
Germany's Cancel Culture and Limitations of Debate

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In this article, I describe Germany's Cancel Culture and Limitations of Debate by referring to my own biography and current social-political events.

I am now 46 years old. The first 28 years of my life I spent at the heart of the Middle East conflict. I was born into these circumstances, and I was raised in them. When I was growing up, we would frequently spend weekends in Gaza at the beach and we did our shopping in the Palestinian territories almost every week.

I grew up watching a local Arabic TV station that portrayed Israel as the enemy. My grandfather had fought on the side of the Arab forces against the newly established Jewish state. Until the day of his death, he was proud of the scar inflicted on him by an Israeli bullet. With that, he always said, he could 'prove to Allah' that he had engaged in combat with Jews. My father carries the trauma of the Revolutionary War deep in his soul. He was born in 1946, and for the first three years of his life he and his mother fled to the mountains many times due to the war. In many ways, his existence is still determined by these experiences.

Jewish and Arab Israelis live in close proximity, and often together. I was born in Kfar Saba, about 15 kilometres northeast of Tel-Aviv. This place is located adjacent to the West Bank's Green Line. At the time, my mother was lying next to many Jewish mothers in the maternity ward of the local hospital and was being cared for by Jewish doctors and nurses. The closest Jewish village was only 200 metres away from my parents' home. My father was a labourer in an orange grove. His employer was a Jew who visited us frequently. He always brought delicious chocolate and spent hours passionately discussing the Palestinians and Israel with my father. They never agreed, but they accepted one another.

At the age of 13, I underwent Islamist radicalization. I spent all of my free time in Jerusalem at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and between the daily prayers and eating falafel, we Arab youth sought friction and conflict with the Israeli armed forces that were

deployed there. I completed my schooling in Arabic in the centre of Israel, where I also learned Hebrew as a second language.

Suffering, joy and trauma are all part of my memories. I recall the gunfire in 1987, during the first intifada, as we went to the West Bank for our weekly grocery shopping. In my mind's eye, I can see soldiers handing out gas masks to us a few years later, and I will never forget being awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of sirens as rockets fired by Saddam Hussein exploded all around us. At that time, we were hiding in sealed rooms with gas masks on our faces.

And there is another side to my memories. I remember the people of my village celebrating in the streets, the tears of joy when Yasser Arafat, the President of the Palestinian Authority, and former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands, and then again when they later signed the Oslo Accords. The same Arab Israelis expressed shock and sadness when Rabin was murdered in November 1995 by a far-right Israeli as a result of his efforts to promote peace. A few years later, Arafat chose the path of violence and systematically used his security forces against the same Israelis who had initially welcomed him to Israel.

After graduating from school, I studied and worked in Tel-Aviv. Unforgotten are the many checkpoints on the way to work during the second Intifada between 2000 and 2004. I remember the buses that were blown up and the fear of the people.

I eventually decided to build my future elsewhere because I could no longer bear the fear, the violence, and the conflicts. I travelled to Berlin, leaving my family behind. In Germany, I ended up very quickly in a parallel Muslim society. I had only Arabic-speaking friends and, in the middle of Berlin, I spoke only Arabic. I didn't interact much with the Germans. Everything that bothered me in my hometown of Tira I encountered in Berlin, sometimes even in a more extreme form: patriarchal structures, violence committed in the name of honour, forced marriages, Islamism, and of course anti-Semitism.

In my new home, I wanted things to be different! I was seeking security and peace, and it was clear to me from the start that in order to find this peace in society, I had to start with myself. It was necessary to challenge the prejudices that I brought with me, as well as my socialization, the upbringing practices that I experienced, my anti-Semitism, and my political understanding. I continued to do that every day. I studied the Holocaust through books, I dealt with the Jewish perspective on the Middle East conflict and with the detrimental effects of patriarchal educational practices. I met people who showed me new viewpoints. These encounters and the curiosity with which I approached my new home caused me to critically reflect on my attitudes, and I learned to question things. Today, I understand my work in Germany as protecting my new home. I do it for peace, for coexistence, for democracy and for human rights. And I notice every day that young people in Germany are interested in my experiences. They are reachable; they can be enthusiastic about freedom and democracy, but also about a different point of view on the Middle East conflict. In our fight for these young people, we must be quicker than Islamists and antisemites, who have become better 'social workers', especially on social media. But we must not lose sight of individuality, peace, freedom, and self-determination – all of these are

products that young people can be enthusiastic about, if we can only do a better job of explaining these fundamental rights. Because doing so may result in a long-lasting decline in anti-Semitism, hatred and radicalization.

One could accuse me of being naïve when I left Israel in 2004, thinking that I would find peace in Germany, of all places, from the notorious rejection of Jews and everything Jewish. I had heard that, particularly in Germany, the past was being dealt with, awareness for anti-Semitism was strong, and social peace was assured. However, I am currently witnessing here a new antisemitic nightmare. Anti-Semitism is not back – it's still present and only getting louder and more violent in nearly every social milieu.

One of the biggest challenges in fighting anti-Semitism is its dazzling appearance. As is well known, it no longer simply has a bald head, combat boots, a baseball bat in hand or Salafist robes on its body. Anti-Semitism wears a tie and tweed jacket, a pantsuit, jeans, a T-shirt and overalls, a summer dress, or a training jacket. It simmers among the police force, in schools, banks and on construction sites, revealing its elusive dimensions.

Anti-Semitism is an intellectual trend, especially in universities, where it frequently goes under the guise of 'criticism of Israel', where questionable post-colonial theories paint Israel as the main threat to international peace. The old, distorted portrayal of Jews as the epitome of evil still has an impact. While in the past it was either communism or capitalism or a plague and epidemics, labels such as 'establishment', 'east coast of America', 'Zionists' and 'Israel' are used today to express resentment and fatal superstition. Anti-Semitism dares to resurface. More and more people in Germany, France and other Western nations display a confidence to openly express what they 'know' about Jews, Israel and Zionism.

Why is this possible in Germany? When I converse with young people in schools and vocational institutions, for instance, I pay close attention to their arguments. It is striking how little they care about the open and self-assured Jewish life in the country. Their phantasies are largely disconnected from reality and originate from the internet. Furthermore, the terms 'Jews' and 'Germany' are almost always presented as victim narratives in the settings where they learn about them, which is typically at school.

I am increasingly noticing a remarkable similarity in the communication between German and Islamist antisemites, and that, despite stricter laws, antisemitic content is still spreading unchecked. Prosecutions for antisemitic propaganda are uncommon. Texts and cartoons that portray Israel as an aggressor, conspiracy theories, and denunciations of my country have turned into a veritable online plague. The Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung) falls short in this as well. One can doubtlessly imagine better, more likable heads of state than Benjamin Netanyahu or Yitzhak Herzog. However, from where does this German obsession with 'criticizing Israel' originate?

The presumptive expectation of excessive morality of Jews and the state of Israel might be one of the main causes of the current anti-attitude of significant portions of German society towards Israel and Jews. They erroneously equate it with Israel in

general. These attitudes have nothing to do with the historical responsibility towards the Jews all over the world.

Personally, I experience anti-Semitism at work, in schools, in asylum facilities, and in prisons. This hatred is not acting silently; it is no longer covert; it has become self-confident, clear, and visible. Due to my public statements on Israel and my work in combatting anti-Semitism, I regularly receive threats, encounter defamation, and was even spat on in the streets of Berlin, at the heart of Germany. Allegedly, I am a Zionist, a traitor, and a Mossad agent; a right-wing extremist, and an Uncle Tom Arab who wants to find favour with the Germans and the Jews. Attacks certainly come not just from Palestinians, but primarily from supporters of the extreme left spectrum.

The Israel of today is irritating. It is a country full of contrasts and contradictions. It is a vibrant, self-assured state that actively defends its rights and fights for its continued existence, including through the use of its military. That doesn't make sense in the context of the victim narrative. Autonomous, creative Israelis, Jewish and Muslim citizens who live their lives more or less successfully, like so many others – none of this fits the description of the sacrificial lamb, toward whom one can feel compassionate and generous. It seems to me that Europeans, especially Germans, are drawn to Israel's enemies in the Arab world because they feel provoked by Israel's self-assertion and day-to-day, self-confident Jewish life. The revolting claim that Israelis are 'the new Nazis' is the grotesque culmination of this antisemitic magnetism. As a psychologist, as an Israeli-Arab and historically enlightened Muslim, I am stunned to hear Europeans saying such things today. And what is even worse, they most likely even believe it.

Defending themselves against enemies who openly harbour annihilation fantasies, and to display strength, autonomy, and self-confidence are legitimate needs of the Jewish people that result from a history of pogroms and persecution, which had culminated in the Holocaust. I have a responsibility to fully comprehend this as an Israeli-Palestinian, as an Arab, as a Muslim, and as a human being who values human rights. I assume responsibility as a German citizen by devoting myself to education and the fight against every form of anti-Semitism, whether it acts in the name of Allah, the church, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement, neo-Nazis, the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) Party or comes from within mainstream society. Accusing Israel of 'apartheid' is just plain incorrect, historically and factually. Furthermore, unilaterally presenting the only genuine democracy in the entire Middle East as a nation of perpetrators is nothing short of disastrous and provides right-wingers and antisemites verbal ammunition on a silver platter. Particularly in Germany, such misguided narratives must be resolutely opposed.

The present is not engaged in a struggle between religions or 'cultures'. There is no competition between Jews, Muslims and Christians. There is a conflict between democrats and anti-democrats. On one side there are right-wing extremists, neo-Nazis, antisemites, Islamists, left-wing extremists, patriarchal authorities, and ultra-nationalists. On the opposing side are democrats and constitutional patriots, who stand up for peace, human dignity, and freedom.

Today I work on a number of initiatives to prevent radicalization – particularly in the areas of Islamism – and human rights. My target group consists mostly of young Muslims with a migratory background. By using theatre education and psychology, we try to win them over to support human rights and democracy. We work in asylum centres, in schools, in prisons, as well as on social media. We combat anti-Semitism by bringing Muslim youths from Syria and Afghanistan to memorial sites; we foster encounters between Jews and Muslims; we train young people to be ambassadors against Islamism; and we bring the new role models to schools to reach out to other young people. We visit teachers, social workers, and disseminators to raise awareness, sensitize them to undemocratic developments, and persuade them to work in the spirit of integration and democracy. The work is challenging. However, our achievements also give us hope for winning over people from the Middle East to support freedom and democracy.

However, the difficulty of this work increases daily, and psychology or education are not the reason for it. It is not that the young people we work with have become difficult to reach; on the contrary, we experience the young people as open and willing to learn, despite the values they brought with them. Rather, our problems come up in the public sphere, and mainly from two sides: left-wing actors, who are primarily guided by identity-political intentions, and activists of political Islam, who attempt to torpedo our work on a daily basis. Why? Because we draw attention to problems, we call out radicalization, and address antisemitic attitudes. These groups intend to defend minorities and believe that minorities are groups that should not be criticized and are worthy of protection. Those who persist in criticizing are quickly denounced as racists or supporters of right-wing extremists. Is reality supposed to be termed racist? And just because right-wing radicals reject migrants in general, shouldn't problems and challenges nevertheless be addressed? We are not referring to a small fringe group here. These people hold positions in the media, in foundations, and in universities. Instead of understanding reality, they practise activism and defame any critical voices, including those from immigrants and Muslims like me.

The ideologized left, with its identity politics, no longer has much to do with originally leftist concepts such as universality, justice and criticism of religion. Their representatives are concerned with highlighting their own moral superiority. At the same time, they deny those who hold opposing views from taking part in the discourse. This identity-political left has no genuine human interest in refugees, Muslims or people with a migrant background. They do not perceive them as individuals, but merely as representatives of certain groups. They do not realize that these people are diverse and can be an asset as well as pose challenges. They view them as a kind of soft toy that needs paternalistic protection, both from themselves and from right-wing extremists. The strategic cooperation with political Islam, which not only occurs in Germany but can also be found in the USA, England, or France, is based on the same enemy images. The identity-political left divides between 'us' and 'them', the oppressors and the oppressed, according to its ideology, just as Islamists do. According to them, European Muslims belong to the oppressed who are being pressured by white Europe to renounce their identity and faith. Any discussion of

political Islam is then dismissed as anti-Muslim racism. Integration is rejected as a tool of colonialism. If integration is still talked about today, it is typically regarded as a debt that society must pay. Their motto is, integration will come naturally if the majority of society accepts these people unconditionally, sees diversity only as enrichment, and allows them social participation. Attempts to convey values or to promote people individually are decried as racist. The ideologized left divides the world according to colour, origin, gender, religious affiliation, and minorities and majorities. It does not see individual people with their attitudes or actions. Instead, it categorizes, homogenizes and pigeonholes, doing exactly what the racists on the other side do. There is no sincere consideration of the individual, no search for truth, and no interest in alternative perspectives.

In the name of tolerance, a lot of intolerance can develop – against other viewpoints and groups, even if they veer just a few millimetres from one's own moral compass. When minorities claim for themselves some kind of 'species protection' that is biologically based, free speech is put in danger. 'White people cannot understand me because I am black! Therefore, white people have nothing to say about it!'

In the US, white students have recently been asked by black students to leave a seminar or lecture so that they can attend 'among themselves' in a 'safe space'. Black professors have openly criticized such methods as 'illiberal', including John McWhorter from Columbia University and Glenn Loury from Brown University (Friedersdorf 2017).

McWhorter acknowledged that he is alarmed by these phenomena that are fuelled by social media because they establish dogmatic restrictions on speaking and thinking rather than eradicate white privilege and foster more open discourse (Friedersdorf 2017). Black civil rights activist Martin Luther King delivered his well-known 'I have a dream' speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on 28 August 1963. A key component of this was the dream that the children of former slaves and the children of former slave owners would sit together at the table of brotherhood and that character, not skin colour, was what mattered. In today's discourse, many criticize such claims as being naive. 'But I am and will remain black, and white people look at me differently!' Yes, that is true, but that is also the reason why statements such as those of Dr King are even more relevant today.

This is precisely what it is all about: the inviolable dignity of every human being, regardless of how different we are from one another. It is crucial to enforce the human rights to which every human being is entitled. When I insist that as an Arab I am 'different' because I come from a different background than the majority here in Germany, I am affirming the 'othering' that makes me the 'other'.

Science must maintain its autonomy. It must be politically neutral and free. Science is the pursuit of truth and the validation of hypotheses. In recent years, however, science has come under pressure. Activist groups, especially those engaged in identity politics, attempt to influence science in accordance with their ideology. Critical thinking is discouraged. Scientists must expect defamation and attacks. Certain research projects are portrayed as racist or immoral. Lately, this

development in the culture of debate has also increased massively in Germany. The willingness to exchange ideas is decreasing. This is a very dangerous development for democracy and for science.

In the summer of 2022, the Humboldt University of Berlin (HU) cancelled a lecture by the biologist Marie-Luise Vollbrecht owing to anticipated protests. The lecture, which was planned as part of the 'Long Night of Science', dealt with clownfish, which have the ability to change their sex when it appears opportune for reproduction. The Woke movement then accused her of transphobia and claimed that the biologist, who specialized in fish, was unqualified to give a lecture on sex in the animal and plant worlds at HU. However, in fact, it was not a matter of qualification or scientific competence. The HU cancelled Vollbrecht's lecture because of the announced protests by activists after the biologist had criticized the theses of the Queer movement in various articles. Simply cancelling Vollbrecht's lecture at short notice because of Woke concerns is unworthy of a scientific institution. Instead of meeting the boycott demand, a university must be able to put up with dissenting viewpoints. It can be expected to tolerate protests, even loud and unpleasant ones. The rights and liberties guaranteed by the Basic Law (the German constitution) cannot simply be cancelled by protests.

A year earlier, a lecture by historian Helmut Bley on colonial history had been cancelled in Hanover. An initiative had criticized the fact that the lecturer was white. The renowned historian of African history was scheduled to give a lecture entitled 'Thinking colonial history from the perspective of Africans'. Since the 1960s, the emeritus professor has been dedicated to confronting German colonial crimes in East Africa. After the historian's presentation, members of the initiative for 'Discrimination Sensitivity and Criticism of Racism' (IDiRa) were to present a petition for the teaching of critique of racism in educational institutions in Lower Saxony and discuss it with Bley. But the initiative refused. Its members decided that they did not want to support the fact that a white man, of all people, would explain how Africans view history in the context of racism. The city then cancelled the event.

When it comes to the topics of migration, Islam, climate, and now also the coronavirus, one thing stands out: simplification and polarization. It's either all or nothing, black or white, moral versus immoral, good versus evil. All sides claim exclusivity instead of openly exchanging arguments. On Twitter (now 'X') and other social media, among journalists, and now even among friends, one searches in vain for an understanding of complexity and uncertainty. This is a dangerous tendency in a democracy. All of society is losing when fanatical voices gain control over the most important debates.

The controversy surrounding the high number of people with a history of migration who are suffering from Covid-19 in intensive care units serves as an illustration of how far this issue can go. According to the *Bild* newspaper, the head of the Robert Koch Institute, Lothar Wieler, has made it taboo to report the high number of seriously ill patients with a migration background, for fear of accusations of racism.

When questioned about it, he responded that this incident related to an informal exchange with chief physicians at three clinics, and that, in general, such data are not available owing to data-protection concerns. One could tell that he was uneasy. The cause of his uneasiness did not remain secret for long. The following day, the Turkish-Islamic association Ditib raised serious allegations. It was 'dishonest and unprofessional' to blame minorities for the pandemic. Here we have the typical pattern: plaintiffs, self-proclaimed victims, and head-in-the-sand politics.

There is no question that it is not easy to discuss those topics without racists hijacking the arguments. It is also true that Germany's AfD Party adopted the topic for its own purposes a few days later. On Twitter, the AfD parliamentary group attempted to cite the high number of patients with a history of migration as proof that multicultural society had failed. In Bavaria, the AfD intended to provide evidence that migrants were the driving force of the pandemic, and asked clinics how many of their Covid-19 patients had a migration background.

Migration researchers, journalists, and politicians sought explanations, or rather, a politically correct explanation. The high number of patients was attributed to the socio-economic situation, language barriers, and cramped apartments. Aspects such as the close family structures, which normally provide support but may turn into a disadvantage during the pandemic, were not considered. Of course, one should not generalize here, but the reports from hospitals could not have been clearer. In Israel during the pandemic, for example, it was also evident that half of the seriously ill Covid-19 patients were of Arab descent, although only around 20% of Israelis are Arabs.

The prevalence of pre-existing conditions such as diabetes and obesity, which are more common in some communities due to their eating habits and sedentary lifestyles, varied between different population groups in statistically significant ways. People in these communities visit the doctor less frequently, so that previous illnesses remain undetected. People who were born in authoritarian countries have a different relationship with the state, which is typically marked by mistrust. It is more difficult to reach them, which has dire consequences in times of a pandemic. But such considerations were hardly discussed in the media. Why?

The interest was not to protect these members of minority groups but about confirming one's own ideology and moral superiority and obsessively demanding political correctness. It was an elitist debate aimed at getting applause from one's own bubble. Scientific and journalistic standards were sacrificed here. A factual and taboo-free analysis could have led to findings that would have saved human lives. It is a paradox – those who claim to protect such communities from racism have accepted that precisely these people have suffered more because of fear of racism.

Covid sceptics and anti-vaccination activists wanted to declare the pandemic over by decree, but the No-Covid movement was pressing for a stricter lockdown. Their motto was to save lives, and who can argue with that? But even though their goals were reasonable and understandable, the absoluteness of their argument took on religious traits similar to those of the people who played down or denied the Coronavirus.

In between, there lies a minefield of moral reprehensibility. The No-Covid community was not interested in the fact that we had been in lockdown for months, that children and young people were not in school, and that they had hardly any social interactions during that time. Their mindset was unconditional. This group perceived even the mere mention of the psychological consequences of the school closure as an attack. Critics were quickly dismissed as Covid deniers, as lacking empathy, and even as murderers. As a result, the exchange of arguments and the willingness to consider new ideas suffered.

There was a great deal of outrage when hundreds of young people with migrant backgrounds attacked police officers, ambulances, and the fire department on New Year's Eve 2022, but the debate went exactly along the same lines as the previous ones, and did not focus on integration, the causes of violence, and hatred of the police and state representatives. Anyone who named the perpetrators' country of origin was immediately accused of racism. Everything possible was done to prevent the debate. It was not about discussing opinions and exchanging arguments, the goal was about the destruction, defamation, and cancellation of opposing viewpoints and to refuse a debate.

Democracy cannot be preserved in this way. Democracy means an exchange of arguments, it means a dispute and tolerating opposing positions. However, defining the culture of discourse so narrowly undermines democracy rather than protecting it.

Reference

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About the Author

Ahmad Mansour, born 1976 in Tira, Israel, is an Israeli-German psychologist and publicist of Arab-Palestinian origin. He has lived in Germany since 2004 and has held German citizenship since 2017. He is involved in numerous social projects and initiatives, mainly working against radicalization, oppression in the name of honour, and anti-Semitism in the Islamic community. He is the managing director of the MIND prevention Mansour-Initiative für Demokratieförderung und Extremismusprävention GmbH (Mansour Initiative for promotion of democracy and prevention of extremism). For his work, Mansour has received many awards, most recently the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2022, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Basel, Switzerland.