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The Perils of Privacy and Passivity: Antidemocratic, Racist, and Antisemitic Sentiments in Postwar West Germany

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Abstract

This article analyzes the affective economy of West Germany's postwar society. After delineating the intellectual history of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research's "Gruppenexperiment," which consisted of 137 group interviews with different segments of West German society, my article focuses on one transcript of a 1950 group discussion of young fashion-designer apprentices. Based on a close reading, I study how the younger generation in West Germany constructed a passive and privatist self-image in which they could both articulate their emotional dissociation from National Socialism while clinging to antidemocratic, racist, and antisemitic feelings in metamorphosed form. The micrological focus of the analysis of the group's emotions is balanced by a rereading of both Helmut Schelsky's study about the "skeptical generation" and texts by researchers associated with the Institute for Social Research who came to markedly different conclusions about the West German youth.

Keywords: West Germany; history of emotions; Critical Theory; racism; antisemitism

Introduction

"Agreed: post-war Germany is a miracle," the Franco-American literary critic George Steiner noted in 1959, analyzing the economic success of the young Federal Republic, but "it is a very queer miracle." Beneath the buzzing economic life hid "a profound deadness of spirit, such an inescapable sense of triviality and dissimulation."¹ Steiner was hardly alone in noticing this eerie atmosphere. Whereas he attributed it to Nazism's destruction of the German language, the American sociologist Morris Janowitz considered the material destruction resulting from Allied air warfare as the crucial reason for German "apathy toward all phenomena outside the immediate personal sphere."² Also emphasizing the poor material conditions, the Swedish journalist Stig Dagerman reported in 1946 the prevalence of "apathy and cynicism" and he noted the indifference with which the population responded to high-stakes political events like the death sentences of the Nuremberg trials and the first democratic elections in Berlin in 1946. He described the latter in morbid tone: "In a deathly silent Berlin, 20 October, the first day of the free elections looked like all the other dead Sundays. There was not the slightest trace of enthusiasm or joy in the crowds of deathly silent voters."³ Hannah Arendt

¹ George Steiner, "The Hollow Miracle," in *Language and Silence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 95–109, esp. 95–96.

² Morris Janowitz, "German Reactions to Nazi Atrocities," *American Journal of Sociology* 52 (1946): 141–46, esp. 145.

³ Stig Dagerman, *German Autumn*, trans. Robin Fulton Macpherson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 15.

agreed: when she visited in 1950, she saw “indifference” and “apathy” everywhere. But in Arendt’s account, the West German atmosphere was marked by its *disregard* for the material destruction of German cities: “Nowhere,” she wrote, “is this nightmare of destruction and horror less felt and less talked about than in Germany.” In her *Report from Germany*, the moods attest to something else: “a deep-rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened.”⁴ Several years later, in their widely received book *The Inability to Mourn*, psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich took the “general apathy that prevails concerning issues involving basic political rights” as a starting point for their attempt to understand the psychic condition of the West German population.⁵ Echoing Arendt, they considered the West German “emotional rigidity” or “quasi-stoical attitude” in response to the downfall of National Socialism to be a central mechanism in the effort to derealize the past and keep feelings of guilt, shame, mourning, and melancholia at bay. This derealization, they argued, constituted an immense expenditure of psychic energy, reinforcing the West German tendency to “show a minimum of interest in the new ordering of their society.”⁶

But what exactly was this stillness, “indifference,” and reservation toward politics to which all these writers attributed such weight? What is its significance for the history of West German emotions and the democratization of the newly founded Federal Republic?⁷ In this article, I analyze the way in which West German youth expressed this mood in the self-representations they articulated in the group discussions of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research’s (ISR) *Gruppenexperiment* in the 1950s. Because of its innovative research design, the experiment’s 121 archived transcripts are a rich source to study German feelings during the country’s semi-sovereign status in the early 1950s. I argue that the groups’ self-images of passivity and privacy, which often bordered a conscious desubjectification or self-pathologizing, were an attempt to affectively dissociate from their National Socialist past and all the crimes associated with it in an environment that called for a radically different emotional conduct. At the same time, these self-representations served as media for articulating old antidemocratic, racist, and antisemitic sentiments in a new, socially less confrontational, seemingly innocent way.⁸

The ambition of this article is twofold. First, in the spirit of the *Gruppenexperiment*’s own psychoanalytic understanding of emotions, it investigates the mood of stillness that was so central in descriptions of postwar Germany and emphasizes its relevance for understanding the precarious position of the new democratic state and the transformation of racist and antisemitic *ressentiments*. To demonstrate this emotional ambivalence, my approach is necessarily micrological. It focuses on one particular group discussion conducted in 1950 with eight fashion-design apprentices and it pays attention to the subtle, fleeting moments in the transcript in which both intrapsychic and social emotional conflicts reveal themselves.⁹ Second, to counterbalance this micrological focus, it traces the intellectual history of the *Gruppenexperiment* in the broader West German discourse about the youth’s position on democracy, focusing specifically on Helmut Schelsky’s 1957 study *Die skeptische Generation* (*The Skeptical Generation*) and on writings by researchers associated with the ISR

⁴ Hannah Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany,” *Commentary* 10 (1950): 342–53, esp. 342.

⁵ Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975), 7.

⁶ Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, 28, 9.

⁷ In this article I use the terms *emotion*, *feeling*, *sentiment*, and *affect* interchangeably; there is no consensus on how to distinguish between them among historians of emotions.

⁸ In analyzing self-representations, my article aligns with recent research that treats *generation* as a self-referential term in which the young generation in postwar Germany could formulate a response to a political and biographical questions. Benjamin Möckel, *Erfahrungsbruch und Generationsbehauptung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014), 14–18.

⁹ For an overview of recent scholarship on the history of emotions, see Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

that came to markedly more pessimistic conclusions about the future of democracy in the infant country.

My analysis contributes to the rich literature on West German youth in the postwar moment.¹⁰ Martin Kalb and Uta Poiger have shown the animosity with which older generations discussed the youth in the years after the war. Exaggerated claims about the younger generation's sexual deviancy and delinquency, and *kulturkritische* complaints about its embrace of American popular culture served as the negative foil against which political elites could promote their conservative vision for West Germany's reconstruction. Rather than merely a resigned reaction to that discourse, however, the transcript shows that the young generation's apathy was a way to fend off guilt. It was exactly the "muddleness" of the category of youth, emphasized in Jaimey Fisher's analysis of West Germany, that allowed the group to acknowledge its embrace of National Socialism while presenting itself as gullible victims.¹¹ More than that, the *Gruppenexperiment* shows, apathy characterized their stance toward a new democratic system that they neither wanted to embrace nor had the power to fight.

In the discussion, the group's ostensible disinterest in the new democratic system also expressed *ressentiment* against the American occupation. These *ressentiments* did not stop the participants, however, from eagerly embracing the segregationist American discourse about sexual relationships between Black GIs and white German women. As studies by Heide Fehrenbach and Maria Höhn have shown, the discussion about the so-called "Brown babies" that sprang from these relationships was illustrative of the change from biological essentialism to more diffuse notions of difference. As such, it was intractably tied to conservative ideas about gender.¹² More than a reconceptualization of race in a way that fit both the occupation army's politics and the conservative reconstruction of West Germany, a careful analysis of the fashion-design apprentices' discussion reveals that discussing Black people and Jews via biracial babies also allowed seemingly benign emotions of care and compassion to serve as vessels for exclusionary *ressentiments*.

The debate about West German emotions and their relevance to the young democracy remains vivid. Whereas Arendt and the Mitscherlichs considered German emotional attitudes an impediment to democratization, recent historiography has tended toward markedly different conclusions, aided perhaps by the retrospective acknowledgment that Germany succeeded in democratizing its society. Ulrike Weckel's study of the German reaction to Allied atrocity films concludes that the prevalent feeling of shame indexes moral convictions that had been violated by National Socialism and that could serve now as a base for "reeducation and democratization."¹³ Frank Biess argues that Germans reacted to the end of National Socialism, the total war and equally total defeat, and the Holocaust with a heightened sense of fear. Even though he points out that these fears had objects of varying plausibility and could, especially in the immediate postwar years, be a means to both fend off guilt and engage in a process of self-victimization, Biess insists these were not detrimental to consolidation of West German democracy, but eventually contributed to a strong vigilance and an awareness for its potential instability.¹⁴ Also writing against the "stereotype of the cold, hard, unfeeling German we encounter time and again," Anna Parkinson interprets West German *ressentiment* as a response to the enforcement of a new democratic emotional

¹⁰ Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Martin Kalb, *Coming of Age* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016); Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Mark Edward Ruff, *The Wayward Flock* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹¹ Fisher, *Disciplining Germany*, 14.

¹² Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6; Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräulein* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

¹³ Ulrike Weckel, "Zeichen der Scham. Reaktionen auf alliierte atrocity-Filme im Nachkriegsdeutschland," *Mittelweg* 36, no. 23 (2014): 3–29, esp. 28; Ulrike Weckel, *Beschämende Bilder* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012), 562. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

¹⁴ Frank Biess, *Republik der Angst* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2019), 21, 64.

habitus by the Allied forces. Analyzing Ernst von Salomon's reactionary autobiographical novel *Der Fragebogen (The Questionnaire)*, Parkinson contends that postwar *ressentiment*, characterized by its attempt to usurp the position of the victim, was no unsurmountable hurdle for democratization. To the contrary, it initiated debates in which "democratic sentiments [were] able to perform and reinstate their durability."¹⁵

The focus on shame, fear, and *ressentiment* illustrates that this recent literature concurs with earlier observations regarding the fundamentally passive nature of the West German mood.¹⁶ And the transcript of the group discussion underlines the centrality of this posture in the postwar affective economy. Yet, by analyzing the emotional ambivalence of the fashion-design apprentices and by paying close attention to their remarks about the Federal Republic's new political system and to the group's attitude toward Jews and Black people, my article makes a more cautious claim about their contribution to democratic stability: that the self-images of passivity and privacy and the emotions were a deliberately impotent rebellion against the new democratic system, a way to distance oneself from the National Socialist past, as well as a means to cling to previously held antidemocratic, racist, and antisemitic sentiments. In an environment that merely tolerated democracy at first, antisemitic and racist emotions were remarkably persistent albeit in new language.

The *Gruppenexperiment*, Psychoanalysis, and the History of Emotions

Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Friedrich Pollock returned only reluctantly to West Germany after their forced exile in the United States. They shared the US military administration's conviction that the social sciences can be a stabilizing element of a liberal society and found in teaching one of the main motivations to return to Frankfurt.¹⁷ The social sciences, Horkheimer argued in his speech for the reopening of the ISR in 1951, should not be taught only to a small group of aspiring sociologists but to teachers, politicians, journalists, jurists, and others whom he considered central to the formation of a democratic civil society. Emphasizing the centrality that pedagogy had for the reestablished institute, Horkheimer considered the social sciences nothing less than "an element of the current form of humanism to whose unfolding the question of a future of humanity is tied."¹⁸ The 1951 *Gruppenexperiment*, an attempt to understand the prevalent public opinion in West Germany and one of the remigrated ISR's first empirical studies, was successful in this regard. It familiarized many young West German intellectuals who would later occupy prominent positions in German academia and society with the empirical social sciences: philosopher Hermann Schweppenhäuser, journalist Peter von Haselberg, theater critic Ivan Nagel, and the sociologists-cum-politicians Ludwig von Friedeburg and Ralf Dahrendorf.¹⁹ The *Gruppenexperiment* was even more successful in revealing the precariousness of the newly founded democratic state to which the Critical Theorists returned. As the Christian Democrat Franz Böhm wrote in his foreword to the report (edited by Pollock and soberly titled *Gruppenexperiment. Ein Studienbericht*), it demonstrated conclusively that a large

¹⁵ Anna M. Parkinson, *An Emotional State: The Politics of Emotion in Postwar West German Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 8, 110–11.

¹⁶ Frank Biess, "Feelings in the Aftermath: Towards a History of Postwar Emotions," in *Histories of the Aftermath*, ed. Biess and Robert G. Moeller (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 47; Parkinson, *An Emotional State*, 95.

¹⁷ Ludwig von Friedeburg, "Die Rückkehr des Instituts für Sozialforschung," in *Die Frankfurter Schule und Frankfurt*, ed. Monika Boll and Raphael Gross (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 40–46; Michael Becker, Dirk Braunstein, and Fabian Link, "Postnazistisches Sprechen. Einführung in Peter von Haselbergs Beitrag zum Gruppenexperiment," in Peter von Haselberg, *Schuldgefühle*, ed. Michael Becker, Dirk Braunstein, and Fabian Link (Frankfurt: Campus, 2020), 14.

¹⁸ Max Horkheimer, November 14, 1951, quoted in von Friedeburg, "Die Rückkehr des Instituts für Sozialforschung," 44.

¹⁹ Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin, "Translator's Introduction," in Theodor W. Adorno and Friedrich Pollock and colleagues, *Group Experiment and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin (Cambridge, MA, 2011), xxxix. Dahrendorf, decades later, vehemently criticized the design of the study; see Ralf Dahrendorf, *Über Grenzen* (Munich: Beck, 2002), 170–71.

proportion of the West German population does “not want to know how Frenchmen, Americans, Russians, etc. are or think, what the occupying power did, what happened in Hitler’s concentration camps, etc. Instead, they have a preconceived and surely thoroughly false opinion ... and fight tooth and nail against learning the plain truth.”²⁰

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, there was certainly no shortage of surveys on the German population in the American occupation zone. Already in October 1945, the US Office of Military Government (OMGUS) set up an Opinion Survey Section that conducted more than seventy surveys by 1949, averaging one every three weeks. This intense research activity continued when the Federal Republic of Germany was established in 1949 and OMGUS became the US High Commissioner for Germany (HIGOC), which financed another 213 surveys until 1955.²¹ Among them, the *Gruppenexperiment*²² was designed as a corrective to the questionnaire-based surveys that had dominated US research activities. These surveys were suspected of suffering from social-desirability bias and the German aversion toward questionnaires due to their association with Allied denazification efforts. But the *Gruppenexperiment* was also the result of a more fundamental critique. In a preface to Pollock’s report, Adorno and Horkheimer even argue that its contribution was primarily methodological.²³ The introduction to the final report, written by Pollock but heavily edited by Adorno,²⁴ criticized surveys for being premised on an untenable assumption: that people hold an articulatable, stable, and coherent opinion on all sorts of topics that only had to be extracted from them by means of precoded alternatives.²⁵ By contrast, the ISR contended that an individual opinion was often nothing more than a “vague and diffuse potential,” a “latent” disposition that took concrete shape only in social interactions. It contained contradictory propositions that, according to Pollock, do not necessarily indicate individual weaknesses in logic alone but eventually reflect the antagonistic state of society. This dynamic, intersubjective, often inherently contradictory character of opinions could not be registered by surveys that conceptualized public opinion as an aggregate phenomenon measured by accumulating a large enough data set of individual opinions.²⁶

Using Hegelian terminology, Pollock compared public opinion to the “objective spirit,” an “intellectual climate” that is prior to any individual opinion and confronts the individual as something “preformed, solidified, and often overwhelmingly powerful” and that is the “effect of the tangible domination of the economic and social apparatus of production over consumption.” Yet he left no doubt that public opinion was “borne by the individuals and based upon their thinking and feeling.”²⁷ And public and individual opinion were by no means identical. Rather, they often contrasted, and the former was only expressed in the latter in a modified, highly mediated way, sometimes “changed beyond all recognition.” The experiment tried to capture opinions in all of their “multilayered, contradictory complexity.”²⁸

Guided by these theoretical reflections, the ISR came up with an experimental design that aimed at replicating the conditions under which people form articulable opinions. The

²⁰ Franz Böhm, “Foreword,” in *Group Experiment and Other Writings*, 7.

²¹ Anna J. Merrit and Richard L. Merrit, ed., *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945–1949* (Urbana: Indiana University Press, 1970), 3–4; Anna J. Merrit and Richard L. Merrit, ed., *Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany: The HICOG Surveys, 1949–1955* (Urbana: Indiana University Press, 1980); Frank Stern, *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge*, trans. William Templer (Oxford: Pergamon, 1992), 106–51, for a discussion of German postwar antisemitism in these surveys.

²² Becker, Braunstein, and Link, “Postnazistisches Sprechen,” 14.

²³ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Introduction,” in *Group Experiment and Other Writings*, 9.

²⁴ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 472.

²⁵ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” in *Group Experiment and Other Writings*, 28. The English translation of the *Gruppenexperiment* is an abridged version of the original report; I cite the English version when possible.

²⁶ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 26.

²⁷ All quotes from Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 25.

²⁸ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 33.

Institute conducted 137 group discussions (sixteen of them were not transcribed) with between eight and twenty-six anonymized participants that were homogeneous with regard to at least one social marker (occupation, leisure activity, political affiliation, etc.). The homogeneity of the groups was the result of the ISR's conviction that opinions are adopted in discussions with a peer group.²⁹ In line with their previous empirical work in the United States and particularly their research on the Authoritarian Personality, the ISR wanted to evoke public opinion by indirect means.³⁰ The stimulus was a fictive letter by an equally sham American (or British, depending on the occupation zone) sergeant named Colburn, who told his family about his experience with the German people. From winter 1950 to the end of 1951, the recorded letter was played to a total of more than 1,600 participants from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This stimulus, the experimenters assumed, would provoke intense ninety-minute debates that reveal "what is in the air in the realm of political ideology."³¹ Whereas the first half of the discussion was supposed to go on freely, in the second half the moderator interjected a set of standard arguments to nudge the participants to state their opinions more precisely.

Making reference to Freudian psychoanalysis, Pollock contended that "mood" and "affective vicissitudes" are important factors for the manifestation of a particular opinion and argued that the most ambivalent statements often reveal the "strongest affective charge."³² As the research design consciously subverted the dichotomy of feeling and reason, the transcripts noted laughter, chaos, and elliptic and aposiopetic sentences in their protocols and thereby made it possible to look for potential tensions, emotional conflicts, and affective ambivalences in individual statements. In short, the *Gruppenexperiment* produced a vast collection of empirical material that shows in dynamic complexity how individuals navigated a situation in which many attitudes had to be relearned because many sentiments became socially unacceptable. It does so without reifying these emotions into precoded options but captures them in all of their volatility and ambivalence.

In *Guilt and Defense*, his monographic qualitative analysis of twenty-five group discussions, among them the group from the fashion school that is analyzed in this article, Adorno described the *Gruppenexperiment* as focused on an "intermediate layer," situated between the deep layer of the unconscious with its "*ich-fremd*" potentialities and affects and the layer of rational consciousness that can assert or reject preconscious positions. He called this layer "a subjective social-psychological disposition" on which individuals work through problems intellectually and psychologically, a place in which subjective and trans-subjective factors, objective spirit and individual disposition, meet, fuse, and clash and thereby form the basis for idiosyncratic individual behavior which is nevertheless inseparable from its social context.³³ The *Gruppenexperiment's* psychoanalytic approach neither completely sociologized the individual psyche nor set the individual consciousness absolute—rather it held the concepts of subject and society in abeyance, emphasizing the former's disintegrated state and the reciprocal, conflictual relationship between both.

²⁹ Pollock, "Group Experiment," 34, 36; see the total number of interviews and detailed demographic data about the participants in Pollock, ed., *Gruppenexperiment. Ein Studienbericht* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), 63–89.

³⁰ The status of the *Gruppenexperimente* and other empirical studies in the work of the Frankfurt Critical Theorists is detailed in Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin, "Guilt and Defense: Theodor Adorno and the Legacies of National Socialism in German Society," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Guilt and Defense* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3–44; Johannes Platz, "Die Praxis der Kritischen Theorie" (PhD diss., Trier University, 2012); Eva-Maria Ziege, *Antisemitismus und Gesellschaftstheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2009); Eva-Maria Ziege, "Einleitung der Herausgeberin," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Bemerkungen zu The Authoritarian Personality* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 7–20; Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 466–79.

³¹ Pollock, "Group Experiment," 32.

³² Pollock, "Group Experiment," 28, 32.

³³ Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 53.

This psychoanalytic approach to study opinions in the moment of their formation makes the transcripts of the *Gruppenexperiment* a remarkable source for the history of emotions in postwar West Germany. It allows the study of two empirical phenomena that were omnipresent but are hard to catch in other sources: first, attempts to qualitatively alter a now-socially unacceptable feeling and, second, the manifestation of this emotion in new, metamorphosed form.

The material itself constrains the moment of speculation that searching for these congealed emotions necessitates. In the case of the *Gruppenexperiment*, it also prescribes a “theoretical self-restraint” that already guided Adorno’s qualitative analysis in *Guilt and Defense*.³⁴ The transcribed interviews do not allow for a depth-psychological reading of emotions, even if there were a full-fledged psychoanalytic method for identifying and interpreting them: too little is known about the individual participants and their paralingual interaction in the experiment.³⁵ Too different is also the setting of this social-scientific experiment from the intimacy and frequency of psychoanalytic sessions. While underscoring that emotions are deeply historical, as forcefully argued by historians of emotions, the transcripts, however, also resist the paradigm of cognitive psychology that has inspired most studies on past feelings. Neither do the participants of the *Gruppenexperiment* always say what they feel nor do they always seem to know how they are supposed to feel in West Germany. This poses difficulty for methods that are focused on the explicit (performative) articulation of particular emotions or on habitualized emotional practices.³⁶

Yet, the transcripts of the *Gruppenexperiment* still make it possible to look for emotions beyond their explicit articulation or enactment, I argue. As Adorno remarked in his analysis, the transcripts reveal a second, brittle language, “a stammering,” that surfaced beneath the research participants’ attempts to react coherently to all problems posed to them by the stimulus, especially in response to emotionally difficult topics.³⁷ Ripe with metonyms and metaphors, feelings that are not explicitly articulated or even consciously negated but permeate linguistic representations, these tense, fleeting moments open themselves up for a close reading that provides clues as to how Germans felt in the early years of the Federal Republic.³⁸

Life after the “Cold Shower:” Self-Images of Passivity and Privacy in the *Gruppenexperiment*

The particular element of public opinion that the *Gruppenexperiment* focused on was West German “neo-nationalism.”³⁹ Two emotions were central to this topic, as Max Horkheimer stated in his 1952 survey of the West German social sciences: “the guilt complex and the changes created in the structure of anti-Semitic and anti-democratic feelings.”⁴⁰ The design of the basic stimulus, the fictitious letter by Sergeant Colburn, aimed at provoking expressions that could provide insights into these psychological structures. Meant to organize the group discussion around a distinct set of topics, it contained a critique of West German

³⁴ Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 56, 52.

³⁵ On the status of emotions in psychoanalysis, see Mai Wegener, “Warum die Psychoanalyse keine Gefühlstheorie hat,” in *Gefühle zeigen*, ed. Johannes Fehr and Gerd Folkers (Zurich: Chronos, 2009), 143–62.

³⁶ William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Monique Scheer builds on Reddy’s cognitive-psychological approach to develop a praxeological understanding of emotions in “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And What Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 6 (2012): 193–220.

³⁷ Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 51.

³⁸ I discuss the methodology of history of emotions and the potential of psychoanalysis in some more detail in “History of Emotions and Intellectual History,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the History and Sociology of Ideas*, ed. Stefanos Geroulanos and Gisèle Sapiro (New York: Routledge, 2024), 275–91.

³⁹ Alex Demirović, *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 353–56.

⁴⁰ Max Horkheimer, quoted in Stefan Lochner, “Die ‘Gruppenstudie’ des Instituts für Sozialforschung. Ein signifikantes Zeugnis zur Mentalitätsgeschichte der frühen Bundesrepublik,” in Boll and Gross, *Die Frankfurter Schule und Frankfurt*, 48.

attitudes, precisely “ethnocentrism,” the defense against guilt, and authoritarian dispositions. The reproach was qualified by repeated positive statements about Germans, whom it described as “clean,” “hardworking,” “good-natured,” and whose “technical talent” and “friendliness” it emphasized. To prevent a superficial rejection of the letter by the groups, the stimulus introduced its author as a “sober GI” who was stationed in Germany for five years and had intimate knowledge of the civilian population that he wanted to spread to rectify common misperceptions about the country by other “superficial observers” whom he accused of generalizing too quickly about the Germans. Sergeant Colburn even makes some sympathetic statements that acknowledge German suffering during World War II. The most important part of the letter is the criticism of Germans that the experimenters expected would provoke the groups to articulate precisely the ideology that the letter subjected to critique. Sergeant Colburn worries that the German population “did not take to heart what was done under Hitler” and that they will readily follow the next strong man who comes along. He critically observes a West German sense of superiority vis-à-vis the occupation forces, *Schadenfreude* about the failures of the American war in Korea, and the use of complaints about displaced persons as a pretense to articulate antisemitism. In a large section of the letter, he also reproaches the German population for its apologetic unwillingness to understand the qualitative difference between the Holocaust and lynching in the United States, arguing that the former was state-organized while the latter is a crime prosecuted by the state.⁴¹

The group discussion that I will analyze in this article was conducted with eight fashion-design apprentices in a fashion school in Frankfurt am Main on December 11, 1950. They were assembled via snowball sampling, which makes it likely that some of them knew one another already. With the exception of Ms. Nagel (a pseudonym like all names in the transcript), who was already thirty-four, the six female and two male participants were born in the second half of the 1920s. With approximately 98 percent of all youth between ten and eighteen years organized in the Hitler Youth in 1939, it is thus safe to assume that they were partly socialized in National Socialist organizations.⁴² This exact upbringing turned this generation into a closely watched seismograph for the development of West Germany after the war, as I will discuss later.⁴³ Only one participant, Mr. Zügel, served in the German Army for one and half years during World War II. The discussion leader Diedrich Osmer, a student at the reopened ISR, remarked that he had the impression that the group “thought about these topics for the first time” and that all participants demonstrated an “honest willingness to engage” with them.⁴⁴

Colburn’s description of the German character is the first topic that is picked up by the fashion-design apprentices. Ms. Opel, a twenty-two-year-old in her third year of study, opens the discussion:

In principle, the man is right. He basically understood the Germans quite well, I think, well—when he talked about the psychological things, let’s put it this way, how the people—precisely the Germans—are inclined to repeat what they’ve heard, and this whole way of—it was basically not bad how he said it, but ... he has ... I....

Her statement is completed by one of the two male students in the group, Zügel: “He approached the topic from an American viewpoint.” After being encouraged to speak openly

⁴¹ Over the course of the experiment, the letter was repeatedly adapted to make it less provocative. The group I analyze in this article was exposed to the second version of the letter. All quotes in this part are from the final version of the letter, translated in Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 177–78.

⁴² Arno Klönne, *Jugend im Dritten Reich* (Cologne: PapyRossa Verlag, 1999), 33.

⁴³ The generation was seen as both a threat and a hope for the democratic rebuild; for the former see Howard Becker, *German Youth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), for the latter see Möckel, *Erfahrungsbruch und Generationsbehauptung*, 257–76.

⁴⁴ Archive of the Institute for Social Research Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, Collection F2, Box 28, “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950.”

by Osmer, the discussion leader, Opel continues, before her sentence is again finished by the second male participant, Lutz.

Opel: For example, he said that there was lynching on a huge scale in our country and blamed us for it, while it has to be added that we did not know about it at that time, these are all things that were uncovered later and we only learned about them after 1945. We were completely immersed in this story, in the youth movement or the military among other things. We were practically completely organized from childhood onwards, and ... in school and BDM [League of German Girls] and the following, we were instructed to ... and the things were kept secret from us ...

Mr. Lutz: They were shown to us the way we were supposed to see them.⁴⁵

After confirming Colburn's general skepticism regarding the West Germans' "authoritarian disposition," Opel's affirmative response is immediately qualified and her language becomes brittle and eventually breaks off. Zügel then, apparently correctly, anticipates what Opel would have liked to address: that Colburn presents an outside perspective on "the topic." Only after the discussion leader Osmer encourages Opel to speak freely, she says which "topic" the American could not understand: the German youth's role in and responsibility for the Holocaust. Thus, the participants do not start by denying the Holocaust—as evinced by Lutz's statement, who makes explicit that they saw something. Rather, they use the beginning of the discussion to affirm Colburn's criticism of the Germans and frame themselves in a particular light: as passive, gullible objects in a total organization, who cannot be blamed for actions that were impossible for them to grasp.

A close reading of the brittleness of Opel's language and the elliptic and aposiopetic construction of her sentences reveals internal emotional conflicts as well as trans-subjective dynamics that shape her response to the stimulus. Opel's first statement becomes evasive and incoherent in the moment when she wants to rebut Sergeant Colburn, tellingly breaking off completely when she utters "I." The second statement then makes explicit what she could not articulate in the first response, namely the Holocaust. Picking up Colburn's phrase of lynching, she remains conspicuously evasive ("things") and apologetic: the Holocaust represents a topic that she avoids addressing directly. Generally, it is only after receiving some encouragement by Osmer and Zügel that she can elaborate on her criticism of the stimulus. In this criticism, crucially, she now adopts the first-person plural, "we," illustrating that she has gained the impression that she can speak for the whole group.⁴⁶ And she does not seem to be wrong about this: all three fashion-design apprentices participating in this first exchange affirm one another, and Opel generally accepts the (to us patronizing) way that Zügel and Lutz finish her sentences for her. She seems to articulate a position that has support.

The group uses the opening of the discussion to present their past selves in a particular way. This is evinced by Lutz's statement, equally evasive in his terms, that underlines the core of Opel's response to Colburn: the youth's passivity, which characterizes their position vis-à-vis a crime whose occurrence and immorality they generally seem to acknowledge. It is important to note that Colburn's letter does not contain an accusation of collective guilt; to the contrary, it is one of the superficial observations that the fictitious author seeks to counter. But immediately, his letter is understood as an attack against which the whole group has to defend itself.⁴⁷ This defense finds its expression in both a language ("lynching") that

⁴⁵ "Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950," 1.

⁴⁶ The quick integration of groups in the *Gruppenexperiment* is discussed in Pollock, "Group Experiment," 145.

⁴⁷ On the German focus on "collective guilt" and its comparatively little relevance for Allied politics, see Jill Jones, "Eradicating Nazism from the British Zone of Germany," *History* 68 (1990): 145–62; Norbert Frei, "Von deutscher Erfindungskraft oder: Die Kollektivschuldthese in der Nachkriegszeit," *Rechtshistorisches Journal* 16 (1997): 621–34; Heidrun Kämper, *Der Schuldiskurs in der frühen Nachkriegszeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005).

indicates a certain equivalence between American racism and German antisemitism and a particular self-representation as “German youth.”

The short exchange between Opel, Zügel, and Lutz already contains *in nuce* two constitutive components of this integrative self-image. First, it shows that the group does not understand itself as active subjects in recent German history. Second, it is this heavily constrained subject-position that frees them from blame in the National Socialist crimes. Thus, from the inception of the discussion, two motives form an emotional and ideological constellation: a dissociation from agency in their self-image and a denial of active complicity in the Holocaust.⁴⁸

This mechanism to fend off feelings of guilt was already observed by Adorno in *Guilt and Defense* but a close reading of the discussion of the fashion-design apprentices shows that the passive self-image also takes on a prescriptive character toward political activity in the post-war moment.⁴⁹ Commenting on a political demonstration she no further specifies (but that could have very well been the pro-European rally in Strasbourg in 1950 during which young adults from various European countries removed inner-European boundary posts),⁵⁰ Ms. Reuther, born in 1930, explains her inhibition to join the activists:

On the radio they talked about a silent rally with torches. And in my unconsciousness, I remembered a silent rally which ... [laughter] I participated in as a ten-year-old girl [Mädel]. And it would have felt like a sin if I supported it.

Ms. Nagel takes up this comment and adds:

It's about the bad conscience. We have an understandable reserve, which can be explained by the whole historical development, to—let's put it the way it was just said—organize the youth the way it was organized in the Third Reich.⁵¹

Using the image of the totally organized youth, the participants now blur the temporal and political boundaries separating National Socialism from the Bonn Republic. Ignoring completely the likely political differences between the rallies, the group uses a formal analogy to convince themselves that they have an “understandable reserve” to become politically active again.⁵² How affectively charged this discussion is can be seen in the laughter that interrupts Reuther's comment when she begins to talk in the first person about her active participation in the National Socialist youth movement. And the participants give a more concrete indication of the emotional conflict they are dealing with. Reuther speaks of a “sin” she would have committed if she had participated in the rally. Nagel mentions a “bad conscience” that makes the group's reservation toward political activism “understandable.” The self-image as inhibited from active political participation becomes a means to articulate an emotional and moral position on the National Socialist past. It acknowledges a conspicuously vacuous wrongdoing while sparing German youth of it. All political activism suddenly recalls old mistakes, and abstention from politics becomes the moral of Germany's recent history.

⁴⁸ A similar observation is made in Möckel, *Erfahrungsbruch und Generationsbehauptung*, 328–29.

⁴⁹ Without attending to its prescriptive character, Adorno mentions this embrace of powerlessness as a mechanism of psychological defense several times in *Guilt and Defense*, 92, 99, 101.

⁵⁰ For a description of the news coverage of what may have been this protest, see Eugen Pfister, “Europa im Bild” (PhD diss., Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität zu Frankfurt, 2012), 142–43.

⁵¹ ““Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 63.

⁵² Similar observations are made in Alan McDougall, “A Duty to Forget: The ‘Hitler Youth Generation’ and the Transition from Nazism from Communism in Postwar East Germany, c. 1945–49,” *German History*, 26 (2008): 24–46, esp. 44, and Ruff, *The Wayward Flock*, 59, 188.

In line with these observations, the group also voices a certain disillusionment with politics that prevents them from actively engaging. This becomes evident in a very concise statement by Reuther about her youthful embrace of National Socialism:

It was like this: We were presented with this idea and were without any doubt thrilled by it. After the cold shower that we received, there was a certain phlegm in all of us and we did not want to listen anymore.

This idea of being phlegmatic is quickly taken up by other participants and becomes central in the images that they paint of themselves (and their generation in West Germany) more generally. Zügel, a former solo dancer, identifies a “lethargy that can even be deadly” and is responsible for “making the people feel tired.” Ms. Müller, a twenty-three-year-old native of Göttingen, echoes this statement: “German youth is not yet ready to work politically.” Opel adds that young West German people “are not only unable but also unwilling to engage in politics.”⁵³ In a similar vein, other participants describe the state of youth with negative terms: “inhibition” and “dilatoriness” as well as “labile,” “disinterested,” even “degenerated.”⁵⁴ The discussion leader’s later attempt to counter this embrace of apolitical passivity by reference to Truman’s upset victory over Dewey as an example of the power of democratic participation is, fittingly, bluntly ignored by the group.⁵⁵

The hegemony of the passive self-image is also exemplified by an individual comment that articulates a markedly different representation of the group. In the middle of a discussion about Hitler’s “phenomenal” rise to power, in which the participants jointly try to explain by reference to his appealing “rhetoric of community, which especially caught the German youth,” it is again Reuther who now, contradicting her positions quoted previously, starts out articulating a surprisingly prodemocratic stance, retreating only midway through her statement:

We start anew from the beginning on a democratic base. Because it is incredibly attractive to make up your own mind and to think about these topics. But I also think that, if there were another man who would tell us what we want to hear or what the masses want to hear, that everyone would follow this man again in the same way.”⁵⁶

Her comment sparks a vivid discussion among the other participants—its vehemence is marked by the transcriber’s choice to end all responses with an exclamation mark. One unidentified person shouts: “Exactly!,” while another exclaims: “I don’t think so!” The protocol then states “chaos” before the discussion leader, Osmer, intervenes and calls upon the participants to hear everyone out and talk one after another. After his remark the protocol notes “laughter” and Müller begins to speak:

Well, I think that’s the case. Because I’ve seen it. I listened to a lot of comments in groups of ordinary people, because I was curious to what extent they are following politics. And something stuck out to me: These people don’t feel like ... following politics.

Interjection: Yes, that’s right!

And they withdraw for one simple reason: If it goes the other way around, we will be punished again! Therefore, nobody wants to commit himself.⁵⁷

⁵³ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 6–8.

⁵⁴ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 13, 52, 62, 48; The group participants’ tendency to describe themselves in pathological terms offers interesting parallels to Monica Black’s observation of self-diagnoses in postwar Germany in *A Demon-Haunted Land* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 77.

⁵⁵ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 65–66.

⁵⁶ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 4–6.

⁵⁷ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 6–7.

Müller's comment finally brings to a halt what had been tentatively argued by Reuther and sets the whole discussion back on its earlier track. After Müller's statement, the chaos caused by Reuther's proactive self-image is calmed and familiar tropes are articulated: "The youth is not yet ready to be interested in politics," "the youth is incapable of being interested in politics," and "I am not interested in politics because I do not feel qualified." Yet, Müller's comment also shows that in addition to being a means to dissociate themselves from the National Socialist past, the group also uses the blurring of National Socialist Germany and the Bonn Republic to justify their *ressentiment* against the Allied forces, which may "punish" them again if they become politically active.⁵⁸ The sequence ends with a statement by Lutz who argues that the majority of the German *Volk* would again follow someone like Hitler if he promised them an improvement of the situation. Crucially, he then adds that he would feel sympathetic to such a return to the *Führerstaat* because the situation under Hitler had brought significant social improvements. After this embrace of National Socialism, Lutz is interrupted by an unidentified speaker of the group who indignantly shouts: "Excuse me! [*Erlaubt mal!*]" and the group resumes its seemingly equidistant position toward the present infant democracy in West Germany and the National Socialist past.⁵⁹

The reactions, provoked by both prodemocratic and revanchist statements, reveal the temporality of the self-image that is articulated in the discussion. Even though these eight fashion-design apprentices occasionally argue that another Führer could teach them democracy, and doubt that their elected officials, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Theodor Heuss, have sufficient leadership qualities, they rarely explicitly express the nostalgic intention to turn back the clock to 1933. References to the *Führerstaat* and its supposed clarity and swift decision-making processes are mostly used as a foil against which the participants can point out the supposed shortcomings of the democratic system. At the same time, their participation in National Socialism is precisely what prevents them from supporting democratic politics. By apologetically equating the two forms of political activism, the group not only expresses a very nebulous, unspecific rejection of National Socialism, but also renders itself caught up in a temporal deadlock. There is no return to National Socialism, but likewise and because of their past, nor is there any chance to accept the democratic present and future. They picture themselves as helpless spectators in a history that washes over them.

Precisely this amalgamation of past and present in the self-images provides clues about the emotional conflicts that the participants carry out internally and within the group setting. From the very beginning, the image of a past self, of having been totally organized and passive in National Socialism, is used as way to counter a criticism that Sergeant Colburn's letter did not even raise: that they are guilty of the Holocaust. At the same time, the participants' desire to counter this alleged accusation indicates that they want to free themselves of this association, which is apparently tied to a negative feeling. Maybe it indicates the presence of feelings of guilt when participants speak of a "bad conscience" or fear of committing another "sin" or shame that articulates itself in the depreciatory self-images.⁶⁰ Yet, the defense is rarely genuinely personal. Rather, their frequent use of "we" shows that they try to exonerate a collective to which they themselves belong: the German youth or even the German nation. This immediate self-integration into a bigger collective even reinforces the impression of passivity that they give in the discussion. And this passive self-image seems to be the main strategy of the group to deal with this emotional conflict: responding to the largely invented accusation, they render themselves helpless in past and present,

⁵⁸ This *ressentiment* is based on an apologetic self-image as victims that is described by Atina Grossman, *Jews, Germans, and Allies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 34–37, and Robert Moeller, *War Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Jeffrey Olick provides a detailed account of the West German reaction to the occupation period in *In the House of the Hangman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ All quotes in "Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950," 6–10.

⁶⁰ Weckel, *Beschämende Bilder*, 15–16.

thereby annihilating the difference between National Socialism and the Bonn Republic. This self-image, however, rarely translates into open opposition to democracy. Open *ressentiment* is instead articulated toward the Allied troops, when one participant implies that democratic activism would put them at risk of being punished again. Manifesting the emotions that Weckel, Biess, and Parkinson identified in their studies of West Germany, the group embraces passivity. In her report from Germany, Arendt remarked trenchantly that “it is as though the Germans, denied the power to rule the world, had fallen in love with impotence as such.”⁶¹

Even the *ressentiment* toward the Allied forces is perfectly compatible with how the group stylizes itself. As described by Friedrich Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals*, *ressentiment* is an “imaginary revenge” by those “denied the proper response of action.”⁶² As an “*Akt der geistigen Rache*,” a decidedly impotent rebellion against the new democratic regime that subverts the threshold of causing an open conflict with a superior enemy, it thrives on inversion of values: the group’s apologetic equation of National Socialism and democracy. Like Nietzsche’s “man of *ressentiment*” the group “knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself.”⁶³

But the self-representation of the group also opens a new way to think about melancholia. Contrary to the Mitscherlichs’ argument that apathy in the Bonn Republic was connected to the exhausting attempt to fend off melancholic feelings, the transcript hints at some traces of melancholy being present.⁶⁴ If, as argued by Freud, the symptoms of melancholia are “a profoundly painful dejection, a cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, an inhibition of all activity and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterances in self-reproaches and self-revilings,” the group fits the description.⁶⁵ After the loss of an important object that they seem unable to mourn, they instead lose all interest in politics, stress their inhibition to political activity, and respond to what they see as the accusation of being guilty. As a static feeling, as Michael Steinberg puts it, melancholia “does not achieve or imply reconciliation” but is marked by its recurrent and enduring expression and long duration.⁶⁶ The participants’ refusal to participate in democracy is marked by this unwillingness to genuinely come to terms with the past and present.

Thus, it appears like the group’s defensive posture against the accusation of collective guilt was transformed into both an impotent rebellion against the new democratic regime and the former occupation forces that are associated with it and a melancholic cessation of interest in the public sphere. Central to these feelings is the passivity of the subject, which is the *basso ostinato* of how the group responds to the basic stimulus. More importantly, however, both feelings also raise questions about whether members of the group had severed their affective ties to National Socialism completely.

Apolitical Democrats or Apathetic Authoritarians?

The group of eight fashion-design apprentices was hardly alone in thinking about their generation in the early Federal Republic. To the contrary, the early postwar years were marked by an intense discourse about youth—as Kalb points out, it became a “discursive space for discussions about postwar society, future objectives, and contemporary threats.” Emphasizing the conservative hegemony in West Germany, this debate was riddled with negative stereotypes about the youth’s delinquency, deviancy, and degeneration.⁶⁷ Partly, the

⁶¹ Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule,” 343.

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20.

⁶³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 21.

⁶⁴ Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*.

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychoanalytical Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1962), 245.

⁶⁶ Michael P. Steinberg, “Music and Melancholy,” *Critical Inquiry* 40 (2014): 288–310, esp. 295.

⁶⁷ Kalb, *Coming of Age*, 3; see also Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, 13.

fashion-design apprentice's unwillingness to engage with public matters may have been a resigned response to this moral panic. Yet, given how the group links political past and present, they seem more intent to embrace passivity for its exonerating qualities. For this, too, they could draw on a public discourse, Jaimey Fisher shows. The German public portrayed itself as the victim of a youth that had most zealously committed themselves to National Socialism while being too young to be fully responsible for its actions.⁶⁸

These discussions were not without disagreements. Whether the passive attitude of the young generation was indicative of an authoritarian mindset and a concomitant animosity toward democracy was a matter of extensive sociological debate.⁶⁹ The most widely discussed contribution to this discussion was probably Helmut Schelsky's sociogram of what he dubbed the "skeptical generation": the young West Germans that, like the fashion-design apprentices, were born in the 1920s and early 1930s and spent their formative years under National Socialism. Confirming the impression that the group of fashion-design apprentices gave, Schelsky's *Die skeptische Generation* (1957) argued that the West German youth of the 1950s was characterized by their depolitical and deideological consciousness, their distanced skepticism toward the political sphere, and their "concretism"—a word that Schelsky borrowed from Adorno—that manifested in a focus on the "practical, tangible, and obvious," "a heightened sense for objectivity," and an "unsatisfiable desire for reality." They often try, he observed in his meta-analysis of quantitative surveys conducted between 1948 and 1955, to defend their private sphere against political intrusion, to place an emphasis on success at work, and to aim at integrating smoothly into society.⁷⁰

Schelsky, who had been shaped by the German Youth Movement and been a vocal supporter of National Socialism in the 1930s, considered this political reluctance and focus on the private sphere a consequence of both epochal changes in the social structure and more immediate historical factors.⁷¹ He argued that the dawn of bureaucracy and industrial production brought about particular challenges for young generations. Using Weberian ideal types, he contended that the private and the public sphere in industrial societies were ruled by contradictory imperatives. While the family preserved the feudal character of patriarchal intimacy, the now-dynamic public sphere of work and politics, characterized by anonymity and purely functional relationships that are "abstract and principled, regulated and purposeful," demanded a totally different behavior. The transition from the private to the public sphere (which he considered the defining characteristic of youth) thus became a "passage between two horizons of social behavior that are mostly antagonistically structured." This, he maintained, throws the youth in industrial societies in deep crisis, making the private sphere attractive and the search for security and order in the public sphere their main concern.⁷²

⁶⁸ Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany*.

⁶⁹ Among others Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 429; Friedrich H. Tenbruch, "Alltagsnormen und Lebensgefühle in der Bundesrepublik," in *Die Zweite Republik*, ed. Richard Löwenthal and Hans-Peter Schwarz (Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1974); Hans Braun, "Das Streben nach 'Sicherheit' in den 1950er Jahren. Soziale und politische Ursachen und Erscheinungsweisen," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 18 (1978): 280–306, esp. 290–92. On the political attitude of the West German generation of the "Forty-Fivers," see Möckel, *Erfahrungsbruch und Generationsbehauptung*; Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Rolf Schörken, *Die Niederlage als Generationenerfahrung* (Weinheim: Juventus 2004); Mark Roseman, *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Friedhelm Boll, *Auf der Suche nach Demokratie* (Bonn: Dietz, 1995); Heinz Bude, *Deutsche Karrieren* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987); Jutta Beyer and Everhard Holtmann, "'Sachpolitik,' Partizipation und Apathie in der Nachkriegsgesellschaft," in *Politische Kultur in Deutschland*, ed. Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jakob Schissler (Opladen: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1987). For a critique, see Christina von Hodenberg, "Zur Generation der 45er," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 70 (2020): 4–9.

⁷⁰ Helmut Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 4th ed. (Cologne: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1960), 84, 88, 91–93.

⁷¹ More on Schelsky's support for National Socialism in Gerhard Schäfer, "Soziologie als politische Tatphilosophie. Helmut Schelskys Leipziger Jahre (1931–38)," *Das Argument* 39 (1997): 645–65.

⁷² Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 36–37, 40.

For Schelsky, this attitude was also the result of historical events that give the skeptical generation its particular “gestalt.” Unlike the Youth Movement and the subsequent “political youth” that pushed to resolve this dissonance between private and public sphere in far more active ways, the skeptical generation tried mostly to adapt. Schelsky argued that the fall of National Socialism with all of its negative effects for the young generation had caused a broad realization in this age cohort of how political and social idealism can be abused in mass political organizations.⁷³ This, Schelsky argued, “deeply convinced them of the planetary helplessness of humans in the face of great political and social constellations of power.” He also saw the privatist attitude and longing for stability as a consequence of the lost war, the breakdown of the totalitarian system, the German position in the Cold War, and particularly the German suffering in the post-World War II years.⁷⁴ But eventually the direct impact of these historical events remained questionable. Rather, he argued, they serve as political rationalizations for the reluctance toward democracy in a generation that actually “hardly felt the consequences of having participated in the National Socialist system.”⁷⁵ Referring to David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, he treated as decisive a politically very different phenomenon: the increasing prevalence of consumerist attitudes toward political institutions, articulating itself in pragmatist demands for welfare and social security.⁷⁶

For Schelsky, the skeptical generation, already burdened by the general synchronous non-synchronicity of life in industrial society, was naturally estranged by democracy. Yet, far from antidemocratic, Schelsky considered them indications of a “prepolitical reaction” that “interprets political questions and situations out of nonpolitical desires and experiences.”⁷⁷ The “apolitically democratic” skeptical generation lacked antidemocratic affects, vaguely associated the political system with personal freedom but had no firm grip on the inner workings of the democratic system nor a desire to familiarize itself with it.⁷⁸

In his review of Schelsky’s study on the “skeptical generation” for the *Guardian*, Melvin Lasky commented trenchantly that the sociologist “seems to be happy with them, and they are happy with themselves.”⁷⁹ As Franz-Werner Kersting points out, Schelsky’s sociogram actively fashioned an apologetic West German identity. It drew a sharp line between the National Socialist past and the democratic present, universalized and normalized the historical tendencies that led to the gestalt of the skeptical generation, and constituted a (rather unenthusiastic) embrace of the Bonn Republic.⁸⁰ Schelsky’s emphasis on the apolitical yet democratic character of the skeptical generation was an explicit response to HIGOC surveys that showed high approval for totalitarian items among German teenagers and theories that considered the German population’s political passivity a potentially threatening phenomenon.

But *The Skeptical Generation* was also an attempt to counter more critical analysts like the sociologists at the ISR. Even though Schelsky acknowledged that a prepolitical attitude can be mobilized for totalitarian ends, he cautioned against “bringing in the big guns of ... the *Untertanenstandpunkt*” a rebuttal of Adorno’s own theoretical reflections on the prevalent “concretism.”⁸¹ But, as Karl Korn and several other contemporary reviewers remarked,

⁷³ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 456.

⁷⁴ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 24, 85, 87, 127–30.

⁷⁵ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 456.

⁷⁶ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 455–63; as Uta Poiger points out, Rieman’s *The Lonely Crowd* became an important reference for West German intellectuals that critically embraced the West German integration into the Western bloc; see Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, 112.

⁷⁷ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 446.

⁷⁸ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 451–52.

⁷⁹ Melvin Lasky, “Adventure in the Normal,” *Guardian*, May 25, 1960.

⁸⁰ Franz-Werner Kersting, “Helmut Schelskys ‘Skeptische Generation’ von 1957. Zur Publikations- und Wirkungsgeschichte eines Standardwerks,” *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 50 (2002): 465–95, 486–87. On apologetic tendencies in West German sociology, see Y. Michal Bodemann, “Eclipse of Memory: German Representations of Auschwitz in the Early Postwar Period,” *New German Critique* 75 (1998): 57–89.

⁸¹ Schelsky, *Die skeptische Generation*, 307, 459.

the adjective *skeptical* was a misnomer for the conformist generation that Schelsky had portrayed: “Sometimes the reader gets the impression that what the author calls *skepsis* is actually something else: adaption to a society that is simply superior in power.”⁸²

Notwithstanding their political differences, the ISR’s sociologists and Schelsky’s *The Skeptical Generation* were in some profound agreement regarding the appearance of the German population.⁸³ In their quantitative analysis, the experimenters of the *Gruppenexperiment* noted the peculiar distance to politics in the group discussions: only 10 percent of all participants expressed an unequivocally positive opinion about democracy while approximately 20 percent of the sample expressed explicitly antidemocratic opinions. A two-thirds majority, constant across all age groups, were ambivalent toward the new political system—demonstrating the representativeness of the group of fashion-design apprentices analyzed previously. Like them, many ambivalent participants explained that in Germany “democracy has to be learned first.”⁸⁴ More than Schelsky, the ISR also analyzed the participants’ representations that seem to buttress their ambivalence about the new democratic system. Analogous to the dynamic in the discussion I analyzed, the majority of self-assessments in the *Gruppenexperiment* were actually critical, with young age correlating with a higher frequency.⁸⁵ In fact, it was one of only two topics—the other being the “East,” in which Soviet-critical statements were coded as a “positive” attitude by the ISR—in which a majority of participants expressed opinions the experimenters considered favorable for democratization. These often took familiar forms: tropes about “authoritarian tendencies” in the German character and diagnoses of “political immaturity” were commonly expressed. Summarizing the quantitative results of the *Gruppenexperiment*, Pollock concluded soberingly: “The profile of our entire population offers little cause for confidence for supporters of a democratic world order.”⁸⁶

This pessimism was substantiated by qualitative analyses conducted by researchers affiliated with the ISR. In his monograph *Misstrauen gegenüber der Demokratie* (*Distrust of Democracy*), which remained unpublished but whose main observations were summarized in the report, Heinz Mauss saw tendencies in the group discussion to undermine the idea of “autonomous action,” which he considered decisive for any democracy.” He diagnosed the participants with “passivity” and a “general disillusion toward all politics.”⁸⁷ And Schweppenhäuser’s and Rainer Koehne’s monograph about language in the group discussions, excerpts of which were included in Pollock’s report, saw the participants taking on a “spectator attitude,” “playing dead,... by not being interested in anything but [themselves],” and exhibiting “collective passivity.” Paying more attention than Schelsky to the alienating dynamics of the capitalist mode of production, Mauss, Schweppenhäuser, and Koehne explained these attitudes with the individual’s position in an industrial mass society in which people “can no longer experience themselves as subjects, only as disposable objects.”⁸⁸ But they also accounted for the phenomena by reference to the German Nazi past. For Mauss the remarkable disinterest was also a consequence of the “pseudopolitization in the Third Reich.”⁸⁹ All three authors emphasized that this passivity was not merely a result of historical and structural development but actively embraced in the group discussion. Schweppenhäuser and Koehne argued that participants show the tendency of “turning [themselves] into the passive thing [they are] already supposed to be”⁹⁰ and

⁸² Karl Korn, “Skeptische Jugend?,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 2, 1958.

⁸³ Interestingly, the ISR wanted to cooperate with Schelsky in the initial planning stages of the experiment, see Platz, “Die Praxis der Kritischen Theorie,” 70–80. See also Stephan Moebius, *Sociology in Germany* (Cham: Palgrave, 2021).

⁸⁴ Pollock, *Gruppenexperiment*, 140.

⁸⁵ Pollock, *Gruppenexperiment*, 205.

⁸⁶ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 106–07, 140.

⁸⁷ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 153.

⁸⁸ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 162–63.

⁸⁹ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 153.

⁹⁰ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 162.

Mauss suspected that “the mistrust against democracy and the disappointment about all politics is to cover up the fact that one is not trying to contribute anything to improvement even within the narrow limits.”⁹¹ These findings could have also shaped the ISR’s understanding of the high number of silent participants (23 percent of all participants did not contribute to the discussions at all).⁹² Rather than considering them as potential democrats, as some reviewers implied to minimize the *Gruppenexperiment*’s findings, the report acknowledged them as a methodological problem that should, however, not distract from the wealth of empirical material that illustrated nondemocratic opinions.⁹³

In *Guilt and Defense*, Adorno undertook a theoretically refined attempt to tie all these threads together. He, too, doubted the spontaneity and depth about the groups’ seemingly self-critical statements about the Germans. He argued that they were not the beginning of an open and concrete examination of one’s own and the nation’s National Socialist past, but often rather characterized its failure. For him, a purportedly self-critical statement often was nothing more than a “stereotype that fends off consciousness of actual responsibility, insofar as the subject reifies itself as an object of pathology without seriously applying the implicit criticism of the subject of himself.”⁹⁴ In that sense, they were means to fend off feelings of guilt.⁹⁵ In line with the other researchers from the ISR, Adorno admitted that the participants’ self-images contained “elements of truth.” Statements that pathologize the Germans are, he argued, actually validated by the neurotic response that Sergeant Colburn’s letter provoked, and the trope of individual powerlessness is not merely a fantasy of the participants but the result of how society is organized. But, writing specifically about the trope of the sick Germans, Adorno summarized that self-critical representations are often an attempt at a “magical transformation of the guilt itself into a ‘neurosis.’”⁹⁶

In “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” a now-famous talk given in 1959, Adorno explicated the structure among repressed guilt, reluctance toward democracy, and the future totalitarian threat. By drawing extensively on the *Gruppenexperiment*, as pointed out by Jeffrey Olick and Andrew Perrin, Adorno identified in the West German population “defensive postures where one is not attacked, intense affects where they are hardly warranted by the situation, an absence of affect in the face of the gravest matters, not seldom simply a repression of what is known or half-known.”⁹⁷ He considered these symptoms the result of an attempted “effacement of memory,” which he saw as “more the achievement of an all too alert consciousness than its weakness when confronted with the superior strength of unconscious processes.” These neurotic forms of working through the past were for him—as he had already argued in *Guilt and Defense*—often rational to the extent that they are “in accord with the spirit of the time” and that they “don’t throw any wrenches into the machinery.”⁹⁸

For Adorno, the postwar attitude toward democracy was in this sense rational. He argued that the German population accepted the new political system as a “working proposition” because of its success in bringing about prosperity and its role in solidifying the infant republic’s integration into the Western bloc. Yet, according to the critical theorist, democracy in West Germany had not become “naturalized to the point where people truly experience it as their own and see themselves as subjects of the political process.” On a structural level, Adorno considered this weak sense of self-efficacy the consequence of

⁹¹ Pollock, “Group Experiment,” 153.

⁹² Pollock, *Gruppenexperiment*, 66.

⁹³ This is detailed in Olick and Perrin, “Guilt and Defense,” 24–29.

⁹⁴ Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 87.

⁹⁵ This centrality of guilt is also evinced by another monograph that was published only recently: Haselberg, *Schuldgefühle*.

⁹⁶ Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*, 87–88.

⁹⁷ Olick and Perrin, “Guilt and Defense.”

⁹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 90, 92.

objective limits in social organization: “The people’s alienation from democracy reflects the self-alienation of society.” Partly, he also saw it as the result of historical contingencies: the fact that democracy was introduced by the Allies and that its introduction did not coincide with the heyday of economic liberalism and its idea of the active and rational subject. Yet it was also a West German attempt to “make an ideology out of their own immaturity, not unlike those adolescents, who when caught committing some violent act, talk their way out of it with the excuse that they are just teenagers.”⁹⁹

A genuine affirmation of democracy (at least within the constraints imposed by capitalism) was, according to Adorno, predicated on working through the National Socialist past.¹⁰⁰ Instead, he observed a glorification of the National Socialist past. It was still hailed for its perceived abolition of the state of alienation, accompanied by an amnesia about the system’s inherent aggressiveness and eventual downfall.¹⁰¹ Adorno saw National Socialism as a system that offered its supporters an “identification with the whole”—a fantasy they still reminisced about. On a psychological level, he argued, the defeat of Hitlerism had never occurred. Instead, he suspected that “secretly, smoldering unconsciously and therefore all the more powerfully, these identifications and the collective narcissism were not destroyed at all, but continue to exist.” This continued subterranean identification with National Socialism constituted a potential threat to the young democratic system. Subjects in capitalism, he maintained, “must negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals; they can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self.” These economic conditions produce the ego-weakness that Adorno saw as characteristic of the authoritarian personality. And they uphold the totalitarian potential by producing subjects who “cannot even tolerate the semblance of what would be better,” including the idea of democratic rule, “prefer to get rid of the obligation of autonomy, which they suspect cannot be a model for their lives, and prefer to throw themselves into the melting pot of the collective ego.”¹⁰²

How seriously Adorno took this threat of another German authoritarian revolt against the alienating conditions of capitalism is evinced by his motivation to apply his research into the authoritarian personality to West German society. In collaboration with students in one of his seminars, he adapted the F-Scale, the list of items to identify authoritarian personality in the United States during the war, to the historical context of West Germany. This new scale was then used in four surveys conducted between 1961 and 1966. Only after his death in 1969, in a moment when the sixties generation had become famously active in politics, were the results of this project published by his student Michaela von Freyhold. In the preface to her book *Authoritarianism and Political Apathy*, von Friedeburg, a former member of the ISR who had been involved in the *Gruppenexperiment* and who had meanwhile become the Hessian minister for education, wrote that authoritarian tendencies had changed their appearance: “Only few of the authoritarians ... are openly and actively antidemocratic. Most of them are politically disinterested.”¹⁰³ And in her theoretical reflection on the results, von Freyhold herself argued that political apathy in West Germany is often an “unarticulated acquiescence with the tendencies that work toward the destruction of democracy.”¹⁰⁴ Although she distinguished between apathy and authoritarianism, she noted three potential factors of correlation: ego-weakness and anti-utopianism that not only accepted a status quo in which subjects were reduced to objects but actively wished for its continuation, a *ressentiment* against democracy, and a potential latent affinity for the National Socialist past. In contrast to the old-school authoritarian, the new apathic

⁹⁹ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 92–93.

¹⁰⁰ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 99.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 95.

¹⁰² Adorno, *Critical Models*, 95–96, 98–99.

¹⁰³ Michaela von Freyhold, *Autoritarismus und politische Apathie* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971), 12.

¹⁰⁴ Von Freyhold, *Autoritarismus und politische Apathie*, 90.

authoritarian type, she noted, is “relatively free from the immediate desire to punish out-groups, even though he is afraid to come in touch with them, which leads to welcome their unobtrusive disappearance though forced integration or isolation.”¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, this tendency is already present in the group of eight fashion-design apprentices. But it did not mean that they were free from *ressentiments*.

Compassionate Resseniments: The Perils of Passivity and Privacy

The transcripts of the *Gruppenexperiment* are full of explicit anti-American, racist, and antisemitic *ressentiments* that deserve extensive attention.¹⁰⁶ Sometimes they preserve their National Socialist form, often they are adapted to the postwar context to either provide a retroactive justification for racist and antisemitic mass murder or are projected onto new groups such as Displaced Persons, black market peddlers, or others. These articulations of *ressentiment* have been the subject of a vast literature, not the least by Adorno himself.¹⁰⁷ But the group discussion transcripts also shed light on forms of *ressentiment* that are harder to capture because they are characterized by a seeming disconnect between the affect of *ressentiment* and the representation it is articulated in. Emotions are connected to images that seem to contradict them. These drifting forms of *ressentiment* are a direct response to the dramatic change in the norms of discourse in West Germany. While antisemitism and racism were openly articulated and encouraged between 1933 and 1945, the postwar period introduced new unwritten rules on how to articulate or remain silent about group-specific antipathies. This change in rules is clear in the first part of the discussion of the eight fashion-design apprentices, who vocally and indignantly defend themselves against Colburn’s accusation of resurgent antisemitism. Yet, these defensive reactions are often saturated with antisemitic and racist *ressentiment* themselves (as Adorno pointed out in *Guilt and Defense*).

The group is all the more interesting because the eight fashion-design apprentices partly abandon this defensive posture in the second half of the discussion and become more explicit about their individual feelings toward Jews and Black people. This part of the discussion starts with a question by Osmer about the hierarchy of different races, which provides an ideal moment for the participants to distance themselves once again from National Socialist ideology. While Osmer is still in the process of phrasing his question, one anonymous participant interjects indignantly: “No!” Nagel serenely answers that she “self-evidently opposes this” as “every human being has a soul and we are all equal before God and thus really every human being is equal.” This equality, however, is not tantamount to sameness as Nagel explains by moving from the abstract to the seemingly very concrete, picking up, as Fehrenbach has shown, a virulent discourse about children of white German women and Black GIs that illustrates like no other the postwar transformation of racism.¹⁰⁸

But why should we dismiss differences, which in fact exist, if this does not lead to positive outcomes. I think, a very tangible outcome of this all is the problem of relationships between Negroes and Germans which plays an increasing role in Germany. The

¹⁰⁵ Von Freyhold, *Autoritarismus und politische Apathie*, 155–64, 251.

¹⁰⁶ Jan Lohl, “‘Die Deutschen wurden bestraft, die Juden nicht.’ Zur Konstruktion des Antisemitismus nach Auschwitz in den Alltagsdiskursen der 1950er-Jahre, *Psychoanalyse: Texte zur Sozialforschung* 17 (2013): 204–25.

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, *Guilt and Defense*; Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans and Allies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Rita Chin et al., *After the Nazi Racial State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Alphons Silbermann and Julius H. Schoeps, ed., *Antisemitismus nach dem Holocaust* (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1986); Werner Bergmann and Rainer Erb, ed., *Antisemitismus in der politischen Kultur seit 1945* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990); Stern, *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge*; Lars Rensmann, “Guilt, Resentment, and Post-Holocaust Democracy: The Frankfurt School’s Analysis of ‘secondary Antisemitism’ in the Group Experiment and Beyond,” *Antisemitism Studies* 1 (2017): 4–37.

¹⁰⁸ Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler*.

kids that spring from these relationships are poor creatures [*Wesen*] who will forever have a hybrid position [*Zwitterposition*] regardless of them moving to America or being here ... and that's something absolutely negative resulting from this.... It is something bad not because the Negro is inferior, but because he is different.¹⁰⁹

Immediately the discussion picks up speed. Regarding biracial children, Zügel worries about “spasm-like formations [*krampfartige Gebilde*] in their development.” Ms. Bauer claims that biracial children “will feel miserable.” Her incomplete sentence is concluded by an anonymous interjection, which adds that biracial children will be unhappy because the “environment rejects them.” For ostensible precision, Opel contends that “for perhaps 80 percent ... of these beings,” the “horrid negative influences of the environment” will cause a negative development. And Müller fears that “these mediocre people ... will never become something good.” Even when the discussion leader mentions Ralph Bunche, the American diplomat and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, as a successful example of someone brought up by an interracial couple, the group pathologizes his success. Zügel: “Of course, it can—this mixture can equally be guided in a positive direction, and these people are starkly more susceptible for the positive and the negative than for the normal.” Nagel concludes that abnormal biracial development is “not just the result of education” but the “predisposition of two sides ... which simply do not harmonize.”¹¹⁰

This short exchange epitomizes how the group talks about Black people by way of a discussion about biracial children—so-called “Brown Children” of Black GIs and white German women. Paramount for the participants is the aim to dissociate themselves from National Socialism and its hierarchical understanding of races. Nagel makes this explicit when she argues that the negative development of “half-breeds [*Mischlinge*] is no German problem” and is therefore not caused by the “racial education [*Rassenerziehung*] of National Socialism.”¹¹¹ Yet, at the same time, the speakers find it of the utmost importance to preserve an understanding of races through a signifier of difference and incompatibility.¹¹² As pointed out in Fehrenbach’s and Höhn’s studies on the transformation of racial discourse in the context of the American occupation of parts of Germany, “Brown babies” provided a unique opportunity for such a reformulation of race. The “fraternization” of Black GIs and white German women was also disapproved in the American occupation forces, whose official desegregation in 1948 had not abolished racist barriers. Thus, for Germans, arguing against interracial love became a stance that could seemingly affirm both democracy and racial segregation.¹¹³

The group’s desire for difference, however, is seldom articulated in representations of Black people.¹¹⁴ Rather, it is the image of the suffering biracial child that is picked up with surprising rapidity by the whole group in constantly reaffirming statements that such children are destined for a miserable life. For their welfare, it would be best for biracial children, the group concludes, not to be born in the first place. It is interesting to see that anti-Black *ressentiment*, which manifests in the desire to keep distance from Black people, is now tied to a representation that subverts the new discursive norms for racist *ressentiments* in West German society. The group is trying to avoid overt racist stereotypes and arguments about a hierarchical racial order. Instead, they use a representation, a suffering child, which usually evokes starkly different emotions, such as compassion, sympathy, pity, or even

¹⁰⁹ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 34.

¹¹⁰ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 35–39.

¹¹¹ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 38.

¹¹² This is also emphasized in Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler*, 60–61, but the group does not shift the “diagnostic shift from mother to offspring” that Fehrenbach considers crucial for the shift from a biological understanding of racial hierarchies to the idea of racial difference.

¹¹³ Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler*, 68–69; Höhn, *GIs and Fräulein*.

¹¹⁴ At times, members of the discussion group also use overt racist and antisemitic stereotypes. See, for example, “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 42, 44.

affectionate care, to manifest their antipathy. Racism becomes synonymous with alleviating suffering, as exemplified by Müller's rhetorical question "if it is worth to [accept] the suffering of eighty percent [of the children] to create twenty percent of good or, let us say, mediocre humans," which is met with approval and laughter by the group.¹¹⁵

This consensual conversation about biracial amorous relationships is interrupted by a question from the discussion leader, Osmer. Having realized that the group circumvents talking about Jews, he poses two questions: whether the women in the group could imagine falling in love with "an educated Negro" and if they could imagine the same with "a Western Jew." This straightforward question about a hypothetical marriage to a Jew seemingly creates so much tension in the discussion that even Osmer slips out of his role as moderator. The first person to respond to him is Reuther whose comment spawns a whole exchange:

Reuther: With a Negro: no! With a Jew: perhaps!
Laughter

Osmer: It depends on who he is.
Laughter and chaos

Interjection: Yes, yes!

Osmer: It depends on the person. Even though I ...
Chaos and laughter

I would be interested in hearing how the other ladies ...

Nagel: I would say, well: In a Negro never and in a Jew: absolutely possible.
Approval

Bauer: Well, I don't know—

Nagel: I would like to qualify: Well, I consider falling in love absolutely possible, but I don't think I would strive for a conjugal covenant for purely rational reasons.

Osmer: Did you make a difference between ...

Nagel: The pure—let us say—affective or instinctual, there I make a difference, there I think it's absolutely possible. In the same way, I consider it absolutely impossible with a direct racial opposite [*rassisch Engegengesetzter*], such as a Negro or Chinese or something like this. But I would not give low importance to rational considerations [*vernunftsmäßigen Erwägungen*] but would think about it then as in how far—this thing with the Jew is to be viewed skeptically because, in the end, he is a Jew.¹¹⁶

Confirming again Fehrenbach's observation that it became taboo to understand Jews in racialized terms in West Germany and the concept of race was redefined according to stereotypical phenotypes as the "black-white binary (or at its most articulated, the black-white-yellow triad," the participants come across very nervous after Osmer's question about Jews.¹¹⁷ The protocol notes "laughter" three times, "chaos" twice, "interjection" and "approval," respectively, once and the sentences are often characterized by punctuation markers that express their tentative and incomplete nature. Maybe because they already exchanged their views on the "Brown babies" previously, the participants agree that a marriage with a Black person is out of the question. They also rely, however, on a largely implicit racist consensus that this is unthinkable, which they justify with supposed physical and psychological differences, as shown by this comment by Zügel:

I don't think it's correct to compare Negro and Jew. I think there are significant differences, first, something that largely informs my opinion, physically, and then of course—

¹¹⁵ "Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950," 38.

¹¹⁶ "Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950," 39–40.

¹¹⁷ Heide Fehrenbach, "Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State," in *After the Nazi Racial State*, 30–54, esp. 42.

I think—spiritually [*seelisch*] and in terms of mentality etc.... I think the difference between a Negro and a White is huge ... while the differences with a Jew are in many ways completely blurred.¹¹⁸

With regard to the “Western Jew,” the group cannot rely on these allegedly obvious differences that interestingly only appear in this moment, when making a case against a marriage with a Jew. In the end Nagel finds a possible pathway: she distinguishes between emotions and rationality, arguing that she may fall in love with a Jew but that she would still abstain from marrying him for reasons that she finds hard to give. She realizes that “because, in the end, he is a Jew” is not a sufficient argument to end the discussion. A few moments later she specifies her “rational considerations”:

By contracting a marriage, you are not only bearing responsibility for yourself and the other human but for the kids as well ... one says you are not only making a decision for yourself but for the whole generation that comes after you and which perhaps has to suffer from a such a decision which is not based on a rational decision.¹¹⁹

Nagel’s statement demonstrates that the previous argumentation to foreclose contact with Black people proves instructive for equally ruling out relationships with Jews. Again referring to the responsibility she has for the children of this hypothetical marriage, she presents as though harboring no strong negative feelings toward Jews but merely “rationally” weighing pros and cons. In the end, unsurprisingly, she rejects it for the greater good—the minimizing of suffering and the well-being of the next generation. This ambivalent attitude mirrors the group’s discussion about Black people and again achieves two goals at once: it represents a dissociation from National Socialist antisemitism, illustrated by the repeated claim that they could very well imagine falling in love with a Jew, and the rejection of ideas of racial hierarchy, while preserving the idea of a fundamental racial difference based on supposedly rational and altruistic grounds.¹²⁰

This twisted approach is subsequently mirrored by other participants who are asked for their stance and sometimes take up the solution proposed by Bauer. How close this argument remains to the National Socialist form of racist antisemitism is exemplified only a few moments later when Müller worries that the “degeneration of the German people [*Volk*] accelerates” by procreating biracial and hence “labile” children. Bauer seconds her concerns and cautions against the “interbreeding [*Vermischung*] between Jews and Aryans as they are constituted to form a robust people [*Volksstamm*].”¹²¹ But again these lapses into well-known arguments do not constitute a full-blown revanchist adoption of National Socialist positions. The same Müller who fears Germany’s degeneration had explained minutes earlier contradictorily that she “do[es] not want to foreclose it [a marriage between her and a Jew] ... but rule[s] it out in case of Jews” as she is “religiously committed,” turning a highly political question again into a private choice.

There is stark evidence that the group’s discussion of Black people and Jews has some cathartic quality: it fills almost half of the transcript. Even more remarkably, the talk about biracial children, which gradually replaces the defensive posture toward Colburn’s criticism, constitutes the significantly larger share of these thirty pages. And when Osmer, notably the discussion leader, concludes the topic by saying that “perhaps our bad conscience is the reason why we talked about it extensively,” his statement is met with laughter and approval. Opel concurs: “It somehow felt good.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 43.

¹¹⁹ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 41.

¹²⁰ Adorno made a similar observation in *Guilt and Defense*, 167.

¹²¹ “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 52.

¹²² “Gruppensitzung Nr. 72 in Frankfurt a.M. am 11.12.1950,” 53.

Nietzsche argued that “men of *ressentiment*” “construct their happiness artificially by looking at their enemies, or in some cases by talking themselves into it, *lying themselves into it*.” By clothing their *ressentiment* in the form of compassion, the fashion-design apprentices demonstrate what sparked Nietzsche’s interest in the subject: A deep distrust of the “value of the unegoistic, the instincts of compassion, self-denial, [and] self-sacrifice,” or short: the “regressive traits lurked in the good man.”¹²³ Reflecting on Jean-Paul Sartre’s dictum that antisemitism is “a passion and a conception of the world,”¹²⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer’s understanding of antisemitism as a “pathic projection,”¹²⁵ and Nietzsche’s emphasis on the “poisonous eye” with which the “man of *ressentiment*” distorts reality,¹²⁶ sociologist Julijana Ranc makes a compelling argument that a reversal of causality lies at the heart of *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*-driven subjects understand their animosity “as an immediate and causally justifiable reaction to the way of being [*Sosein*] or behavior of those ... against who they in reality already are disposed to feel aversion toward.”¹²⁷ But how is this “axiomatic reversal of causality” functioning in the group of the fashion-design apprentices? It is clearly present in the way they try to defend themselves against Colburn’s observations of a resurgent antisemitism in West Germany and in the way they apologetically frame the Holocaust. In the discussion about marriage, however, this projective quality of *ressentiment* seems to have changed. Now the *ressentiment*-driven discussants do not project qualities on the groups they feel aversion toward but on a third person: the biracial child and, by extension, all the elements that will inevitably make its life miserable. This makes this form of postwar *ressentiment* idiosyncratic. The group hardly even talks about the group from which it wants to keep distance (except for occasional and sometimes even positive characterizations). The object against which antipathy is directed almost disappears from the argument. It seems as if both the *ressentiment*-driven subject and the object against which the feeling is aimed are both victims of a situation they simply cannot change. This way the group reifies society and frames itself as external to it. Here, the passive self-image of the discussion about democracy and the peculiar forms of *ressentiment* meet.

The first step in this process is the transformation of a political into a supposedly private topic. The group changes Osmer’s rather abstract question about a racial hierarchy to the question of whether one could imagine having a biracial child. This also links the discussion of racism and antisemitism to the topic of sexuality. Analyzed against the backdrop of Elizabeth Heineman’s and Dagmar Herzog’s respective analyses of National Socialist and postwar sexuality, this is more than a coincidence. Heineman illustrates how the fraternizing woman became a welcome sign of moral decay in the postwar years that alleviated the West German population from asking themselves challenging questions about their complicity. If sex with the occupying forces was the foremost sign of German decline, reinstating the nuclear family became the key for rebuilding a sovereign Germany.¹²⁸ Herzog points out that this reverence of the nuclear family and the emerging prudery of the 1950s was exemplary for the ambivalent discussion of National Socialism in West Germany: a means to distance oneself from the more liberal sexuality under National Socialism while preserving its sexual understanding of racial purity.¹²⁹ In this sense, the group’s discussion of racism and antisemitism with reference to sexuality is a continuation of National Socialist ideology that

¹²³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 21, 6, 8.

¹²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1965), 11.

¹²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 158.

¹²⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 22.

¹²⁷ Julijana Ranc, “Eventuell nichtgewollter Antisemitismus” (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2016), 21–22.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Heineman, “The Hour of the Women. Memories of Germany’s ‘Crisis Years’ and West German National Identity,” *American Historical Review* 101 (1996), 354–95, esp. 381–87.

¹²⁹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 139; Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler*, 46–47.

can at the same time dissociate itself from National Socialism because it merges with the conformist “prudish rebellion” against National Socialist sexual mores.

The link between the passive attitude toward democracy and this specific form of *ressentiment* is provided by a self-image that remains largely implicit in the discussion of Jews and Black people.¹³⁰ The discussants again picture themselves absolutely impotent in caring for a biracial child. The exact causes that the individual participants identify to explain the supposed developmental aberration of biracial children, which oscillate between inborn qualities of “half-breeds” and the negative effects of living in an unaccepting and hostile society, do not seem to matter greatly to the group. They do not get caught up in a nature versus nurture debate. Instead, both factors are accepted for their supposedly similar quality: they make the group unable to change the supposedly dire situation for biracial children, especially the references to a “hostile environment” show that, parallel to the discussion on democracy, the participants do not consider themselves part of a humanmade and thus essentially social society for whose condition they are partly responsible. The private sphere of the family is the only space in which the participants consider themselves sovereign. And it is here that they partly preserve, partly restructure their racist and antisemitic *ressentiments*.

Conclusion

On April 11, 1945, in the small village of Kirchhorst, reactionary Ernst Jünger reflected upon the German defeat while watching antennas of Allied tanks passing by his window: “Recovery from such a defeat will not be the same as after Jena or Sedan. This portends a change in the lives of populations; not only must countless human beings die, but much of everything that used to motivate our deepest being perishes in this transition.”¹³¹ But what exactly died in West Germany in the postwar period? The National Socialist antidemocratic, racist, and antisemitic sentiments did not vanish when Germany was defeated in 1945 nor when it was refounded as a democratic state in 1949. Instead, they drifted, and acquired new representations they could attach themselves to. In the self-image of passivity and privacy, the analyzed group of eight fashion-design apprentices could cling to old anti-democratic, antisemitic, and racist stereotypes without violating the new discursive rules of the Bonn republic. It may have been that this private self-image was eventually conducive for the stabilization of democracy in West Germany. But the question remains as to what it did to its foundations.

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¹³⁰ Attesting to the prevalence of passivity in Germany’s postwar population, Atina Grossman highlights the very low birth numbers in postwar West Germany; see Grossman, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 42, 60.

¹³¹ Ernst Jünger, *A German Officer in Occupied Paris*, trans. Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 404.

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