On July 11, 2018, Yitzhak Melamed, a fifty-year-old Israeli professor of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, was walking in Bonn with a colleague from the city’s university, a few hours before his scheduled talk that evening. Suddenly, a twenty-year-old German-Palestinian man shouted antisemitic insults at him, throwing his kippa to the ground several times. Bystanders called the police but when they arrived, the young man ran away and Melamed chased after him. Confusing the victim with his attacker, four or five policemen then mistakenly wrestled Melamed to the ground, brutally punching, bruising, and bloodying him, as well as breaking his glasses and impairing his ability to breathe. Only after throwing more punches did they finally heed his cries that they had grabbed the wrong man and apprehend the offender.

Had this been a simple case of mistaken identity, the situation might have ended there. But as the police acknowledged their error and removed his handcuffs, one of them warned Melamed—in English—not to make trouble for the German police. To their surprise, Melamed responded that the German police had killed his grandfather, grandmother, aunt, and uncle all on one day in September 1942, and that he was no longer afraid of them. He then went to the police station to file a report about the original antisemitic incident, where he received no assistance with his wounds. Moreover, to his astonishment, the police tried to persuade him not to file a complaint about their behavior, claiming that their actions had been justified because he had resisted arrest. They told him that if he were to file such a report, they would assert that he had resisted.
Melamed then went to another police station to report the initial incident as a hate crime. There, he received friendlier treatment including expressions of regret and concern for his wounds. Hours later, Melamed managed to give his talk at the university. However, the incident was not yet over. The next morning, Bonn’s chief of police visited his hotel in order to apologize in person. Nevertheless, in a subsequent statement, the police apologized for the incident but also, true to their original threat, claimed that Melamed had resisted arrest. The story of the incident went viral after Melamed posted about it on Facebook. The University of Bonn then issued a statement of outrage at Melamed’s treatment and the city of Bonn organized a day of kippa-wearing solidarity for the following week.¹

Certain aspects of this horrifying incident and the ensuing responses follow a pattern that is similar to some other recent violent antisemitic attacks in Germany. In these, a person is recognized as a Jew and attacked, catalyzing an outraged response from the German media as well as an outpouring of support for the Jewish community. If the identity of the attacker is a Muslim or associated with Muslims, that aspect is played up by the right-wing media and—in response to, or in anticipation of this display of right-wing Islamophobia—also ignored or downplayed by the mainstream German media.² This pattern of antisemitic incident, anti-Muslim/anti-foreigner response, and philosemitic response and counter-response is apparent here, too. Melamed’s Jewishness was clearly important for his antisemitic attacker as well as for his philosemitic supporters. However, the role his Jewishness played in the German police’s beating remains unclear. In brutalizing Melamed, threatening him, and lying about his alleged aggression, the police disrupted the typical pattern of events by inserting an element of ambiguity about how his Jewishness functioned in their response. Were the police indifferent to Jewishness in their eagerness to subdue an attacker and then cover up their mistake? Or were they perhaps acting on their own antisemitic impulses? Was it a mixture of the two? Whatever the case, this incident is instructive for recognizing that antisemitism and philosemitism are components of a larger ordering system of Jewish difference—by which I mean the hierarchical ordering system of constructed ideals of the Jew and non-Jew—that continues to operate as a potent ordering system in modern Central Europe.

The antisemitic impulses that drive violent attacks need to be understood as stemming from a broader framework of Jewish difference that forms not only the basis for explicit violence, but also the foundation for opportunistic support for Jews as well as moments in which responses toward Jews may be more ambiguous, displaced, or even suppressed. All of these responses stem from and—if not recognized and destabilized—continue to perpetuate a particular Jew/non-Jew ordering system in which the Jew functions as the quintessential Other. Recent explicit incidents of violent antisemitism, along with their accompanying philosemitic responses and blaming of, or avoiding discussion
of, Muslims, highlight how the framework of Jewish difference continues to operate in Germany. In what follows, I argue that recognizing this framework’s less negative and explicit iterations is necessary for understanding the systemic nature of Jewish difference and the powerful persistence of antisemitism even in the absence of explicit, violent acts.

BEYOND ANTISEMITISM

Part of the problem in distinguishing between antisemitism and the Jew/non-Jew ordering system from which it stems is that we lack a neutral term to denote the relationship between the Jew and the non-Jew. In the face of this lack, we often turn to the term antisemitism, even though antisemitism is only one iteration of the relationship(s) between the mutually constitutive and hierarchical ideals of the Jew/non-Jew. To be sure, scholars such as Sander Gilman have long acknowledged the historical importance of the figure of the Jew as an imagined Other in its function as part of a broader social framework. And Shulamit Volkov’s seminal work on antisemitism, for example, did much to advance our historical understanding of this phenomenon by showing how antisemitism functioned as a cultural code in Germany to articulate a host of other political and social tensions. However, although it is not articulated as such, this scholarship, too, suggests a broader, yet unnamed, frame of constructed ideals of Jews and non-Jews from which antisemitism stems.

An analogy with gender is helpful to explain the distinction between antisemitism and the broader framework from which it stems. As Joan Scott noted, the term “gender” is readily used in part because it sounds neutral and objective: “‘Gender’ seems to fit within the scientific terminology of social science and thus dissociates itself from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism. In this usage, ‘gender’ does not carry with it a necessary statement about inequality nor does it name the aggrieved (and hitherto invisible) party.” Scott also notes that part of the strength of the term “gender” lies in its suggestion that both women and men are co-constitutive of the world they live in, and its insistence that what happens to women is completely separate from what happens to men is a fiction. Moreover, it allows us to reject essentialist, biological explanations for what women and men are, in that it instead denotes “cultural constructions” as the “exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women.”

To articulate the Jew/non-Jew framework without automatically referring to its most negative iteration, antisemitism, we require an equally powerful term that occupies a linguistic space similar to the one gender occupies with regard to the relationship between the constructed ideals of man and woman. We need this term because “antisemitism” is not equivalent to the framework that generates negative iterations of the Jew, just as the terms sexism, misogyny, and chauvinism are not equivalent to
gender. Antisemitism can never be a neutral term, nor can it ever suggest that Jews and non-Jews are co-constitutive of the world they inhabit. I argue that using the term “Jewish difference” to refer to this paradigm is helpful because it opens up our understanding of the Jew/non-Jew binary as an ordering system even when its effects are not necessarily explicit or negative. It also permits us to see how the categories of the Jew and non-Jew can be applied to anyone, regardless of whether they are Jewish or not. It also helps us see how this framework persists in perpetuating Otherness: while, historically, the Jew is the fundamental other, the figure of the Jew can also be replaced with a different other—such as, in recent examples in Germany, the Muslim.

Because the terms “Jew” and “Jewishness” refer only to one half of the constructed Jew/non-Jew binary that forms the basis of this analytic category, we cannot rely upon them alone to do the analytic work we need to describe these phenomena, because these terms do not indicate that the notion of the constructed Jew depends upon the notion of the constructed non-Jew. Used in this manner, “Jewish difference” does not promote or celebrate “differences” between Jews and others. Rather, it suggests that those differences are real only insofar as people consider them to exist, and then act upon those considerations. The word “difference” in this sense denotes the presence of the category of the “non-Jewish” and as such is analytic rather than prescriptive.

With the best of intentions, some might wish to imagine that, because it is constructed, this Jew/non-Jew binary is not so important. However, scholars have already shown the harm in downplaying the importance of difference to how people order their worlds. The work of scholars of racism who have addressed the dangers of such often well-intentioned desires to erase difference can be instructive in reflecting on the difficulties some have with conceptualizing antisemitism and Jewish difference in Central Europe. Robin DiAngelo, for example, argues that “color-blind racism,” or acting as if racial differences do not exist or do not matter, ironically works to uphold the social structures that created these discrepancies by providing a convenient excuse for avoiding their discussion. In her research, DiAngelo has found that many who consider themselves to be progressive and liberal often insist “I don’t see color,” claiming that race only matters to racists and that discussion of racial difference is to blame for perpetuating it. However, she argues that these denials actually indicate an unrecognized preference of white people not to recognize their own role in a deeply internalized system of racism from which nobody is exempt. By reducing racism to isolated incidents of violence instead of recognizing it as a larger structure in which all people hold prejudices and are affected by its forces, such individuals avoid the complicated historical and structural analysis needed to challenge the binary system of thinking from which these acts stem. As she puts it, “Differential treatment in itself is not the problem. . . . The problem is the misinformation that circulates around us and causes our differential treatment to be inequitable.”
Alison Bailey helpfully characterizes such refusals to recognize systemic prejudices and the avoidance of engaging ideas people perceive as threatening as “privilege-preserving epistemic pushback.” Attempts to deny the inequalities produced by systemic difference can be used to guard and defend one’s terrain and maintain the status quo, allowing members of groups in the dominant position to unconsciously push back against ideas that disrupt their place in that system. Rejecting the binary of Jewish difference and insisting that we not focus on it, even though it deeply affected and continues to play a role in Jews’ experiences in Central Europe, suggests a similar defensive response. Moreover, rejecting the broad and often unarticulated systemic effects of the Jew/non-Jew binary in favor of focusing solely on isolated, explicit acts of antisemitic violence allows often well-meaning individuals to imagine themselves as operating comfortably outside this system, instead of facing its difficult challenges head-on.

**THE CONSTRUCTED ANTISEMITE**

It is for this reason that not only gender, but also feminism—in the sense of recognizing the constructed nature of man and woman and acknowledging the subordinate position of woman in the gender binary—is also crucial to our understanding of Jewish difference. Since the Holocaust, the constructed or figural Jew—that is, an ideal of the Jew—has been largely understood as serving as the antithesis of the figural Antisemite—a conceptual failure that obscures the true nature of the paradigm from which antisemitism stems. Jean-Paul Sartre crystallized this figural Antisemite in his influential *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946). Many quote his observation “If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him” to pinpoint the constructed nature of the figural Jew. However, we need to recognize that according to Sartre’s formulation, the counterpart to this constructed Jew is not its antithesis, but its opponent. Sartre states that the Jew is constructed in the mind of the Antisemite, but what his words really show is his own construction of the Antisemite: the mind of the self-proclaimed Anti-antisemite—that is, himself—thus allowing him to displace his own responsibility in society for the consequences of Othering.

Sartre’s iteration is an expression of a broader phenomenon. As Europeans adapted to postwar conditions, they relied upon this culturally constructed category—the Antisemite—as a way to come to terms with their radically changed circumstances while absolving themselves of complicity in its disastrous effects in the Holocaust. As an easily adaptable, readily recognizable ideal figure, the Antisemite loomed large as a trope all Europeans used both to avoid responsibility for crimes committed by the Nazis and their helpers as well as to subsume Jews’ experiences together with those of
other victims. Decades before Jews’ experiences in the Holocaust would emerge as a master moral paradigm of suffering under evil, and long before equating Jews with Nazis became a significant form of Holocaust denial, the figure of the constructed Antisemite provided a forceful narrative structure that allowed for recognizable paradigms about Jews and non-Jews to persist, even as explicit expressions of antisemitism became taboo.ги

Given Sartre’s intimate romantic and intellectual relationship with Simone de Beauvoir and their links to existentialist philosophy, it is no coincidence that Sartre’s discussion of the relationship between the Antisemite and Jew bears many similarities to de Beauvoir’s critique of the Man/Woman dialectic, which she outlined in her *Deuxième Sexe* (1949, translated as *The Second Sex*, 1953). The question of who influenced whom to a greater degree is still contested. But Sartre’s explicit concern with antisemitism mirrors de Beauvoir’s analysis of sexism on a fundamental level: the erasure of the subjectivity of the Other. Regarding women, Beauvoir posited that femininity was not a natural state, but rather a social construction according to which Man was the absolute subject—the representative of the human norm—and Woman his Other. Though scholars have often criticized various other aspects of her work, de Beauvoir’s analysis of sexism represents one of her strongest contributions to our understanding of gender. Her work reveals that the relationship between the concepts of Man and Woman is an unequal dialectic, with Man signifying the universal, or human, and Woman its Other. Women have little choice but to accept—or reject—these significations; either way, they are unable to modify their terms.

Toril Moi illustrates de Beauvoir’s keen identification of this paradox: To explain what she means, Beauvoir gives an example. In the middle of an abstract conversation, a man once said to her: “You say that because you are a woman.” If she were to answer: “I say it because it is true,” she writes, she would be eliminating her own subjectivity. But if she were to say: “I say it because I am a woman,” she would be imprisoned in her gender. In the first case, she has to give up her own lived experience; in the second, she must renounce her claim to say something of general validity.

Here, the impossibility of escaping the parameters of gender without erasing one’s subjectivity mirrors Sartre’s pronouncement that it is impossible for a Jew to choose not to be a Jew. Take, for example, Sartre’s contention that “The one thing Jews can never choose is not to be a Jew.” If they do, according to Sartre, they will be in a futile position—“inauthentic Jews.” For Sartre, this category is a theoretical impossibility, as a Jew who attempts this denial of subjectivity merely reinforces the terms that created them in the first place. But what his words also imply, although he doesn’t say them explicitly, is that one who is not a Jew can deny being an Antisemite. In doing so, one can be an Anti-antisemite: someone who is neither Jew nor Antisemite, but—like Sartre himself—is able to reject the terms of this ordering system and float over and above the fray.
But de Beauvoir’s solution—a call to action for women to demand freedom from their oppression—along with her focus on the patriarchal nature of gender and its implication of women in their own oppression, contributed to her eventual fall into disfavor. Many feminists later rejected what they viewed as her dismissal of women’s agency in defining femininity, resenting the claim that women must either abandon femininity as a basis for self-identification, or remain complicit in their own oppression by accepting its terms. Yet, the notion that the categories of Woman and Man are constructions remains difficult to refute. Perhaps due to her influence, Sartre was also working with a similar binary of constructed categories, even if he mistakenly replaced the category Non-Jew with Antisemite in order to create a comfortable position for himself on that spectrum.

Hannah Arendt also reflected on the parallels between gender, Jewish difference, and subjectivity, even if she did not use these terms in the same way. In a letter to Gershom Scholem in 1963, Arendt refers to her Jewishness as an “indisputable fact in my life”:

I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman—that is to say, kind of insane. . . . There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been given and not made; for what is physei and not nomos.  

Arendt wrote defensively in order to counter Scholem’s accusation that as a Jew, she should treat the extermination of Jews in the Holocaust more sensitively. Given the timing of this letter after the Holocaust, her insistence that both Jew and woman are inalienable categories is understandable. However, as sympathetic as we may be regarding her reasoning, we still cannot deny her error in refusing to recognize that society functions according to constructed ideals of “woman/man” as well as “Jew/non-Jew,” and these form the basis of ordering systems that impact all of our experiences. Arendt’s postwar concerns help shed light on the deficiencies of Sartre’s formulation of the Jew as the product of the Antisemite’s imagination, as well as his own insistence of the Jew as a natural category.

NEW DIRECTIONS

In his 2013 book *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, David Nirenberg contextualizes a wide range of negative experiences based on constructed ideas of the Jew by referring to their broader place in a “powerful theoretical framework for making sense of the world.”  

However, in labeling this framework as “anti-Judaism” and using only
explicit, negative examples, Nirenberg, too, continues to conflate the negative iteration of the Jew/non-Jew framework with the broader theoretical basis that forms this potent, dynamic ordering system. Used in this manner, “Anti-Judaism” forecloses other iterations of Othering as well as the possibility of an engagement with this framework in less explicit and more nuanced forms. To name one example, in the case of Jewish members of sport teams in interwar Vienna, researchers have shown that the degree to which their Jewishness mattered to themselves and others depended upon a complex structure of functions and roles depending on the time, place, and situation. Using Jewish difference as their analytical framework, they are able better to pinpoint how and why Jewishness mattered at certain times and became irrelevant at others—even when not explicitly apparent—instead of relying solely on negative iterations of the frame to prove the existence of an engagement with the Jew/non-Jew binary.\footnote{23}

Recognizing Jewish difference and the persistence of the figural antisemite can also help us understand their links to the persistence of philosemitism in Europe. As Jonathan Judaken has pointed out, antisemitism and philosemitism often exist side by side, utilizing the same stereotypes, albeit for different ends.\footnote{24} The fact that the two terms emerged almost simultaneously in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century helps us see how they are both belief systems that ascribe certain characteristics to Jews as part of a hierarchical ordering system. In the wake of the Holocaust, the murder of Europe’s Jews didn’t eradicate the use of this powerful framework of Jewish difference as a way to continue to order the world. Because of the murderous deeds of the Nazis and their helpers, Jews were now largely absent, and the explicit use of antisemitism—in both words and deeds—was now largely taboo. The postwar propensity to distance oneself from public and explicit antisemitic words and deeds has been aptly termed “antisemitism without antisemites.”\footnote{25} That many remained bitter about this new taboo on something that once featured as an integral facet of prewar culture is clear from a common joke about how “the Nazis ruined everything—even antisemitism.”\footnote{26} It is these two major changes that led to a shift in how Jewish difference was engaged after the end of World War II. In the postwar era, it was taboo to speak negatively about Jews. But these negative qualities and essences are often evoked so that the hierarchical framework of Jewish difference is perpetuated even in their absence. This invisibility of the Jew also opened the opportunity for others—such as Muslims—to take their place as an “other” as part of this system.

The notion that Jews played a major role in the creation of culture in modern Central Europe is far from new, but we have only recently begun to probe in depth the role of the socially constructed category of the “Jew” in that process beyond the prejudices—or advantages—it generated. Gender studies takes it as a given that the socially constructed ideals of the “feminine” and the “masculine” stem from, but are not equivalent to, actual men and women, and that these ideals profoundly affect
everyone’s social and cultural environment. In contrast, Jewish studies as a discipline typically deploys the idea of the socially constructed Jew only in relation to antisemitism. Thus, our study of the Jewish past remains biased in favor of the constructed Jew as a figment of the antisemitic imagination and the constructed antisemite as a convenient way to displace responsibility for the consequences of Othering. The recent pattern of antisemitic attacks, philosemitic and anti-Muslim responses in Germany and elsewhere, along with their accompanying unanswered questions, makes recognizing the broader analytic system that encompasses Jews, non-Jews, and antisemites imperative.

**NOTES**


2. For example, see the 2017 Arte documentary *Re: Weil du Jude bist. Die Geschichte von Oscar, Opfer von Antisemitismus*, about a fourteen-year-old from Berlin who faced constant antisemitic attacks from fellow students. That these students are Muslim is suggested but not thoroughly engaged as part of the documentary.

3. Sander L. Gilman, *Inscribing the Other* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991). Gilman notes that this figural Jew is male, which points to the gendered nature of the framework of Jewish difference, a topic in its own right.


8. See, for example, Cynthia Baker’s engaging discussion of the term “Jew” and its symbolic uses throughout history in *Jew* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017).


13. I discuss the development of this defensive attitude toward antisemitism in my forthcoming book, *The Postwar Antisemite: Culture and Complicity in Germany and Austria after the Holocaust*.


16. I explore the notion of the constructed Antisemite, as well as its links to Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of the “authoritarian personality,” in my forthcoming book project, *The Postwar Antisemite*.

17. The most recent translation of *The Second Sex* is by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).

18. Sartre based his book on his article “Portrait de l’Antisémite,” which appeared in *Les Temps modernes* in December 1945 and was published by Schocken Books as *Anti-Semite and Jew* in 1948. “Portrait of the Anti-Semite,” an abridged version of Sartre’s 1945 article, also appeared in English in the *Partisan Review* in 1946; parts of this were also published in *Commentary* in 1948.


