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Antisemitism Scandal and Contemporary Art: “Judaizing” in the Documenta Controversy

Introduction

Presented every five years in Kassel, Germany, Documenta is the world’s largest noncommercial exhibition of contemporary art. The most recent edition, *Documenta fifteen* (2022), generated more publicity than any before it, due to controversies about antisemitism. In the debates surrounding the international art exhibition, “the Jews” were used, not for the first time, as hermeneutic space and hermeneutic tools. In response to accusations of antisemitism leveled against the exhibition, “antisemitism” itself became such a space and such a tool.¹ A self-described postcolonial strain of criticism viewed the antisemitism charges as racist or bigoted towards exhibition artists, who largely hailed from the Global South. Defenders of the exhibition characterized *antisemitism discourse*, or *speech about and concern with antisemitism*, as legalistic, inflexible, acquisitive, vengeful, elite, conspiratorial, modernizing, and abstract—all qualities that *antisemitic discourses* ascribe to Jews and Judaism. These controversies thus suggest a category I analyze as *Judaizing antisemitism*. In this paper, we will consider how the Documenta controversies rhetorically oppose this Judaizing antisemitism to discourses of anti-racism and anti-imperialism. We will closely read scholarly and critical appraisals of these controversies to appreciate the interpretive possibilities that maintaining this opposition foreclosed.

This essay will examine in greater depth two outstanding qualitative vectors of antisemitism discourse as characterized by defenders of the exhibition: antinomianism—against legalism, or adherence to the “dead letter” of codes of speech and conduct—and abstraction. While Jewish history in the West intersects at many junctures with host societies’ negative

ascription of legalism to Jews, the Early Church formalized *antinomianism*, or the opposition to the literal practice of the (Mosaic) Law, as a core component of the Church's critique of Judaizing. Second, since the 19th century, the intellectual lineage of modern antisemitism—Marx, Weininger, Chamberlain, Rosenberg, Hitler—has inferred a cosmopolitan, antinational substrate of Jewish life; cemented an association between Jews and nonproductive, deracinated financial capital; and criticized formal and technical innovation in cultural products created by Jews.

I wish to make the claim that discussants on the exhibition characterize antisemitism discourse and antisemitism analysis in ways that relate structurally to anti-Jewish cultural forms. Postcolonial criticism of *Documenta fifteen* associated the antisemitism charges levied against the exhibition's artists and organizers with qualities of abstraction, urbanity, and malign and globally networked secret power. "Antisemitism" thus Judaizes. Wielded by "guardians of anti-antisemitism"² or "high priests of the German Catechism,"³ "antisemitism" is depicted as inimical and damaging to putatively originary or traditional social relations, such as collectivity. These authors identify the exhibition's artists, aesthetics, and organizational strategies as exponents of such a collective principle, opposing speech about antisemitism to just and organic social relations. This unit of associations, I contend, derives from the archive of modern antisemitism. Critics of the exhibition are described as legalistic, inflexible, hypocritical, and vengeful—as pharisaical, in other words. Talking about antisemitism is made legible as *Judaizing*, which is to say *doing as Jews do*. The hypothesis I want to test is that where we find commentary that talks about "antisemitism" in the same way that antisemitism talks about Jews, there we uncover a continuity with Judeophobic cultural and ideological traditions. Noting these continuities is not merely a philological exercise, but rather empowers us to identify and, if we choose, to counteract such continuity. The Documenta controversies, in their relevance to

fundamental and entangled contemporary debates—touching Holocaust memory, legacies of imperialism, Israel/Palestine, capitalism, and race—exemplify the broad applicability of this rubric of analysis. As in Christian religious anti-Judaism, in responses to *Documenta fifteen*, neither the intended targets nor the weaponizers of German antisemitism discourse (i.e. anti-antisemitism and anti-anti-antisemitism) were, in the main, Jews. Indeed, as the German-Jewish poet and public intellectual Max Czollek asserts, “the public representation of Jews [in Germany] betrays more about the self-perception of German society than it does about Jews.”⁴ Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate, self-defined “multidirectional” and “postcolonial” strains of commentary categorize *discourse of antisemitism* as deriving from anti-Jewish patterns of thought, which do ultimately negatively affect both Jews and democratic public spheres at large. As Matthew Flisfelder contends: “Zionism...has come to occupy a position that is similar to the figure of the Jew as represented in fascist ideology and rhetoric or in contemporary reactionary right-wing populism.”⁵ Below, I argue that “antisemitism” works analogously through its identification with Judaizing behavior.

I would like to offer in advance a disclaimer on the political implications of this investigation. I am not suggesting that dissatisfaction with current FRG political orthodoxies regarding Holocaust memory, Israel, antisemitism, and/or Jews is necessarily or even generally antisemitic. Indeed, these orthodoxies are very often enforced in bad faith. The press and the political right, especially the Right-radical Alternative für Deutschland party, displayed great alacrity in condemning the exhibition for perceived antisemitism, even in the absence of artistic evidence. Far from dismissing *prima facie* anti-imperialist and postcolonial critiques, I join in Jonathan Judaken’s exhortation that “scholars of antisemitism...need to engage the core narratives of anti-racism not just as critics, but also by reframing them, starting by making clear

the pivotal role played by Judeophobia as the scaffolding in the creation of racism.”⁶ Precisely this perspective is deficient in debates on *Documenta fifteen*. One can and must protest hypocritical and disingenuous opposition to antisemitism, and, especially today, abrogation of others’ freedom in its name. But to do so without care to the categories and thematic associations one uses is to risk giving substance to spurious accusations. It is, crudely, to oppose false accusations of antisemitism with complaints that the hypocritical accusers are being “too Jewish.”

What happened?

For *Documenta fifteen*, the Indonesian collective Ruangrupa was selected as curator. To guide their work, they formulated the concept of *Lumbung*, an Indonesian term for a collective rice barn, meant to ground the event in a spirit of sharing and communal participation. Rather than act as curators in a traditional sense, Ruangrupa engaged other collectives both to create work for the exhibition, and to engage yet other collectives in their turn. As a result, there was no formal curatorial control over the artistic projects themselves.

The exhibition drew attacks over charges of antisemitism from before its opening. These charges, their rebukes, and their counter-rebukes are the subject of this article. Many of the sources of conflict related to Israel, but not all. They included:

- 1.) The non-participation of any Jewish artists in the exhibition.
- 2.) Historical antizionist and antisemitic print materials in the archival exhibit
Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie
- 3.) Palestinian propaganda films from the 1970s and 1980s unearthed from a radical Japanese archive, screened as *Tokyo Reels*.

- 4.) The inclusion of the West Bank (Palestinian) collective, *The Question of Funding*.
- 5.) Collages by Gazan artist Mohammed al-Hawajri with the title *Guernica Gaza*.
- 6.) Most seriously, imagery in a large work of protest art, *People's Justice*, by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi (Figure 1). The work had been installed in the most prominent square in Kassel. These images are: an orthodox Jew with *payot* (sidelocks), a cigar, red eyes, fangs, and a bowler hat with the SS symbol (Figure 2); and an Israeli soldier as a pig (Figure 3).⁷

In the end effect, as Hauenstein notes, “the entire exhibition, curated by the Indonesian collective Ruangrupa, became a battlefield in Germany’s struggle to distinguish between critical views of Israeli policies and overt, indefensible antisemitism – identified in at least one artwork during the exhibition.”⁸ Before the exhibition opened, a fringe advocacy group associated with the *antideutsch* faction of German politics called *Bündnis gegen Antisemitismus* (BgA, “Alliance against Antisemitism”), issued an anonymous press release accusing the exhibition organizers and administrators of antisemitism for platforming *The Question of Funding*, whose members they believe support the BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction) movement, and to whose work they objected on that basis.⁹ (Briefly, the “antideutsch” movement is a political orientation that is opposed to German nationalism and uncritically supports the State of Israel. It considers itself fundamentally antifascist, but shares some tendencies, including Islamophobic attitudes, with the extreme Right.) In the days following BgA’s action, it became clear that no Jews (or Israeli Jews) were exhibiting in the exhibition. The public sphere took notice.

After the public opening, attended by the German Federal President, a smoking gun was found: the antisemitic images in the Taring Padi installation, which had placed in the most prominent square in Kassel. The organizers first elected to cover the installation over with black

cloth, and in the face of outcry had it removed three days after the opening. Ruangrupa issued formal apologies for the works. With Documenta leadership, they announced a further series of panel discussions about antisemitism in the context of hate and bias. They then abruptly cancelled these with the note that they wanted the show to speak for itself. The artist Hito Steyerl, likely *Documenta fifteen*'s most prominent participating artist, very publicly removed her works from the exhibition. She stated, "I have no faith in the organization's ability to mediate and translate complexity" in regard to the antisemitism charges, and referred to "the repeated refusal to facilitate a sustained and structurally anchored inclusive debate around the exhibition, as well as the virtual refusal to accept mediation."¹⁰

Permanent Documenta leadership was also obviously implicated. The director, Sabine Schormann, called on a number of experts to try to put together a scholarly panel that would review the entire Documenta and produce reports and writings that would be of use for study as well as looking closely for blind spots. The leadership of the panel was offered to the director of the Anne Frank Center, the Israeli-Jewish scholar Meron Mendel. Mendel had publicly defended the exhibition since the first rumors of antisemitism and accepted the offer. But after the suggestion of the panel, no further action was taken. He then withdrew his participation as well, stating that "in dealing with the current antisemitism scandal, I don't see a serious will to work through the events and enter into an honest dialogue."¹¹ While a committee was ultimately formed to study antisemitism in the exhibition, Ruangrupa refused to cooperate with it. And finally, Ruangrupa, together with a number of artists in the show, circulated their own document decrying attacks on Ruangrupa as in themselves racist.¹² Schormann, the director, left Documenta, by "mutual agreement" with the board. The exhibition continued the scheduled 100 days, until September 25, but continued to draw extensive negative publicity.

On the one hand, the controversy is entangled with broadly applicable ideas about the Holocaust and about Jews that underpin or underpinned the global postwar and post-Soviet neoliberal order. In this context, Enzo Traverso has defined a “civil religion of the Holocaust,” and Adam Sutcliffe writes of “redemptive anti-antisemitism.”¹³ On the other hand, we must understand the firestorm over the exhibition in the context of specifically German phenomena of national self-understanding, ideology, and image, such as the German government’s anti-antizionism, and an active tradition of semi-official, surface-level philosemitism that has left many underlying Judeophobic attitudes in place and intact. On this understanding of Germany, “Jews” and “Israel” are centrally important to explanations of what it means for the FRG to be a liberal democracy that is also the successor state to the Third Reich. Germany has, of course, a particular history as regards both antisemitism and antisemitism discourse. This history has shaped Germany’s national project of memory culture (*Erinnerungskultur*) and “overcoming the past,” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Commentators across the ideological spectrum viewed the realization of *Documenta fifteen*, which for the first time was entrusted to a collective, as fundamentally at odds with this project—either for good or for ill.

Judaizing and Antinomianism

But what is Judaizing? David Nirenberg cites Galatians 2, in which Paul admonishes Peter “for refusing to eat with gentile converts,” as the source of the Christian understanding of the verb “to Judaize,” which is to say, to do as Jews do.

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.¹⁴

Judaizing and Judaizers are mired in this world rather than the next, the letter rather than the spirit, and the flesh rather than the soul. As Nirenberg writes:

[Paul's] logic identified with Jews and Judaism a cardinal category of error for the believer in Jesus—that of giving excessive attention to the “flesh” of the text and of the person...[F]ar from making “Jewishness” an irrelevant particularity...in the new creation, Paul's letter to the Galatians would help to turn it into a key term of epistemological and ontological critique.¹⁵

Thus, this essay seeks to understand the ways in which Judaizing functions as behavioral critique of antisemitism discourse. Already in its Pauline point of origin, then, Judaizing gives birth to antinomianism, its first principle of analysis. As the Swedish theologian Jesper Svartvik puts it, antinomianism “refers to the understanding that the message of Jesus and Paul was that the Torah is a burden that has to be removed in order to free people for service in the kingdom of God.”¹⁶ See, for instance, 2 Corinthians:

Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. (2 Cor: 3-6)

Not least because this concept—that the old law is a yoke, at best onerous and at worst inimical to salvation through Christ—is easy to understand and to teach, it has been profoundly influential in the Church's teaching about Jews. Teter (2025) instructively cites Augustine's *Answer to Faustus* as an originary moment.¹⁷ In Book 12, Chapter 13, of Augustine's text, he relates the (Jewish) law and its observance to the mark of Cain.¹⁸ For him, this observance demonstrates that Jews are “set apart” from other nations as witness both to their crime (the death of Christ) and to Christianity's divinity. As Teter makes clear, the “Cain metaphor...allowed Augustine to

compare Jews to Cain, stamping them for posterity with a badge of the archetypal murderer.”

The Law is both a punishment and a public imputation of crime, a curse made visible.

Antinomianism has helped to shape Christian thinking about Jews ever since.

Antisemitism Discourse and Antinomian Critique

How is this theology relevant? In their defense of *Documenta fifteen*, Ruangrupa connect colonialist racism and cruelty with antisemitism discourse through the antinomian characteristics of literalism, inflexibility, and spiritual bankruptcy. When the supervisory board of Documenta recommended convening an expert committee on antisemitism to study the exhibition, Ruangrupa, together with several of the artist collectives, published a letter stridently refusing to cooperate, saying: “We are deeply disappointed that you chose to ignore the racism and violence that the artists and the artistic direction and team have been exposed to over the past eight months.”¹⁹ Attending to antisemitism, in other words, not only constitutes a misuse of attention, but also entails “ignoring” racism and thereby, by implication, supports racism. Antisemitism discourse, as constituted by the expert panel, is, then, far from a helpful means of analysis, but rather a means of oppression. The statement continues:

This environment of intimidation, suspicion, and censorship is untenable and some of the collectives in the exhibition have been experiencing it for far too long. Therefore, we collectively and categorically object to your recommendation to “enter a process of consultation with scholars from the fields of contemporary anti-Semitism,” or any re-examination of the artworks. We will not accept any result that comes from such re-examination.

Indeed there had been racist critiques and even vandalism of the exhibition. But here antisemitism discourse, as constituted by the expert panel, is a means not of analysis but of oppression. In an interview with *Monopol* three days before the exhibition’s closing, Ruangrupa member Farid Rakun said the “red lines” precluding cooperation with the committee studying

antisemitism in the exhibition included “calling the committee *wissenschaftlich*.”²⁰ That comes from colonial history. *Wissenschaft* can be used and was used to label people and to delegitimize. That is nothing new.”²¹ Rakun here expresses the view that convening the expert committee represents an instance of the state exercise of power that is both on a continuum with and an extension of colonialism. A month previously, the collective had given an interview to the *Berliner Tagesspiegel* in which Ruangrupa’s Reza Afisina claimed that “in Indonesia, not like in Germany, there is not yet a proper vocabulary to articulate what an antisemitic motif is. Only through the debate did we learn what a sensitive subject antisemitism is in Germany.”²² The assertion that in Indonesia a fanged Jew with *payot* and a cigar, painted among identified agents of oppression, could not be apprehended as prejudicial to Jews is at the very least debatable. But further, and interestingly, Afisina here seems to claim that the *lack* of an appropriately equipped discourse was the problem. A closer look at his statement however suggests that the problem of antisemitism is only a problem *in Germany* or *because of Germany* (“only through the debate did we learn what a sensitive subject antisemitism is *in Germany*”) (emphasis added). Under cover of acknowledging the sophistication of antisemitism discourse, Afisina portrays the concern with antisemitism as a local particularity: as, in other words, parochial. For Afisina, while antisemitism is strictly immaterial on its own terms—namely harm to Jews—*wielding* claims of antisemitism does indeed have injurious effects, not on Jews, but on other minoritized groups, including the artists and organizers of *Documenta fifteen*.

In a 2022 blog post, Michael Rothberg offered a more nuanced response along these lines. But in his piece too, antisemitism is a discursive construct whose material victims are those against whom its accusations are leveled, not those whom antisemitism itself addresses. In repeated reference to Germany’s “guardians of anti-antisemitism” and “anti-antisemitism

watchdogs,” he suggests that it is they—undifferentiated media and political representatives of the establishment—who command and control the policing of these borders. He describes anti-antisemitism—a form of antisemitism discourse—as being *for*: the State of Israel, German “memory culture,” and German “discursive provincialism.” It is *against*: Islam, the “Global South,” “postcolonialism,” “reflexivity,” “irony,” and “multidirectionality,” the paradigm in memory studies for which Rothberg himself is justly renowned.

Indeed, in his book on the subject, Rothberg lays out with exemplary clarity the discursive characteristics most problematically absent in the Documenta debate. In the justly celebrated *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg asserts that setting the Holocaust “against global histories of racism, slavery, and colonialism” represents an “ugly contest of comparative victimization.”²³ He also considers cases “where memory’s multidirectionality functions in the interests of violence or exclusion instead of solidarity” (12). Indeed, Rothberg’s pathbreaking book explicitly calls for an “ethical vision based on commitment to uncovering historical relatedness and working through the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics” (29). Asserting the necessity of attending to the particularity of historical traumas, while acknowledging that “comparisons, analogies, and other multidirectional invocations are an inevitable part of the struggle for justice,” he closely and approvingly reads texts, such as Schwarz-Bart’s *A Woman Named Solitude* and Caryl Phillips’ *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*, that deploy “an aesthetic premised on nonappropriative hospitality to histories of the other,” juxtaposing violence against Jews and against colonial subjects. The conception, however, and implementation of *Documenta fifteen* and indeed many or even all of the works criticized as antisemitic display just such a hospitality to others’ remembered pasts, calling more or less openly for viewers’ solidarity with oppressed groups that

are not their own. With artist-archivists hailing in part from different countries and contexts than the works selected and displayed, and those works in turn gesturing yet elsewhere, to Israel/Palestine, *Tokyo Reels* and *Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie* in themselves represent transnational and transhistorical gestures of solidarity. As Rothberg eloquently writes, “multidirectional memory is often the very grounds on which people construct and act upon visions of justice,” and his scholarship assiduously illuminates strategies by which memories of the suffering of Jews and of other groups can push memory “beyond zero-sum logic” and contribute to each other’s recognition and redress (19-20). However, as we have seen, structurally lacking from *Documenta fifteen* was any explicit concern with Jewish histories, even as a reference point. In Germany, of all places, this lack suggests exclusion, and begs the question: why?

In his blog post, Rothberg’s target is a “provincialism” that stops at Germany’s “discursive borders.” Here again, antisemitism is a discursive creature whose material victims are those against whom its accusations are leveled, not those whom antisemitism itself degrades. In identifying a certain strain of Judaizing-critique in the trope of zealously guarding the textual law, I am not suggesting that Rothberg is deploying antisemitism for his own forensic purposes; nor do I dispute his important diagnosis of “one of the truisms of recent German discourse on antisemitism—that it’s a problem of Muslims.” I am merely registering the qualities attributed to *antisemitism discourse* in Rothberg’s argumentation. Antisemitism discourse has been instrumentalized, for Rothberg, to “confirm [...] prejudices”—hardly a welcome project on its face. To state the obvious, this discourse itself is Rothberg’s forensic antagonist. We can characterize his stance as anti-anti-antisemitic.

Indeed, as Max Czollek notes, strictures against antisemitism in Germany are most publicly and most commonly enforced against minorities and perceived “outsiders.”²⁴ As in the Documenta debates, memory culture—most prominently antisemitism discourse—is used to “discipline” these outsiders. And yet what crucially differentiates Czollek’s thought here from Rothberg’s notes on Documenta is that for Czollek, German society has dealt too little, and not too much, with antisemitism. Speaking more about all varieties of antisemitism can help to loosen this discourse from extrinsic political agendas, and in the process can raise awareness about injustices done both to Jews and to other minorities groups. Recognizing antisemitic characterizations of antisemitism discourse can, in clarifying structures of thought, aid in this project. This interpretive perspective is especially needed now, as political discourse and civil society seek to identify and censure antisemitism in the radical Right, including the increasingly prominent *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party. Given the ferocity of this movement’s rhetoric not only towards societal antagonists (notably immigrants and Muslims) but also towards its critics, the terms in which the German Right respond to allegations of antisemitism will warrant close analysis along these lines.

Rothberg’s polemic against deploying antisemitism discourse upon *Documenta fifteen* is gentle in comparison with that of his frequent collaborator A. Dirk Moses. A review of his concept of the “German Catechism” informs a reading of his Documenta critique. In his hotly disputed 2021 essay “The German Catechism,” Moses, too, had taken aim at parochialistic legalism, for him bounded by a five-point “catechism” which, he alleges, defines current German political and ideological orthodoxy. Three of his five points concern antisemitism. As Philip Spencer,²⁵ Saul Friedländer,²⁶ and others have noted, Moses makes fulsome use of figures commonly identified with antisemitism to describe this “catechism” and those who hold to it. He

insists, for instance, on the “high priestly” nature of the “guardians” of the fatally inflexible catechism.²⁷ In doing so, he recalls ancient patterns of Christian religious anti-Judaism, especially antinomianism. Moses’ essay effects an identification of antisemitism discourse, as based in Holocaust memory, with German nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, as well as with troubling tropes of overt Judeophobia. His contribution to *Hyper-Zionism* (Kundnani, 2025) reinforces this interpretation.²⁸ In it, he reiterates the “ritual incantation” of the catechism’s postulates and avers that the formulation is clerical and Christian (rather than antisemitic). He writes that:

“[The five points] seemed to me to amount to a ‘catechism’ because I saw how they were ritually incanted and unquestioned secular articles of faith. I also observed how prominent members of the political class (‘elites’) guarded them against sections of the population they don’t trust. Given the general cultural Christianity of the *Bildungsbürgertum*...this all looked very Christian and clerical to me.”

As I hope to have shown, these characteristics are, in Nirenberg’s sense, exactly the Judaizing element against which a certain tendency in Christianity has dialectically differentiated itself, whether it be the in the Church Fathers, Martin Luther, or Jerry Falwell.

These recent statements clarify tendencies of Moses’s analysis of the Documenta scandals. In a rhetorically charged contribution to *Grey Room*, Moses’ (2025) enemy remains antisemitism discourse, to which he ascribes the agentive organization of a “campaign against” the exhibition that “succeeded in crystallizing new tropes in German public discourse: ‘postcolonial antisemitism’ and ‘antisemitism of all types.’” Indeed, he goes beyond the claims of his catechism essay when he writes that the Documenta affair reinforces “increasingly authoritarian German public culture” (85). For him, the controversy demonstrates a tendency in which “in trying to master the Nazi past, Germans ended up reproducing the exclusionary structures and illiberalism they were trying to overcome.” An academic panel’s report, a product

of antisemitism discourse, is on this understanding of a kind with actions of the Nazi state, and public pressure to relieve two members of Ruangrupa from guest professorships at the University for Fine Arts in Hamburg is identifiable as “cleansing.” In these cases, antisemitism discourse expresses hidden, networked, and repressive power, in proximity to hurt, bad faith, and a Manichean expression of good or evil. Especially in times, like our own, of real ethnic and ideological cleansing, these remarks stand out as unhelpful generalizations. What is most important for this article, however, is the target of Moses’ argument, antisemitism discourse, and how it is described: as illiberal, authoritarian, fascistic—and also as dangerously and malignantly legalistic and inflexible, which latter are constitutive categories of Judaizing.

Inimical abstraction

A second Judaizing strand equally marks these debates, namely abstraction. Critics defending *Documenta fifteen* not only devalued antisemitism discourse as abstract, but praised the practice of representational art over-against formal abstraction, which they portrayed as a vector of malign, oppressive globalism. In the US progressive magazine *In These Times*, Panthea Lee sketches a narrative of representational aesthetics and political efficacy as they relate to the artistic forms employed by Taring Padi and other artists she deems “collectivist.” Work like Taring Padi’s “is the type of art—figurative, political, collectivist—that Western powers, led by the United States, have tried to extinguish.”²⁹ In telling an abbreviated story of the cultural Cold War that recapitulates (but does not cite) arguments from Frances Stonor Saunders’ fine book on the topic, she posits an adversarial relationship between “collective struggle,” which is aligned with representational and figurative art practices, and the allegedly apolitical “abstraction” and “individual introspection” that characterized work funded by the CIA through the Congress for

Cultural Freedom and other intermediaries.³⁰ (She does not note, though she might, that Documenta itself was founded as a German contribution to the Cold War cultural project of Modern Art.) In Lee's reading, we may recognize patterns of association that are common to modern thought about capitalism, Europe, and Jews. Her core claim is that artistic abstraction is inimical to collectivity, and that by eschewing it, "ruangrupa insists on the beauty and possibilities of art as radical, bottom-up organizing." Those who questioned or condemned *Documenta fifteen* are enemies of collectivism: "across human history, collectivism has...been the norm. Capitalism has tried to discredit it as inefficient, naïve, and backward. But at *Documenta fifteen*, artists reclaimed their inheritance." Artistic form, community alignment, and emancipatory or anti-emancipatory potential are inextricable.

Recognizing the heuristic dyad of community and society helps us parse Lee's aesthetic politics. Lars Fischer (2017) teases out affinities between this dichotomy in Ferdinand Tönnies and Marx's opposition of civil society and human species being.³¹ He maps these onto the qualities Tönnies attached to community or *Gemeinschaft* (like kinship, neighborhood, friendship") and to society or *Gesellschaft* (like "anonymity of relations"). While *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by collective ownership and "the unity of ends and means," *Gesellschaft* privileges machines over workers, materialism and relativism over idealism, and legalism over custom. Antisemitism discourse falls, perhaps predictably, under what we can call the *Gesellschaft* column for Lee. She subsumes the antisemitism debates under a subheading called, in boldface type, "Power Fights Back." Antisemitism discourse, in other words, is a weapon of *Gesellschaft* to silence the voices of "communities," or even "community" as such. With reference to Marx and Tönnies' schemes, antisemitism discourse opposes human species being and *Gemeinschaft*, respectively.

The role of antisemitism in the history of 20th century German Left thought is by no means consistent, nor is its character even generally agreed upon in the current scholarly record.³² That said, meaningful segments of Left discourse have at various times openly aligned with reactionary thought in associating Jews with tropes of *Gesellschaft* (and vice versa), most especially capital (*Judenkapital*). Though he draws somewhat different conclusions from the evidence than I do, Hanloser (2020) observes the troubling tendency in the German Left of the Weimar period to trade in anticapitalist antisemitism, or, more charitably, to tolerate antisemitism in the name of class struggle. The KPD chair Ruth Fisher, for instance, is quoted as saying, in 1923, “[y]ou speak out against Jewish capital [*Judenkapital*], gentlemen? Whoever speaks out against Jewish capital is already engaged in the class struggle, whether or not he knows it yet.”³³ Similar lines, delivered by the KPD exponent Hermann Remmele, earned cheers from Fascist activists. Part of the shared ideological armamentarium of both radical movements was the glorification of rural workers and the proletariat over-against financial capitalism and personifications of *Gesellschaft*. This ideology, enshrined as official state thought under NS government, persisted in the GDR. East German official language likewise appealed to an authentic *Volk* of “farmers and workers.” In dictating the subjects and treatment of ideologically valuable art, this orientation undergirded the sole officially sanctioned artistic style of the GDR’s opening decades, Socialist Realism. As Ursula Peters and Roland Prügel (2009) note, “socialist realism called for an affirmative and, at the same time, standardized depiction of ‘happy people’ engaged in building socialism. Works that did not fit into this approach were dismissed wholesale as ‘formalist.’”³⁴ Artistic abstraction was categorically suspect in the GDR.

In the FRG, however, “a consensus was reached on an abstract artistic idiom freed of all ties to subject matter or ideology. ‘Lack of substance’ was equated with ‘freedom’ and

considered a sign of absolute artistic autonomy” (73). In their conception of Capitalist Realism, artists like Sigmar Polke, who was born in East Berlin but moved to the West as a child, and Gerhard Richter, who emigrated as an adult, employed abstract representation while explicitly problematizing its inscription in the capitalist marketplace. Part of the artistic appeal as well as of the perceived ideological utility of abstract art during the Cold War was its capacity to answer back to Socialist Realism. Dialectically, part of the appeal, e.g. for Lee, of what we might call the postcolonial figurativism valorized at *Documenta fifteen* may be its capacity, in turn, to answer back to Capitalist Realism. However, as Postone (1980) writes:

“Any ‘anti-capitalism’ which seeks the immediate negation of the abstract and glorifies the concrete—instead of practically and theoretically considering what the historical overcoming of both could mean—can, at best, be socially and politically impotent in the face of capital. At worst it can be dangerous, even if the needs it expresses could be interpreted as emancipatory”³⁵

An immediate and necessary casualty of abjuring abstraction as such is clarity about the role of Judaizing in such thought. But we can go further: to make abstraction itself an enemy is to deprive art and thought alike of capacity to engage and to represent capitalist society in its complexity.

Judaizing and overreading: Jews and pigs

To consider the possibility that overlooking the Judaizing of antisemitism discourses forecloses important avenues of interpretation, let us return to *People’s Justice* and its Israeli pig. The European and particularly German context of depictions of Jews as pigs goes some distance towards explaining the heightened tenor of reactions to *People’s Justice*. Scholars like Shachar (1974)³⁶ and Jay Geller (2017)³⁷ have closely traced the figure of the *Judensau* (“a large sow

with Jews kneeling beneath it suckling at every teat.” On the famous painting of the *Judensau* that adorned the Old Main Bridge in Frankfurt, Geller writes:

However much this particular representation may have been employed to render ‘the Jew’ grotesque and ludicrous, whether with images of Jews suckling at the sow’s teats and engaging in anilingus, through captions informing the viewer that Jews employ pig feces to heal their scabs and otherwise clean themselves, or by evoking the foetor Judaicus (the Jewish stench), it also portended the Jewish threat to Christian existence by depicting the ritually murdered corpse of Simon of Trent hovering above the porcine scene.³⁸

Martin Luther’s infamously commented on the *Judensau* of Wittenberg, describing rabbis seeking the Talmud inside the sow’s anus, and as recently as 2022 a German case about the legality of the continued public display of that work roiled German public spheres.³⁹ (It speaks to the selectivity of outrage against perceived antisemitism that while *People’s Justice* was speedily removed, the *Judensau* of Wittenberg remains where it has been for centuries.)

That Rothberg does not engage with this context (beyond a passing reference to the court case on the Wittenberg *Judensau*, which he somewhat unexpectedly does not explicitly link to the images he is ostensibly interpreting) is surely evidence neither of ignorance nor of antisemitism on his part. Its absence, however, points to the stakes, as Rothberg sees them, in this discussion. The *People’s Justice* debate reveals “a world far more interconnected and porous than German commentators would like to assert.” A world, in other words, that better acknowledges and accords with Rothberg’s own concept of multidirectional memory, to which he makes abundant reference in this piece, and to whose reception in the German-speaking world he has devoted a great deal of print and has described as having unleashed a *Historikerstreit 2.0*.⁴⁰ “Simply reaffirming a ‘special’ German sensitivity to antisemitism is inadequate as a response to an event like the Documenta controversy,” Rothberg observes. This is quite true, and yet it is a trope that has been used by Ruangrupa’s critics as well as, as we have seen, by the collective’s members themselves.

Rothberg sees the Israeli pig as “clearly one of a series of nearly identical military figures with largely similar faces and uniforms.” But I believe that he misses something important here and that it relates to the tendency to overlook or excuse the Judaizing of antisemitism charges. Rothberg contends that the Mossad figure, by virtue of its placement in a cohort of representatives of international military intelligence, refers to the State of Israel rather than to Jews, and therefore has “little to do with singling out Jews or even to do with Jewishness at all.” We cannot divine the intent of the Mossad figure’s inclusion in *People’s Justice*. But Rothberg’s argumentation that the figure is “clearly one of a series of nearly identical military figures with largely similar faces and uniforms” is not proven by the pictorial evidence. The “M-I5 [sic]” figure directly to the right of the Mossad agent is not drawn in a flattering way, but neither is it “nearly identical” nor even “largely similar” to the porcine face to its left.

I rather read these pigs as describing a porcine principle, one of networked, legalistic, dehumanizing violence against indigenous collectivity, marked by proximity to the Jewish. The *chazerei* of colonialist *Gesellschaft* so to speak, motivates and executes imperial rapacity. The image Rothberg supplies, of the work *Taring Padi – carrying pigs*, to demonstrate that the Israeli pig is unexceptional in its pictorial context in *People’s Justice*, actually undermines his argument. In *carrying pigs*, a grouping of sympathetically rendered humans holds up bottles of hot sauce and alcohol. In a pen, pigs in military berets stick out their snouts, with sinister faces of undifferentiated yellow and green (Figure 4). The painting enacts a fantasy of revenge, in which oppressed, collectivized individuals feast on their anonymous, dehumanized enemy. The pig-faced figures stand in clear alterity to the people who intend to consume them. Thus, that there are indeed pigs in Taring Padi’s corpus does not preclude negative association with this figure. Nor does it vitiate the fact that the presumably Israeli agent, or in any case the one with a helmet

reading MOSSAD and a star of David on his neckerchief, is the only one of the twelve soldiers in this grouping to be depicted with the face of a pig.

In *People's Justice*, I count three pigs aside from the Israeli one, all of which pictorially and ideologically connect to the fanged Jew with payot. In the dock, behind bars, at the top of the pictorial space and beneath only the people's tribunal is a horizontal grouping with a feline predator, a snake, a crocodile, a rat, and a monkey, all with business attire. Looking down upon the tableau of oppression and resistance, these animal figures suggest a string-pulling cabal behind bars. A fanged pig occupies the center of this rogue's gallery. The pig's fangs link it to the bowler-hatted Jew below and, by the way, to the trope of the Jew as vampire.⁴¹

Next, a figure with a porcine nose and pink skin tone looks is positioned above the foreign intelligence service operatives. A demonic figure with angelic wings holds out cash to this figure, while the pig, eyes emblazoned with a wheel spoke pattern possibly suggesting demonic attention to the spectacles of oppression, holds what appears to be a sandwich in front of its mouth, engaging tropes of media control, greed, and sensuous gluttony, and raising the question of an "end user" in the West whose nonproductive consumption necessitates the suffering inflicted elsewhere in the image.

Last, a character Rothberg identifies as a Black American soldier has the face of a boar, its tusks inverting the Jew's fangs. He holds a large penis in his hand and either urinates or ejaculates on a grave marked "Iraq." To note the gendered and racialized difference between the boar and the picture's pigs, we need not posit that the Taring Padi artists were discursively familiar with the relevant antisemitic and racist tropes of Jews as feminized intellectuals secretly ordering violence and destruction effected by hypermasculinized Blacks. Still, we need to accept an ideological consistency in the works' depictions of cycles of oppression with antisemitic

systems of thought. The fanged Jew then was not just an errant detail in a monumental exhibition. Pointing out the possibilities for antisemitism in this crude politics is not necessarily an exercise in bigotry, and overlooking these possibilities can impoverish critical analysis.

Beyond anti-antisemitism

It would be cynical—and precisely the sort of move Rothberg and others have rightly sought to redress through multidirectional conceptions of cultural memory—to conclude that attention to antisemitism and attention to the harms of globalization and imperialism necessarily stand in inverse ratio to one another. Zygmunt Bauman’s thought helps us to see that the hunt for antisemitism in the exhibition bears a family relationship to antisemitism itself, linked by epistemological and affective habits of intolerance for ambiguity and ambivalence.

Understanding this genealogy of these phobias offers hope for a perspective that encompasses both the injustices done to the Documenta artists and curators (and to those for whom they hope to speak) and the underlying anti-Judaism of their thought. For Bauman (1998), the quest for true/false, good/bad answers to complex social questions has epitomized the hatred of Jews. He has argued that, over many centuries, Christian Europe has cast Jews—being neither pagan nor un-pagan—as “ambivalence incarnate.”⁴² Jews represented the limits of Christian belief systems, and incoherence of all kinds was foisted onto them. “Ambivalence is the one enemy without which order cannot live,” writes Bauman, and thus modern societies, with their mania for order and homogeneity, found an enemy ready-made for them in the figure of the Jew. Modern antisemitism is inseparable from the advances in science, technology, thought, and infrastructure that the last two centuries have seen.

While it was certainly not the intent of the organizers and agencies who called for expert, *wissenschaftlich* investigation of the exhibition, we can nonetheless understand the rush on the part of the press and the establishment to use “science,” rather than dialogue, to judge the acceptability of artworks as part of the same fundamentally binary, with-us-or-against-us impulse that motivates not only antisemitism but also so many other related hatreds. What does not fit in our society must be identified and excised.⁴³ Bauman’s insights suggest strategies to integrate antisemitism analysis into broader critiques of modernity, postmodernity, and capitalism/imperialism. One vehicle for a more capacious and responsive critique is to expand, and not to elide or to deride, our readings for antisemitic figurations within figurations of antisemitism. If commentary on antisemitism discourse endows it with Judaizing features, such commentary likely does not take into account the substrate Judeophobia shares with *Wissenschaft*, racism, and imperialism. Such thought is harmful to Jews, yes, and is also inimical to a clearer and more usable understanding of Judeophobia’s role in constituting modern systems of oppression.

Conclusion

The long-term effects of the *Documenta fifteen* scandals on public subvention of art in Germany and on the institution of Documenta remain unclear. Since the October 7 attacks, political efforts, championed by Berlin’s culture senator, Joe Chialo, to bar public funding for art categorized as antisemitic have unleashed furious protests in Berlin and elsewhere.⁴⁴ This “antisemitism clause” has been viewed as a political ploy to muzzle the freedom of an unruly arts sector.

Organizationally, Documenta has made substantive efforts in response to the difficulties raised by the 2022 edition. In May 2023, it commissioned an independent scholarly review of the

exhibition, headed by Nichole Deitelhoff, expressly to examine “anti-Semitism incidents” at *Documenta fifteen*.⁴⁵ Informed by the review’s findings, it has put in place new forms of oversight for artworks and curation. Perhaps most significant among these measures is the institution of a Code of Conduct meant to serve as “a guideline for the conduct expected of documenta.”⁴⁶ This Code enshrines principles under which “business administration” and “exhibitions” alike are expected to operate, and provides the administration with a lever by means of which it may address, independently of the Artistic Director, artistic expression it considers “in conflict with the principles of conduct.” Tellingly, the first item these principles “oppose” is “all forms of anti-Semitism,” which is to be adjudicated based on the capacious and heavily debated International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition. Documenta has moreover selected the American curator Naomi Beckwith, formerly of the Whitney Museum, as Artistic Director of the next edition of the exhibition, to take place in 2027. Her engagement represents a return to the single-curator model that prevailed before *Documenta fifteen*, suggesting that there is little appetite to repeat the collectivist experiment. The extent to which artists, organizers, and German and international public spheres characterize these new institutional measures as inflexible, legalistic tools of repressive, networked power will serve as a test case for this article’s arguments.

In the end, we must, in my opinion, acknowledge that Ruangrupa were treated poorly by the Documenta administration. It was unfair to their work that a fraction of the art exhibited was made to stand for the entire project, and that the organizing collective was made to bear the greatest share of negative publicity for it. It is however also true that the spirit of collectivity to which they aspired for the exhibition de facto excluded Jewish people, while abounding in negative representations of Jews, and that the reasons for these facts demand attention.

Ruangrupa's vision called for trust among artists and organizers, and along the way a serious oversight took place, probably first on the part of Taring Padi for not closely examining all the work they intended to share with the art world, or for not having informed themselves that *biens pensants* in Germany would not abide, for instance, an image of an orthodox Jew with fangs and an SS band across his bowler. As the curators of record, however, it was Ruangrupa's responsibility to initiate and execute critical discussion about *People's Justice* and other implicated works in advance. Yet they either did not see the work, did not anticipate it would be more than usually problematic in the context of an anticapitalist exhibition funded by The West, or a combination of these motives with indifference. Perhaps this oversight even reflected approval of the content, as conditioned by the symbolic power of the Jew.

The hermeneutic Jew and the Judaizer have found a strange new life in the figure of antisemitism discourse itself. We need not assume that the artists of Taring Padi are citing the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or Renaud Camus in giving Jews a role as coordinating and controlling global disorder and violence against traditional collectivized communities. Nor must we accuse Left-aligned commentators of deliberately coded antisemitism for decrying the racist effects of capitalism and colonialism. Just the same, what Nirenberg terms the "mask" of Judaizing, or the "pedagogical fear that gives enduring form to some of the key concepts and questions in the history of thought," is manifestly present in these debates.⁴⁷

Forty years ago, Postone wrote, "[l]earning from the past' must also include learning the lesson of anti-Semitism, of foreshortened 'anti-capitalism'" and moreover that "[t]he Left once made the mistake of thinking that it had the monopoly on anti-capitalism or, conversely, that all forms of anti-capitalism are, at least potentially, progressive."⁴⁸ The German and international responses to *Documenta fifteen* demonstrate that these lessons have not been durably or

uniformly assimilated. When “antisemitism” is used both unjustly to discredit and unfairly to exculpate, we do ourselves a disservice by ignoring the continuities of rhetorical and forensic figures of Judaizing in today’s public spheres. Not all charges of antisemitism are fair or levied in good faith. But some of them are. Not all rebukes of these charges are antisemitic in nature. But some of them are. In the conflicts yet to come, recognizing Judaizing “antisemitism”—figures of Judaizing like abstraction and legalism applied to the discourse about antisemitism—can help us to tell the difference.



Figure 1. People's Justice, Taring Padi (installation view)



Figure 3. People's Justice, Taring Padi (detail)



Figure 2. People's Justice, Taring Padi (detail)



Figure 4. Taring Padi - carrying pigs (detail)

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Notes

¹ I use “*antisemitism*” and *antisemitism discourse* interchangeably. If not otherwise noted, translations from German are my own.

² Rothberg, “Learning and Unlearning with Taring Padi.”

³ Moses, “The German Catechism.”

⁴ Czollek, *Desintegriert Euch!*, 190.

⁵ Flisfeder, “The Persistence of the Jewish Question in Socialist Struggle: Rethinking Global Antisemitism and Emancipatory Universality,” 36.

⁶ Judaken, “Reckoning with Postcolonial Judeophobia after October 7 and the Gaza War,” 317.

⁷ A large, complete image of *People’s Justice* is available at <https://madsack-rndde-prod.web.archive.org/resizer/v2/NHDNHIOFIBCGDHKX4M4AHWTSCI.jpeg?auth=e0954a458b9a1762c9693f81e1710690d4be92edfdac3d9b9a222de7ba7fd36d&width=6048&height=3402&smart=true&quality=70>.

⁸ Hauenstein, “The Crisis of German Culture.”

⁹ “Antisemitismus-Vorwürfe gegen die Documenta: Oberbürgermeister Geselle bezieht Stellung.”

¹⁰ Dafoe, “Steyerl Has Pulled Her Work from Documenta.”

¹¹ Katharina Heflik, “Antisemitismusvorwürfe: Meron Mendel beendet Beratertätigkeit bei Documenta Fifteen.”

¹² “Censorship Must Be Refused: Letter from Lumbung Community”

¹³ Sutcliffe, “Whose Feelings Matter?” 222–42. Sutcliffe locates as the beginning of “redemptive anti antisemitism” the end of the Cold War and the attendant collapse of ideological systems as grounds for identification. This collapse brought a need for new terms of moral social cohesion, a vacuum filled by the Holocaust and Jewish suffering. Sutcliffe views this investiture of Jewish suffering as of a piece with the Jews’ traditional eschatological role as “light to the nations,” in other words a purpose, both for the gentiles, and for the Jews.

¹⁴ Gal. 2:16 (KJV).

¹⁵ Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism : The Western Tradition*, 59.

¹⁶ Svartvik, “Jewish Foundations of the New Testament.”

¹⁷ Teter, *Christian Supremacy*, 19–24.

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum, Book XII*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140612.htm>.

¹⁹ “Censorship Must Be Refused: Letter from Lumbung Community”

²⁰ Unlike in English, *Wissenschaft* refers both to the sciences and to the academic humanities. While the discussion was likely in English, the interview was published in German, and it is unclear which word Rakun originally used.

²¹ “Documenta-Fazit mit Ruangrupa.”

²² “Documenta-Macher: Keiner hört richtig hin.”

²³ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

²⁴ He also usefully explains that in a German context, the label “postcolonial” is laden with the same charge and baggage as “Critical Race Theory” is in the US.

²⁵ Spencer, “The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression by Dirk Moses (Review).”

²⁶ Friedländer, “A Fundamentally Singular Crime”

²⁷ Nor is the proscription on such non-catechistic speech universally perceived as one that actually obtains in Germany. As Elbe (2024), referencing Piorkowski (2021), notes, “the phenomena, common in Germany, of the wish to have done with the Holocaust (*Schlussstrichmentalität*)...and the propagation of Israel-related antisemitism in all

political camps” render Moses’ diagnoses of “prescribed catechisms, dictated discourses, and feelings determined by Israel” difficult to substantiate (Elbe, 123).

²⁸ Moses, “Hyper-Zionism and Israel.”

²⁹ Lee, “What Does Collectivist Art Look Like?”

³⁰ Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*.

³¹ Fischer, “Marxism’s Other Jewish Questions.”

³² See Herf (2024), Benz and Wetterau (2020), and Hanloser (ed. 2020) for sharply differing recent accounts.

³³ Hanloser, ed., *Linker Antisemitismus?*, 40.

³⁴ Peters and Prügel, “The Legacy of Critical Realism in East and West,” 66.

³⁵ Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism,” 115.

³⁶ Shachar, *The Judensau*.

³⁷ Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*.

³⁸ Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*, 35-6.

³⁹ “Here in Wittenberg, in our parish church, there is a sow carved into the stone under which lie young pigs and Jews who are sucking; behind the sow stands a rabbi who is lifting up the right leg of the sow, raises behind the sow, bows down and looks with great effort into the Talmud under the sow, as if he wanted to read and see something most difficult and exceptional; no doubt they gained their Shem Hamphoras from that place...” “Vom Schem Hamphoras” (1543).

⁴⁰ Michael Rothberg, “Lived Multidirectionality.”

⁴¹ Halberstam, “Technologies of Monstrosity.”

⁴² Bauman, “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern.”

⁴³ Ginzburg, “Postface,” 428-9. For Carlo Ginzburg, contra Bauman and Nirenberg, it is rather the “physical contiguity, and continuity, of the two Testaments, the Old and the New—the outcome of the Christian appropriation of the Bible—[that] nourished a deep ambivalence towards the Jews.” For him, then, it is the inclusion rather than the exclusion of Jewish religious material within Christianity, and the textual inextricability of the traditions, rather than the nonidentity of Jews with either “Christian” or “pagan” categories, that provide the impetus for ambivalence. That said, regardless of its ultimate source, religiously motivated ambivalence remains central to his account of Christian attitudes towards Judaism.

⁴⁴ Farago, “Berlin Was a Beacon of Artistic Freedom. Gaza Changed Everything.”

⁴⁵ “Final Report of the Organizational Development of Documenta Und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH Now Available,” Documenta, December 15, 2023, <https://documenta.de/en/news/abschlussbericht-der-organisationsentwicklung-der-documenta-und-museum-fridericianum-ggmbh-liegt-vor>.

⁴⁶ “Code of Conduct,” Documenta, accessed July 7, 2026, <https://documenta.de/en/code-of-conduct>.

⁴⁷ Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 10.

⁴⁸ Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism,” 115.

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