Good jews/bad jews: thingified semites?

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ABSTRACT
This review of Alana Lentin’s Why Race Still Matters chimes in on the context of Germany and questions how our contemporary understanding of “race” works in relation to the “new anti-Semitism.” My commentary focuses on the chapter Good Jew/ Bad Jew. At first, I will reconstruct Lentin’s argument, then move on to illustrate Lentin’s theoretical analysis with examples from Germany. In a final step, I elaborate on a few questions revolving around the material dialectics of race and Whiteness in relation to race, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim racism.

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In her book Why Race Still Matters Alana Lentin presents her intellectual reflections as rooted in life. On the one hand, they stem from her experience as a white European Jewish woman in an “almost monolithically Catholic” Ireland (3). On the other hand, she was “born on colonized Palestinian land, the granddaughter of refugees from fascist Romania” (4). For Lentin, anti-racism and anti-racist scholarship is thus not just about intellectual word juggling. Instead, she wants to incite us to become angry about the current state of affairs, to raise our voices, to actively ‘do the undoing’ and not just preach or teach it: Following Black feminist scholarship, she wants her readers to mobilize anger as a driving force for such intellectualization and undoing. That is why her book stands out as a personally courageous and intellectually stimulating piece of scholarship, especially against a (bourgeois) academia primarily interested in interpreting the world through (even) more abstractions (Karl Marx). As Yassir Morsi pointed out in the commentary before, Lentin does more than just academically re-telling theories of race and racism: The book “provides a lighthouse for those exhausted by the fight” as well as “reassurance and a guide.” (Morsi 2021, 5)

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My commentary focuses on the chapter “Good Jew/ Bad Jew” and Lentin’s implicit call to decolonize the study of anti-Semitism. I am writing from Berlin, Germany, a country largely absent in the book, but definitely in dire need of reading Lentin. Just as Lentin’s identity and thinking is bound up with and thus stems from the colonial, so is the modern political identity of a German Palestinian bound up with anti-Semitism. In Germany, discourses on anti-Semitism deeply shape our lives, our rights as citizens, and our abilities to participate in public debates. Discourses on anti-Semitism decide if we get a job and define if we are ushered through school as a problem, or not. One is perpetually busy with justifying one’s existence and politics against accusations of anti-Semitism (or Islamism). Alana Lentin’s work has been important for my own work on the same issues in Germany and I am lucky to be in an intellectual exchange with a contemporary thinker like that. In what follows, I will proceed in three steps. First, I outline the main arguments of the chapter; then I will describe structures that developed in Germany, which I believe provide ample examples for the tendencies Lentin describes. Finally, I will raise questions which mainly revolve, broadly speaking, around what we call “racial capitalism” and figurations of the Semite as they materialize in a post-Shoah and post-reunification German context.

**Chapter IV: good jew/ bad jew**

Lentin’s first sentence of the chapter starts with the “Hideous Jew Alana Lentin.” It could be read as an intentional move to illustrate what to expect on the following pages: a personal and yet intellectually stimulating take on current affairs of race, anti-Semitism, Europe or the so-called “West.” It must be said, that albeit Germany is still mainly missing from her theorization, she nevertheless got a taste of what it means to be censored by German academia. In 2020, she was asked by a group of so-called “decolonial” thinkers to cut out sentences from an article she wrote, “one which referred to Israel ‘running the longest occupation of any people by another in the world’; the other that cited the state’s ‘regime of racial supremacy over Black and Brown Jews’.” (Lentin 2021) This exemplifies the crude scholarship and thinking so prevalent in public spaces in Germany. At this stage in an editorial context, this happens either out of fear to lose one’s job, because one actually believes those flattened Jewish subjectivities represent the “true and core” Jewish realities, or because one believes in a “need” for Israeli-Jewish control over Palestinians. As an interpellation it has thus more to do with what it loves and invests in, rather than with what it doesn’t love and doesn’t invest in. In other words, it is more about what it does than about what it doesn’t do (to care about Palestinians, for instance).

For Lentin such self-proclaimed anti–anti-Semitism policy is an outcome of a contemporary Europe/North America in crisis: This “white crisis […]” on the
brink of fascism,” thus sets the stage for anti-Semitism becoming “a point of intense debate” (138). She argues that white Jews have been hyper-humanized in such post-Shoah and post-racial times, which for her is an outcome of “state philosemitism” (164) citing French intellectual Houria Bouteldja (2016). Lentin then sets out to interrogate and trouble the binaries between what is structurally interpellated as “good Jews” and “bad Jews” in white (supremacist) social narratives. In this matrix of interpellating minorities – some as favorable, some as not-wanted – the splitting of groups into good and bad apples sets the boundaries of permissible speech and action in society, but also marks those seen to be mournable, empathizable, in short, those considered fully human. Lentin critically remarks that such conversations around anti-Semitism of white anti-anti-Semitism narratives are then weaponised against minorities of color: She obverses the creation of a hierarchy of race and racism, where today figurations of the Arab and Muslim are interpellated as the “real anti-Semites” (140). She goes further by stating that “[t]he political utility of antisemitism today is not to illuminate the operations of race, but rather to obscure them” (137). At the same time, Lentin rightfully points out that actual anti-Semitism is kept alive and eclipsed (and thus tolerated to continue to exist) in those moments where a commitment to anti-Muslim racism and Zionism is uttered: Netanyahu’s political allyship with the European right, as well as, Orbán, Trump, and the AfD are named as examples of such deeply engrained anti-Semitism coupled with pronounced anti-Muslim racism and commitments to political Zionism. Israeli settler-colonialism also generally flattened the existence of what it means to be Jewish for Lentin (167). Interestingly, Lentin then also proposes another binary system of “good anti-Semitism” vs. “bad anti-Semitism,” which springs from such white supremacist conflations. And, if I understand correctly, they constitute yet another dialectical doubling, similar to the good Jew/ bad Jew binary. The “good anti-Semitism” is the philo-Semitism of the white racial state that weaponizes Jewish survival and suffering to re-structure borders, minority rights, and imperial ventures. The “bad anti-Semitism” in this matrix is reserved for the figure of the Muslim/Arab or de/anti-colonial anti-Semite, the far right, the anti-imperialist Left and those in solidarity with a transnational commitment to political and decolonial subjecthood.

The war on anti-semitism in Germany

Much of what Lentin writes resonates strongly in a country that rehearsed the mantra of a “fight against anti-Semitism” (German: “Kampf gegen Antisemitismus”) by almost all means possible. The same country that once prided itself with being experts in anti-Semitism is today the country that prides itself with being experts in anti-anti-Semitism: As of today, Germany employs 14 federal-state (anti-) anti-Semitism delegates (out of 16 federal states), one
(anti-) anti-Semitism delegate of the government (Dr. Felix Klein) and one
special representative at the Foreign Ministry for anti-Semitism and Jewish
Organisations.¹ For 2020–2021, said special representative of the Foreign
Ministry also serves as the chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance
Alliance (Auswärtiges Amt 2020). And on the EU level, it is also a white
German (Katharina von Schnurbein) who was “appointed the first European
Commission Coordinator on combatting Antisemitism in December 2015”
(EHRI 2019).

In practice, those anti-Semitism experts are also experts in using social
media to personally attack and accuse individuals or organizations of anti-
Semitism, defaming their work and character in public. EU coordinator
Katharina von Schnurbein Twitters that it is anti-Semitic when EU parliamen-
tarian Ana Gomes invites Omar Barghouti, the co-founder of the BDS move-
ment, to speak in the EU parliament (Schnurbein 2018). In 2019, Prof. Dr.
Salzborn, Berlin’s anti-Semitism delegate, twittered that the P-word in
public is a reason to revolt: “When people at the next table on the train
start bringing up ‘palestine’ as a topic for no reason at all, it’s either time
to get off, put on headphones, or yell at them #antisemitism” (Salzborn
2019). And in June 2021, the anti-Semitism delegate of Baden-Württemberg,
Mister Blume, proposed that the Jewish Voice for Peace in the Middle East
account is “a fake/pretend Jewish [Twitter] account” (Blume 2021).

These can be seen as illustrations of Lentin’s argument that “race is above
all a matter of rule” (159): From a political taboo to talk about Palestinian
human rights to the smearing of intellectuals, activists, and human rights
organizations as anti-Semitic to the accusation of Jews not being Jewish
(enough). Moshe Zuckermann once attested that “only Antisemites can call
Jews Antisemites” (Zuckermann 2015, 196) – well, from where I stand, we
are well beyond that in Germany. What now?

Since 2021, Germany’s war on anti-Semitism includes a planned legal
denial of citizenship to alleged anti-Semites (even for small criminal
offences). When I finished my PhD (2016) and work on a “war on anti-Semit-
ism” (Youens 2020), none of these delegates were employed yet, let alone
spoken of, and many of such laws and policies still just loomed on the
horizon. Yet, in the wake of a new citizenship law in 2000 and after the so-
called “refugee crisis” in 2015, this – what I call – “war” was propelled to
the frontlines of German cultural and security politics. Now, let me state for
all readers that I don’t think that there is anything wrong with a legitimate
and truthful interest in working against anti-Semitism. Yet, the way this war
against anti-Semitism unfolds is, as Lentin writes, the following: “antisemitism
is left intact while all other racisms within the racial state are denied” (162).
And here, Germany offers itself up as an insightful example for such lived con-
tradictions: We have anti-Semitism delegates and experts mushrooming
everywhere, observing peace and order in an almost Orwellian like scenario
of “newspeak” – everyone is for peace, liberty, democracy and against any type of racism. At the same time, interpellations of political Zionism are what qualifies as “expertise” in the fight against anti-Semitism today.

Questions: what’s “new” in the “new anti-/semitism”? 

These dangerous developments also impose themselves on academic theorization. I want to trouble the “why” of race and not just the “how” and “what” of race as Lentin already splendidly does? In the following questions, I would finally propose to think through the dialectics of Whiteness as well as think through “thingified Jews and thingified Semites” to connect a critique of racial capitalism with black, indigenous and other racialized ethnicities.

When Lentin states that fascism is looming on the horizon in a “Europe in crisis,” I suggest to chime in on what we mean by crisis, since there are crises and contradictions everywhere one might say. Is it an economic one, a racial one, or maybe “an assemblage” of crises? Why now? And how do we define or delineate such crisis from other crises? One might also ask, ‘when does a crisis stand in for the system’s failure when otherwise things are still working out?’ Furthermore, in a Gramscian analysis fascism is the safety belt for a failed social democratic attempt in capitalism and thus constitutive of the structure. In other words: hasn’t Europe always been in a crisis? And whose crisis is it to begin with?

In that same vein, it is sometimes difficult to fully grasp, if Lentin’s arguments about good and bad Jews and Muslims (etc.) are simply continuations of older colonial structures producing new intricacies of race, or if there is indeed a material dialectic at play? She states that “racial rule necessarily shapeshifts, never remaining the same” (169) yet doesn’t answer how it develops further or why the need to do that is there to begin with (see the crisis argument above, too)? In other words: are these doubles of bad and good racisms thingified/reified doubles that develop a materialized “life of their own” (Eigenleben)? Or is the analysis to be situated rather in a Foucauldian paradigm where we are trapped in loops that describe the dis-/continuation of structures – without subjects and without an explanation of the “Why’s”?

Connected to such material dialectics is also the question of what “white Jews” truly are in Lentin’s argumentation. It seems that “white” in her writing denotes the belonging to the Symbolic realm of Whiteness and thus also to power. At the same time, “white” also marks the somatically “passing” European looking Jews. Yet, “passing” as white and “being white” still marks two different positions. Are European white Jews then fully white in Europe? Or, which is rather my hunch, are there only certain white Jews who are white in Europe – and if so, how do we account for such partial whitening process (again see the questions above)? And what do we make of it in times of fascism looming on the horizon?
Lastly, it is also important to note that Lentin argues that the “cipherization, its availability to racial rule and the proxification of antiracism, and the attendant construction of good and bad Jews” is intrinsic to anti-Semitism (168) and thus different to other racisms. At the same time, Lentin doesn’t tire in stressing the history of racial capitalism along with the colonial and European invention of race. If we do not see this as an epistemological contradiction, then we can see it as different levels of structural analysis. However, where do we locate the difference between racisms then? And, radically speaking, do these differences actually exist in the “abstract that is race” or just in its material manifestations? Furthermore, in a country like Germany, anti-Semitism is kept separate from understandings of racism by all means possible. I am thus wondering in what way Lentin’s argument would differ here then? And can we really argue that cipherization, the proxification of antiracism, and the good/bad binaries are intrinsic to anti-Semitism alone? I personally contest that notion and there is little space to enumerate all the thinkers who have already found similar constructions at play for other people (see Morrison, Mamdani, Zia-Ebrahimi)? After all, isn’t “race the original conspiracy theory,” as I argued recently in a conference presentation and not anti-Semitism?

And finally, in line with the dialectics of Whiteness: What do we make of white Germans that today become better Jews than most Jews? Those people learn Hebrew, own a Kippa, a Menora, tattoo the Star of David, love travelling to Tel Aviv, some of them convert. This goes beyond “lifestyle;” it is a commitment and investment into an identity where eventually white European Christians become “Jewdeofied.” Provocatively speaking, such new whiteness performatively calls into being their own non-white-identity. How do we account for that?

**Conclusion**

I am aware that some of those questions might be unorthodox for some scholars of anti-Semitism. However, in a time where white Germans have commodified the fight against anti-Semitism (Zuckerman 2015) to suppress decolonial thinking and movements, whilst calling non-Zionist Jews “not-Jews”, we need radical ways of rethinking our understanding of what race means. In the meantime, I am honoured and looking forward to continue this intellectual exchange with a scholar of race critical theories who will not only influence many more generations of scholars, but who has, quite literally, her finger at the pulse of her time.

**Note**

1. Since 2017 this includes the commemoration (and politics thereof) of the genocide against Europe’s Sinti and Roma during WWII.
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