 1923. The *New Yorker's* Alex Ross proclaimed shortly after Trump's election that 'The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming',¹³ and the more recent publication of one of Adorno's postwar lectures attests to the ongoing relevance of critical social theory that similarly grappled with historical analogies and precedents. On April 6 1967, at the invitation of the Austrian Socialist Students' Association at the University of Vienna, Adorno gave a lecture entitled '*Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus*' (translator Wieland Hoban updates the original term, 'radicalism', with 'extremism').* Adorno spoke against the backdrop of the rise of the German National Democratic Party (NDP), a successor to the far-right Deutsche Reichspartei, which held five seats in West Germany's first Bundestag, and the Socialist Reich Party, which was declared unconstitutional and disbanded in 1952. The NDP formed in 1964 and by 1968 had gained seats in seven state parliaments, only to be defeated in the 1969 federal election by falling short of the five percent threshold required for representation in the Bundestag.

The NPD wore the clothing of a legitimate democratic party (just compare its name to some of its far-right predecessors) but underneath, Adorno said, lay 'a sadism cloaked in legal ideas' (35). For Adorno, the NPD's rise exemplified a broader problem for post-fascist democracies: 'Openly anti-democratic aspects are removed' from party platforms, while right-wing movements 'constantly invoke true democracy and accuse the others of being anti-democratic' (24) – thus restricting 'the real people', as Jan-Werner Müller has argued of populism generally, to its own adherents.¹⁴ The historian Walter Laqueur determined that the NPD was not a 'strict conservative' party, as its leaders claimed, but also not a genuine neo-Nazi party, in which case it would have been banned.¹⁵ While the NPD tapped into apologetics for the Nazi regime and resentment towards foreigners, it was sufficiently restrained by Germany's 'militant

democracy' that it never developed into the dynamic 'cultural synthesis' of interwar fascism.¹⁶ Adorno analysed this resurgence primarily through the lens of the psychosocial needs it fulfilled. More often contrasting than conflating this new right-wing extremism with the 'old' fascism of the Nazis, Adorno sought to illuminate how a far-right movement could still garner popular support twenty years after the Nazis had led the country to ruin.

Adorno begins by observing that the grim thesis he made some years earlier in his influential 1959 radio address 'The Meaning of Working through the Past' had become only more evident: 'I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascistic tendencies *against* democracy'.¹⁷ In 1959 he reflected that he 'did not wish to go into the question of neo-Nazi organizations', so palpable were the legacies of Nazism itself, including the prominence of leading officials in the Federal Republic with Nazi pedigrees. However, the latent fascistic potential that 'was not yet truly visible' in 1959 had, by 1967, risen to the surface at the polls (1). Socially, if not politically, Adorno argues, the widespread potential for fascism continued to exist – just as Adorno and his colleagues had argued about America in their influential empirical study *The Authoritarian Personality* first published in 1950 and reissued by Verso last year with a new introduction by Adorno scholar Peter E. Gordon.

It has long been fashionable to chide Adorno as an apolitical 'mandarin' who, as he claimed in his last interview, was 'not at all afraid of the term ivory tower'.¹⁸ Yet the principal reason Adorno gave for the continued possibility of fascism was hardly out of step with the view of his radical '68er students: 'the still prevailing tendency towards concentration of capital' (2). Resulting 'immiseration', he argued, put continual pressure on the petit bourgeoisie, who in turn 'want to cling to, and possibly reinforce, their privileges and social status' (9, 2). But this group lays blame for their decline not on the capitalist social order but on the spectre of 'socialism'. Since 1966, Germany's Social Democratic Party under the leadership of Willy Brandt had compromised itself in a governing coalition with the conservative CDU. Together they accounted for over ninety per cent of the Bundestag,

* Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2020). Subsequent references given as page numbers in the text. A recording of the original lecture can be listened to on Österreichischer Mediathek's website, <https://www.mediathek.at/oesterreich-am-wort/suche/treffer/atom/014EEA8D-336-0005D-00000D5C-014E5066/pool/BWEB>

creating openings for extremism on both sides of the political spectrum. The leftist student radicals of the era pursued 'extra-parliamentary opposition' to disturb political consensus and complacency. On the right, the NPD mobilised disaffected voters with slogans such as 'Now one can choose again' (27).

Above all else, Adorno says, far-right movements speak to 'the feeling of social catastrophe', which he understands as 'a distortion of Marx's theory of collapse' (9–10). Such movements 'want the catastrophe, they feed off apocalyptic fantasies' by exploiting an 'appeal to the unconscious desire for disaster, for catastrophe' (10). It has been argued that an analogous kind of despair – 'a hope gap' – led many voters to Trump in 2016; this reached a high point in Trump's 'American Carnage' inauguration speech authored by Steve Bannon.¹⁹ While Adorno diagnosed present crises as symptoms of what Walter Benjamin called the 'permanent catastrophe' of capitalist modernity, he resisted a Spenglerian capitulation to decline that would make 'common cause with the catastrophe'.

Adorno's insights into right-wing subjectivity derive from Freudian psychoanalysis but go beyond pathologising individuals. He argues that psychological susceptibilities grow in the poisoned soil of objective powerlessness: 'the spectre of technological unemployment continues to haunt society to such a degree that in the age of automation ... even the people who stand within the production process already feel potentially superfluous ... potentially unemployed' (3). The economic troubles of the 1967–69 recession, he argues, funnelled discontent into the NPD. Insofar as its followers felt powerless to change their own fates or transform their society, they yearned instead for 'the demise of all' (11). As Volker Weiss updates this view in his afterword, 'The experience of being interchangeable as an employee can ... lead to the rightist phantasm of a "great replacement" between ethnic groups' (54).

Such trends continue to stoke xenophobic anxieties today. We still observe 'an increasing discrepancy between provincial and urban areas' when it comes to voting (6). And 'of course there are old Nazi cadres', Adorno says, but also the younger 'new right', drawn in by the idea that 'Germany has to be on top again' (7–8). In the summer of 2020, thousands of maskless, self-proclaimed 'anti-corona' protestors marched on the German capital

decrying 'corona dictatorship'. As Quinn Slobodian and William Callison have shown about 'Querdenker', many such conspiracy theorists purportedly vote for a smattering of parties and reject xenophobia and Holocaust denial, yet make affirming nods to QAnon, which enjoys surprising popularity in Germany.²⁰ Adorno rejects the idea that such people should be dismissed as 'eternally incorrigible' or 'a lunatic fringe', for 'there is a certain quietist bourgeois comfort in reciting that to oneself' (8). Blaming a distinct group of 'deplorables' or 'fascists' lets progressives off too easily from doing the actual work of politics: building new coalitions.

By 1967, the official antifascism of the Allied occupation had long since given way to the anticommunism of the Cold War. 'Fear of the East' – of actually existing communism – manifested in the popular 'feeling of a foreign threat' (3–4). The new nationalism, Adorno says, was a compensation for Germans' 'perpetual fear for their national identity' (12). The 'unity complex' that had haunted them for centuries once again became acute under partition (12). Nationalism generally grows from a contradictory desire, the 'attempt to assert oneself in the midst of an integration' into an imagined collective (25). Adorno deems nationalism 'pathic' to the extent that it is a psychic response to defeat and has an 'aspect of selling something to people in which they themselves do not entirely believe' (5). Of course, the 'famous Hitlerian technique of the bare-faced lie' is hardly foreign to us today, either (31). Yet we learned from Trump not to mistake far-right leaders' 'low intellectual level and lack of theory' for weakness (12): on the contrary, Adorno considers 'the ideological component entirely secondary to the political will to have one's turn' (25). For, as scholarship has borne out, 'there was never a truly, fully developed theory in fascism', but rather open-ended *movements* set into motion by charismatic leaders (28). As Rahel Jaeggi has remarked of far-right voters, 'even though their real interests are not satisfied, their *ressentiment* is'.²¹

Adorno saw right-wing reliance on propaganda as the flipside of the 'blindness, indeed abstruseness of the aims they pursue' (13). What he called the 'culture industry', centred on profit and 'mass distraction' rather than truth, and continues to fuel our fake news economy today. Propaganda's combination of 'rational means and irrational ends', Adorno argues, 'corresponds to the overall tendency of civilization' that he and Max Horkheimer

diagnosed in their 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (13). Thus 'real interests' are exchanged for 'fraudulent aims' peddled by agitators until 'propaganda actually constitutes the substance of politics' (13). Without a concrete basis, right-wing movements 'are somewhat akin to the ghost of a ghost', reduced to 'manipulation and coercion' (15). To be sure, when Adorno calls such movements ideologically hollow and 'essentially no more than techniques of power', his analysis suffers from the one-sidedness of the 'totalitarianism' hypothesis in his time, which over-emphasised the top-down, 'administered' power of agitators and underestimated genuine popular support (21). But today the outsize power of right-wing media to churn up resentments generate powerful feedback loops; it is not for nothing that Verso has just re-released Norbert Guterman and Leo Löwenthal's (his Frankfurt colleagues) 1949 work *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*. Ideologically vacuous right-wing agitation continues to fuel a deluded and grandiose 'politics of catastrophe'.

Rumours and conspiracies

Adorno remarked during his American exile from Nazi Germany that antisemitism was 'the rumour about the Jews'.²² It is also among the most stable elements of modern right-wing ideology. As Adorno wrote in 1967, 'Obviously, in spite of everything, antisemitism continues to be a "plank in the platform". It outlived the Jews, one might say, and that is the source of its own ghostly nature' (22). Officially taboo in the postwar Federal Republic, what Adorno and his colleagues called 'crypto-antisemitism' was instead conjured with a wink and a nudge: 'We're not allowed to say it, but we understand each other. We all know what we mean' (23). Adorno investigated such veiled prejudice and apologism for the Nazi regime upon returning to Germany in 1949 in his study of 'non-public opinion' *Guilt and Defense: On the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany*. Recall for a moment Trump's final campaign ad in 2016, which showed menacing images of prominent Jewish people accompanied by the following conspiratorial voice-overs: George Soros, 'those who control the levers of power in Washington'; Janet Yellen, 'global special interests'; Lloyd Blankfein, 'put money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations'.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of 'pathic projection', antisemitic prejudice is rooted in the ego-weakness of the individuals who fall prey to it. Their internal anxiety is projected onto groups who are vulnerable in a given social context. In the postwar era, Adorno writes, 'as long as one cannot be openly antisemitic' after the Holocaust, this prejudice is veiled as anti-intellectualism, anti-cosmopolitanism, and hatred of migrant workers (21). In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer went so far as to write that 'the blindness of antisemitism, its lack of intention' means that to a certain extent its 'victims are interchangeable: vagrants, Negroes, Mexican wrestling clubs, Jews, Protestants, Catholics' etc.; they thus conclude that 'there is no authentic antisemitism, and certainly no born antisemite'.²³ As Weiss argues in his afterword, in some respects the spectre of the Jewish threat has shifted to Islamist jihad today, suggesting that progressives would be remiss to abandon that complex subject to the xenophobic and Islamophobic far right (55).

The rise of authoritarian populism around the globe has come with a spike in antisemitic attacks from the far right, who account for a vast majority of antisemitic attacks in both Europe and the United States.²⁴ But this violence should not be confused with the discourse of the so-called 'new antisemitism', a dubious notion that conflates violent far-right antisemitism with legitimate criticism of Israeli policy, plays upon fears about rising Muslim and refugee populations in Europe who are assumed to be de-facto antisemitic, and mischaracterises the nature of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) movement.²⁵

Such times lead to strange bedfellows. Yair Netanyahu, son of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has become a poster boy for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) due to his condemnations of open borders, cosmopolitanism and the EU, which he has called 'evil'.²⁶ In the U.S., the alliance of the alt-right and evangelical Christian leaders close to Trump taught us that antisemitic Zionism is not a contradiction but a real product of resurgent ethnonationalism. Antisemitic far-right European leaders like Victor Orbán received warm welcomes in Israel by Netanyahu. This all represents a new turn. In its time the NPD exaggerated and campaigned against German reparations to Israel, which had been paid since 1952, and such antisemitic

stances discredited their legitimacy. These days the AfD outdoes all other parties in its philosemitism, yet some of its leaders have also decried Berlin's Holocaust memorial as a 'monument of shame' and declared it time to end the 'cult of guilt' about the Holocaust (58).²⁷ Some on the far right have even characterised themselves as 'the new Jews' because they are vilified by much of German society.

This context has converged with a renewed campaign of 'anti-antisemitism' that traces back to the Anti-deutsche, an offshoot of German antifa defined by their concern about antisemitism and support for Israel.²⁸ As the lecture's translator (a progressive activist in his own right) Wieland Hoban notes, this stance has grown into an official 'antisemitism industry, in which certain theoretical models are used to endlessly repeat the same theorems, often referring to the work of Theodor W. Adorno'.²⁹ In April 2020, a politician from the German liberal party and then Germany's anti-antisemitism commissioner Felix Klein called for the prominent Cameroonian postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe to be disinvited from giving the keynote at a German literary festival because of his alleged antisemitism, support for BDS, and the vague charge of 'relativising the Holocaust'. The ensuing debate continues to roil the German intellectual scene. Wielded against Mbembe was his essay, 'The society of enmity', published in *Radical Philosophy* in 2016 (RP 200), in which he writes that 'the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories can be seen to serve as a laboratory for a number of techniques of control, surveillance and separation, which today are being increasingly implemented in other places on the planet'.³⁰ Mbembe also wrote the foreword to the 2015 book *Apartheid Israel*, in which he called the occupation of Palestine 'the biggest moral scandal of our times' and claims, 'To be sure, it is not apartheid, South African style. It is far more lethal. It looks like high-tech Jim Crow-cum-apartheid'.³¹ Mbembe's *parrhesia* ran roughshod over German sensibilities, most prominently one codified by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's controversial definition of antisemitism, which, as Aleida Assmann has noted, in its surreptitiously abridged form widely adopted in Germany conflates criticism of Israel with antisemitism.³² Mbembe responded to the charges of the hostile German commentariat: 'I respect the German taboos, but they are not the taboos of everyone else in the world'.³³

In a series of open letters, hundreds of academics voiced their outrage at Mbembe's racist treatment and demanded the resignation of Felix Klein. Michael Rothberg, the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies at UCLA, debunked hostile misreadings of Mbembe's work. Rothberg noted that many of Mbembe's critics assumed the framework of 'competitive memory' that his own 2009 book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* had long since challenged, arguing that 'memory does not obey the logic of the zero-sum game. Rather, all memory cultures develop dialogically – through borrowing, appropriation, juxtaposition, and echoing of other histories and other traditions of memory' – notably between the Holocaust, colonial violence, and other genocides.³⁴ When Rothberg's book was subsequently translated into German in 2021, a 'second historians' debate' revealed even more clearly what Dan Stone calls the 'provincialisation of German memory culture which isolates the Holocaust from world history, preferring to "keep" it to themselves as a purely German phenomenon'.³⁵ In contrast to the ritualistic, redemptive philosemitism Dirk Moses has pejoratively called 'the German catechism',³⁶ Rothberg aptly reprised the counsel of the German-Jewish survivor Jean Améry that the proper attitude of Germans to the Holocaust is not one of 'mastering' the past but one of 'self-mistrust'. Rothberg's call, with the historian of Africa Jürgen Zimmerer, to 'abolish the taboo on comparison!' is emphatic in its call to *expand* German responsibility for past atrocities to include the crimes of colonialism, not to diminish it.³⁷

The Mbembe affair should be understood as the first major test of a May 2019 resolution passed by the Bundestag that condemned BDS as antisemitic and called for states and municipalities to cut off organisations supporting it from public funding. An alternative resolution proposed by the philo/antisemitic and pro-Israel AfD would have banned BDS outright! The resolution was so vaguely worded that it was broadly interpreted and over-applied to blacklist anyone with the slightest association with criticising Israel, leading to 'an expansive culture of fear and inquisition'.³⁸ Aleida Assmann declared that 'a spectre is haunting Europe: the accusation of antisemitism'.³⁹ Shortly after the resolution was passed, in June 2019, the Jewish Museum Berlin tweeted an article about a petition by 240 Jewish studies scholars opposing the res-

olution in the name of academic freedom. As a result, its non-Jewish director (a foremost contemporary scholar of Judaism) Peter Schäfer was forced to resign. In response, one of the museum's minority of Jewish staff, Yossi Bartal, publicly resigned 'in protest against the crass political intervention by the German government and the State of Israel in the work of the museum.'⁴⁰ Broadly, however, the passing of the resolution has been followed by self-censorship and an informal 'Berufsverbot' (professional ban) against those with links to BDS. Hence one of the authors in a forum on the affair in the *Journal of Genocide Research* published their piece anonymously.⁴¹

Time and again, voices of progressive Jews, Palestinians, Muslims and people of colour have been silenced in Germany in the name of anti-antisemitism.⁴² The American-born German public intellectual Susan Neiman has even doubted whether progressive, German Jews like a Hannah Arendt or an Albert Einstein, who criticised racist tendencies in Israeli politics in their time, would be allowed to speak in Germany today; the initiative for 'world-openness' endorsed by Neiman and dozens of German cultural institutions condemned the Bundestag resolution as a 'counter-boycott' to BDS that had had a chilling effect on the 'diversity of views' permissible in the German public sphere.⁴³ A feature in *Haaretz* illustrated how a paradoxical result of anti-antisemitic legislation is the silencing of progressive Jews, such as when an anti-Zionist university reading group run by an Israeli student in Berlin was shut down and classified as an antisemitic event alongside far-right attacks like that in Halle in 2019.⁴⁴ (And in the case of Halle, when an armed neo-Nazi was blocked from entering a synagogue, few seemed to notice that he instead shot up a nearby Turkish kebab shop and then rammed a Somali man with his car – leading Hoban to describe the incident as 'a textbook illustration of intersectional hatred: a neo-Nazi targeted the Jewish, Turkish and black communities'.⁴⁵) When Judith Butler – a Jewish supporter of BDS who wrote about 'Israel/Palestine and the paradoxes of academic freedom' in *RP* 135⁴⁶ – was awarded the Adorno Prize by the city of Frankfurt in 2012 (the acceptance speech was published in *RP* 176), they were met with protestors proclaiming 'No Adorno Prize for antisemites!' and 'No hate for Israel in Adorno's name!⁴⁷ But the issue is not limited to 'Butler Trouble'.⁴⁸ As Neiman reflected on increased concern about antisemitism

following the latest Israeli onslaught on Gaza, 'Caught in the shame of being descendants of the Nazis, some Germans find it easier to curse universalistic Jews as anti-semites than to realize how many Jewish positions there are'.⁴⁹ Mbembe said in defence of his work: 'I think the time is fast coming when we will have to ask why does Germany appear to have become a laboratory for a powerful offensive against certain traditions of critical thought and progressive politics? Why is this offensive taking as its prime targets the minority voices in Europe and voices of the formerly colonised worlds? Who gains the most if indeed these voices are reduced to silence?'⁵⁰ Certainly not Europe's Jews.

Ruth Klüger, who survived Auschwitz and who passed away last year, was right to have her doubts about the alleged assurances of official Holocaust memory: 'To be sure, a remembered massacre may serve as a deterrent, but it may also serve as a model for the next massacre'.⁵¹ Klüger later taught in Germany and bridled at the complacency she found among her students, a sense of cultural superiority for having 'mastered' their past. I recall sitting in Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt in the summer of 2017 to hear Wendy Brown deliver a lecture entitled 'Democracy under Attack: Apocalyptic Populism'.⁵² As she attempted to explain to a foreign audience the economic inequality, racial resentments and wounded masculinity that had made Trump's election possible, she drew upon a slew of disturbing polls indicating that America had become far more accepting of blatantly authoritarian and anti-democratic agendas, including, for example, 'the number of Americans who think it would be a good idea for the army to rule has doubled over the past two decades'. Members of the audience laughed. Amused at the seemingly unique stupidity of Trump supporters, they remained oblivious to the possibility of a similar movement amassing support in their own country. Brown's analysis held that insofar as neo-liberalism was behind the rise of right-wing populism, its spread was going to be global. In the discussion, one of Brown's German interlocutors said he wasn't convinced by her analysis: It might apply to Hungary or Poland, he said, but that's an *eastern* problem. In the federal election three months later, the AfD won 12.6 per cent of the vote, making it the first far-right party to enter the Bundestag since the downfall of the Third Reich.

The myopia of some reaches of Holocaust studies

to this new political landscape is striking. Commenting on the U.S. Capitol riot, the American historian Deborah Lipstadt – the author of *Denying the Holocaust*, the basis of the film *Denial* – tweeted, captioning a photo of a neo-Nazi who had stormed the Capitol: ‘Note the t-shirt: Camp Auschwitz. There is antisemitism on the left, for sure, but it[s] there on the right too’. When a leading authority on Holocaust denial and antisemitism is so consumed with searching for antisemitism on the left that she is *surprised* to see antisemitism among literal Nazis, something has gone very wrong indeed.

Contrary to Antideutsch interpretations of his work, Adorno’s stance on ‘relativising the Holocaust’ and the interrelation of antisemitism and other racisms is clear: While he saw Auschwitz as a world-historic, even metaphysical rupture in history, he also said in a 1965 lecture that his fixation on it should be taken to refer to ‘not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam’.⁵³ The historical possibility of Auschwitz and the use of the atomic bomb, in Adorno’s view of history as progress toward catastrophe, ‘form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity’. In his 1967 lecture Adorno notes that some of

the same figures on the German right drawn into Nazism had earlier been complicit in ‘gruesome’ violence in the colonisation of Africa, and then later pivoted to Cold War anticommunism (19). For this time of racial reckoning, when streets in the German capital will finally be stripped of their racist and colonial names (my own Neukölln street was named after ‘colonial hero’ Hermann von Wissmann), Adorno reminds us that antisemitism most often comes together with other forms of racism. As the recently authored Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, an alternative to the IHRA definition signed by over two hundred scholars, rightly claims, ‘What is true of racism in general is true of antisemitism in particular’.⁵⁴ Both are still spearheaded by actual Nazis. We don’t need to look far for the source of a ‘new antisemitism’. It’s old, and it’s right under our noses.

Historicising the Frankfurt School

Adorno’s lecture was a surprise bestseller in Germany when it appeared in 2019. Its prestigious publisher Suhrkamp called this handy edition a ‘message in a bottle to the future’, emphasising its timeliness. The volume’s reception sparked a fruitful debate in German feuillets



about how the Frankfurt School should be historicised. As Pola Gross observed, reviewers saw ‘astonishing parallels’ between right-wing radicalism in the 1960s and ‘current developments’, calling Adorno’s analysis of the NPD ‘frighteningly valid’ when applied to the far right today.⁵⁵ *Der Spiegel* went so far as to title its review: ‘What Adorno already knew about the New Right in 1967’.⁵⁶ Weiss’s afterword notes that more than half a century later, ‘one is struck by the continued validity of his analysis, which reads in parts like a commentary on current developments’ (42). Weiss warns his reader against creating any ‘simplistic equivalence’ and claims that a critic must ‘distinguish between context-dependent and fundamental aspects’ (44). Yet he goes on to apply Adorno’s words directly to both contemporary movements and to National Socialism with little contextualisation, for example, when he writes that current right-wing discourse about ‘cultural Marxism ... has meanwhile taken over from the Nazi propaganda phrase “cultural Bolshevism”’ (57). In 1967 the notion of ‘communism’ was an ‘imago’ or ‘bugbear’ – an ‘elastic concept’ ripe for distortion and projection (20); and indeed recent work has shown how Nazi paranoia about ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’ evolved into Cold War anticommunism.⁵⁷ Undoubtedly, such resonances and historical links are there for the taking. But, to return to our initial question, are we justified in employing them in what are ultimately rather sweeping analogies?

Weiss concludes with the striking claim that amidst a resurgent right-wing, ‘there is no reason to historicize critical theory’ as so many elements of Adorno’s analysis ‘can be directly transferred to offers of discussion today’ (63, 61). By contrast, Magnus Klaue’s cutting review in the *FAZ* reminds us, with its sardonic title, that ‘Adorno was not in the Antifa’.⁵⁸ He rightly notes that Adorno criticised many of the same aspects of his era’s right as its new left, with which he notoriously clashed: crude anti-Americanism and anti-intellectualism, the persecution fantasy of being silenced by the media, and the priority of political activity devoid of conceptual orientation. Adorno emphasises crucial differences between his time and the rise of Nazism in the Weimar period in order to ‘avoid thinking in schematic analogies’ the way both ‘68ers and conservatives often did through crude moral equivalences between the Holocaust and American imperialism or the Soviet gulags (16). Critical theory, he and Horkheimer stressed, is nothing without its ‘tem-

poral core’.⁵⁹ And as Klaue closes his review: ‘A way of thinking is only alive if it doesn’t apply to every era’.

Adorno concludes his lecture by addressing the old question of what is to be done to combat right-wing extremism. ‘Aside from the political struggle by purely political means’, he says, ‘one must confront it on its very own turf’ (39). Despite their propagandistic and ideological substance, right-wing movements can only be counteracted with the ‘penetrating power of reason, with the genuinely unideological truth’ (40). Lies cannot be fought with lies, but only with reflective enlightenment. In his still-untranslated 1962 lecture ‘Combating Antisemitism Today’, Adorno arrived at a similar, remarkably Freudian conclusion: only ‘militant Enlightenment’ can break the ‘spell’ of prejudice by bringing its unconscious mechanisms to the light of reason, reflection and public debate. ‘One should not shrink from anti-intellectual arguments’, he says, but must rather speak as if to a world in which the term *intellectual* applied not to an exclusive and maligned class but to all members of humanity, for ‘basically all people can be and actually should be what is generally reserved for intellectuals’.⁶⁰

One might object, with Adorno in 1967, ‘The fact that people do not fully believe in the cause does not make things any better’ (15). Far-right voters, however strong their cognitive dissonance, may still vote for the far right. But in each contradiction, Adorno believed, lurks the potential resistance of reason. Strategically, Adorno says, ‘the only thing that really strikes me as effective is to warn potential followers of right-wing extremism about its own consequences, to convey to them that this politics will inevitably lead its followers to their own doom too’ (17). Hence, ‘if one is serious about opposing these things, one must refer to the central interests of those who are targeted by the propaganda’, especially youth (17).

But how effective is reason at combatting right-wing movements built on reaction and resentment? As Adorno notes in his 1954 short essay ‘Ideology’, ‘the critique of ideology, as the confrontation of ideology with its own truth, is only possible insofar as the ideology contains a rational element with which the critique can deal’, for example in the cases of liberalism or individualism. This fails in the case of movements like National Socialism that have no rational core: ‘Where ideologies are replaced by approved views decreed from above, the cri-

tique of ideology must be replaced by *cui bono* – in whose interest?’⁶¹ For our time of extreme inequality, dark money in politics, and the alliance of the conservative establishment with authoritarian demagogues, this suggests that the critique of ideology may be less important than the direct critique of power and its interests. Adorno recalls that in his study on the authoritarian personality, enemies of FDR would suddenly behave ‘relatively rationally’ when the subject changed to New Deal programs that benefitted them (37). This ‘split in people’s consciousness’ remains a starting point for forming new coalitions (37).

Of course, self-reflection and criticism are not enough. Yet ‘by making this a problem’, by clearly articulating the contradictions at play, ‘a certain naivety in the social climate has been eliminated and a certain detoxification has taken place’ (39). It was this conviction that led Adorno the public intellectual to return to Germany in 1949 to critically mould the next generation through teaching and delivering over 300 public lectures and radio addresses on pressing topics, twenty more of which were recently published in a new volume from Suhrkamp.⁶² In perhaps the most influential of these, his 1966 ‘Education after Auschwitz’, Adorno also stresses the importance of cultivating love and warmth in parenting to overcome the cold, instrumental, and authoritarian forces that characterise bourgeois society.⁶³

Adorno leaves us with some cause for hope: ‘It is very often the case that convictions and ideologies take on their demonic, their genuinely destructive character precisely when the objective situation has deprived them of substance’ (5). If Nancy Fraser is right that we find ourselves in a Gramscian ‘interregnum’ after the collapse of neoliberal hegemony, the winds of resentment that have filled the sails of right-wing populism in recent years may yet shift course.⁶⁴ If they do so, revealing such movements to have been vacuous all along, the opportunity arises for the left to step into its place and deliver more than empty words. In this spirit, Adorno’s lecture is surprisingly emphatic about what genuine social democracy would have to entail: ‘I have already told you that one should appeal to real interests instead of moralizing; I can only repeat it once more’ (37). With its ‘socio-economic content’ still unrealised amidst widespread precarity and inequality, ‘democracy has not yet become truly and fully concrete anywhere but is still

formal’ – and, of course, not always even that (8). ‘In that sense’, Adorno says, ‘one might refer to the fascist movements as the wounds, the scars of a democracy that, to this day, has not yet lived up to its own concept’ (9). In the cruel shadow of right-wing reaction nursing its wounded attachments, Adorno sees democracy’s promise waiting to be fulfilled by material social transformation.

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Notes

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