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EDITORIAL

Editorial

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Germany's reaction to the armed conflict between Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups and Israel that broke out on 7 October 2023, has resulted in a series of prohibitions, ranging from legal bans to symbolic *Denkverbote*. On October 13th, in Berlin, authorities revoked the right to use slogans like "Free Palestine" in schools. On the same day in Frankfurt, the management of the Book Fair postponed indefinitely the awarding of a literary prize to the Palestinian novelist Adania Shibli, on the grounds that it was necessary to make Israeli voices "particularly visible". Co-president of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Saskia Esken considered it crucial to cancel a meeting with American Senator Bernie Sanders, the latter having described the indiscriminate bombings in Gaza as a "war crime". On October 18th, a document by the public broadcaster ARD intended for internal use tells its journalists which words to write when reporting on the conflict, with internal guidelines quoted in the document warning that "what must absolutely be avoided are words such as 'spiral of violence' – and 'escalation in the Middle East'" ("Hamas fighters" are also listed as a taboo term). On October 20th, the director of the Oberhausen Short Film Festival summoned people to participate in a Solidarity Event for Israel organized by the Central Council of Jews in Germany, writing "Show the world that Neukölln's Hamas friends and Jew-haters are in the minority". As the Israeli retaliation intensified and became increasingly more violent, Germany's position became more stubborn. On November 13th, the website of the Normative Orders research center at Goethe-Universität Frankfurt published a statement "Principles of Solidarity. A Statement", signed, among others, by Jürgen Habermas, which claimed that discussions about the "genocidal intentions" of Israel are slips in "standards of judgment."

The international intellectual community has found many ways of dismantling the hypocrisy of these prohibitions. For example, over 100 leading scholars and intellectuals signed an open letter in reply to the position of Normative Order stating that discussions about genocidal intent should not *a priori* be ruled out, citing ongoing research among genocide scholars and legal experts on the matter. The philosopher Judith Butler has pointed out that proscriptions against the use of certain terms such as references to 'the occupation' not only make it impossible to stage a meaningful debate on racial apartheid or colonialism, but also undermine "hope of understanding

the past, the present or the future". In a much-discussed article for the *New Yorker*, the writer Masha Gessen wrote about the rhetorical hypocrisy of what, in Germany, falls under antisemitism. Gessen faced discursive pressures themselves as a result of publishing the article, with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung withdrawing its participation from the award ceremony of the Hannah-Arendt-Preis that the Böll foundation had itself co-awarded to Gessen, but no longer felt comfortable promoting following the heated discussions about the article. A vast bureaucratic apparatus – the Office of the Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight Against Antisemitism – which employs commissioners at the state and local levels, is in charge of reporting instances of antisemitism, including criticism against Israeli government policies. As Gessen does not fail to notice, under these rules, Hannah Arendt, who just three years after the Holocaust, compared a Jewish Israeli party to the Nazi Party, would have had to be deemed an antisemite. In a doubly Kafkaesque turn, German judgments over what classifies as hate speech are now made in the name of and increasingly hurting those they intend to protect.

In these times of evaporating values, the desire for "the unmasking of hypocrisy" is as "irresistible", as Hannah Arendt put it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), as it is necessary. However, pointing at incoherence may provide little explanatory value as to the origins of this double-speak. References to Germany's guilt-complex seem hardly adequate to understand the perversion of the *Staatsräson* – Germany's unique responsibility not only for preserving the memory of the Holocaust but also for defending the security of the state of Israel. After all, guilt is frequently part of the justification for Germany's cynical political decisions – the *Sonderweg* is joined by the *Sonderrolle*. Having thus rationalized its own irrationalities, appeals to reason – important as they are for acknowledging common sense – may fail in their effect. As the Hannah Arendt scholar Jeffrey Isaac wrote, "she [Arendt] also understood that hypocrisy is not the ultimate vice, and that the exposure of hypocrisy is not the ultimate task of intellectual work."[1] In her view, the focus of political thought and action ought not be to denounce inconsistencies or possible discrepancies between rhetoric and practice. Instead, it should concentrate on addressing the pain and harm humans inflict upon one another.

It is now undeniable that Germany's Israel policies are inflicting tremendous harm. In early November, *The Financial Times* reported that German arms exports to Israel worth €300mn represent a nearly 10-fold rise compared to the previous year. On the European level, German leaders continue to block joint European calls for a ceasefire. As Israel targeted residential areas, refugee camps, schools and hospitals, as well as religious sites in Gaza, and as Israeli government officials advanced their plans for de facto ethnic cleansing, Scholz echoed the prevailing beliefs of the nation, "Israel is a country that is committed to human rights and international law and acts accordingly." Now, it is easy to demonstrate that this commitment had failed before and after the attack of October 7th and thereby point at the hypocrisy of Scholz's statement. For instance, according to a report of February 2022 by Amnesty International, acts by Israeli forces in Gaza are prohibited by the Rome Statute and Apartheid Convention; the day of Scholz's statement, Human Rights Watch called on the International

Criminal Court to investigate Israeli attacks on hospitals and ambulances. However, such "unmasking of hypocrisy" can tell us little about its origins.

In *Totem und Tabu* (1913), Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, makes a compelling connection between social prohibitions (taboos) and the pain and harm humans inflict upon one another. According to Freud, compulsive prohibitions occur in society wherever individuals feel a strong desire to violate these prohibitions, in particular in the treatment of enemies, the taboo of rulers, and the taboo of the dead. Freud posits that these prohibitions and taboos persist through generations, and are upheld by laws, tradition, or societal norms. Freud writes that societies with strong taboos must have "an ambivalent attitude towards their taboos. In their unconscious there is nothing they would like more than to violate them, but they are afraid to do so; they are afraid precisely because they would like to, and the fear is stronger than the desire."[2] If we recognize Germany's prohibitions against criticizing the state of Israel as a Freudian taboo, we may "not feel comfortable", as Freud would say in another context,[3] but we may hope to get a better understanding of their causes. So let us imagine, for a moment, that Germany's uncompromising 'solidarity' for Israel stems from such a deeper, more "ambivalent attitude" in the Freudian sense.

Germany's guilt associated with the historical treatment of Jews may then find a perverse relief in the fusion and confusion of Jews with the actions of the Israeli state. This scenario allows for the transfer of guilt onto the Jews themselves, ultimately suggesting that they are guilty of their own persecution. The relief or joy that some Germans might feel witnessing Jews portrayed as aggressors would then stem from a Freudian return of repressed feelings of enmity, offering a perverse form of catharsis for their own historical guilt. Yet, the societal imperative to honor the memory of the Holocaust and to reject antisemitism forbids the open expression of these feelings, reinforcing the taboo and necessitating its defense through a bureaucratic apparatus aimed at policing speech and thought.

There must, then, be no paradox between exaggerated expressions of philosemitism and latent antisemitism. Indeed, in Germany's case the one may reinforce the other. This "emotional ambivalence" is deeply ingrained into the psyche of post-war German society. It played an essential role in the immediate aftermath of World War II, where, as the historian Frank Stern notes, economic anti-Jewish biases transformed into optimistic views about Jews' economic abilities and hopes that 'special gifts' could expedite Germany's economic recovery; praising the Jewish impact on German culture became politically popular, allowing post-War German society to distance itself from the Nazi past and align itself with the victors.[4] The ambivalence can be seen in almost all aspects of the Holocaust film industry, where reverence for the past is met with the commodification of suffering; where emotions of horror and empathy melt with voyeurism and sensation; where shame for historical sins intermingles with pride for fulfilling the duty to repent; where symbolic gestures of concern and memory have replaced justice and responsibility. These aspects of Germany's memory culture, a particular kind of *Exportwunder*, make it resemble a cult. (The piety with which the US has started to commemorate its history of slavery, raises a question Wole Soyinka's

asked decades ago, “are certain aspects of these proceedings not […] a condonation of impunity?”[5]) Freud’s “emotional ambiguity” can be found in the trend of Germans naming their newborns after figures from the Hebrew Bible – perhaps the most blatant expression of the Freudian ambiguity as it confounds the deepest form of affection with a gesture of cultural appropriation. Lastly, it is and always has been integral to Germany’s stance towards Israel, which sustains a colonial cycle where those previously oppressed become oppressors themselves and where the former oppressor seeks redemption by enabling the subjugation of others. It is in this way that Freud’s cultural theory centers on the problem of violence and aggression. It provides an “uncomfortable” answer to the question of what kind of violence is necessary to maintain hegemonic power.

Freud’s analysis on taboos is insightful regarding another aspect. It sheds light on the mechanism of projecting internal taboos onto external figures or “demons”. Germany’s Economy Minister Robert Habeck warned on November 1st, “now that the Jews have been attacked” Muslims in Germany “must clearly distance themselves from anti-Semitism so as not to undermine their own right to tolerance.” Suddenly, Muslims in Germany must answer for the actions of the Hamas. By framing the Muslim population as a collective “demon”, the Freudian argument goes, ambiguous sentiments – historical guilt, but also hatred towards the Jew as a witness to a collective crime, or joy in the violence now committed by the sacralized enemy, etc. – can be externalized onto an ‘other’, facilitating a narrative where the defense against this ‘demon’ is framed as a moral imperative. Freud states, “the hostility, of which the survivors know nothing and moreover wish to know nothing, is ejected from internal perception into the external world, and thus detached from them and pushed on to someone else […] a wicked demon ready to gloat over their misfortunes and eager to kill them. It then becomes necessary for them, the survivors, to defend themselves against this evil enemy.”[6] Judeophobia and Islamophobia are thus parallel manifestations of bigotry, both are sustained by a mechanism absolving German society from confronting its ambiguous sentiments towards the Jews, instead shifting the focus toward a perceived external threat, the Muslims. Make no mistake, while the instrumentalization of the massacres in Israel is a political strategy of the far-right, it is a psychological mechanism of a wider society. 84 percent of antisemitic crimes in Germany are committed by right-wing white Germans – yet another taboo.

As we observe these developments, we are inclined to point at the hypocrisies of those who legitimize cycles of violence in the name of “never again”, who foster antisemitism and discriminatory laws against Muslims through claims to historical responsibilities, who silence and criminalize critical discourse under the guise of combating hate speech. In her criticism against intellectuals committed to the “unmasking of hypocrisy”, Arendt was concerned over writers, scholars and artists who yielded to the temptations of totalitarianism, precisely because, in her view, given their “bitter disappointment” and unfamiliarity with the times at which totalitarianism took root, they fail to see that “an atmosphere in which all traditional values and propositions had evaporated […] in a sense made it easier to accept patently absurd propositions than the old truths which had become pious banalities”. In the risk of sounding naïve, we

may repeat, with Arendt, our hope for Arab–Jewish cooperation "without which the whole Jewish venture in Palestine is doomed". Arendt's argument here was not just pragmatic but clearly normative, since such cooperation would show the world "that there are no differences between two peoples that cannot be bridged". The current situation, marred by inequality and injustice, cannot lead to a viable future or genuine cooperation. This is especially true if the term 'cooperation' is used with "ambivalent sentiment" in order to keep existing structures of violence in place.

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This month's issue features our coverage of the 2023 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. Martin Kudláč reviewed Tinatin Kajrishvili's *Citizen Saint*, a parable set in a remote mining town, Stephan Komanderev's *Blaga's Lessons* about the complexities of post-Soviet capitalism, and David Jařab's *Snake Gas* that adapts Conrad's immortal *The Heart of Darkness*. Colette de Castro reports from Karlovy Vary with reviews of Marija Kavtaradze's bumpy romantic drama *Slow* and Nate Pommer and Eric Weinrib's *Scream of My Blood: A Gogol Bordello Story* about musician Eugene Hütz and his eventful life.

We are happy to also publish Anzhelika Artyukh's wide-reaching survey of the "female boom" in Russian documentary film (2012-2023). The article is an insightful take on overlooked tendencies on the Russian film landscape and a welcome addition to our spotlight on critical voices from the country.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors

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