

On the Critique of Freedom and Its Repression in liberal democracies

SYMPOSIUM

March 13–15, 2026

**with Lily Abichahine, Katja Diefenbach, Emily Dische-Becker,
Denise Ferreira da Silva (zoom), Hanno Hauenstein, Sami Khatib,
Henrike Kohpeiß, Ralf Michaels, Hannah Tzuberi, René Wildangel,
and others**

Registration: Anne Volk, volk@wkv-stuttgart.de

Language:

Friday, March 13, 2026: German and English, accompanied by AI-assisted translation

Saturday, March 14, 2026: German and English with simultaneous translation (German–English
/ English–German)

PROGRAM (as of March 13, 2016)

Topic of + Events in the Run-up to the Symposium

The subject of this interdisciplinary symposium is the question of freedom of art, science, and expression in Germany and other liberal democracies. It was prompted by the observation that critical spaces of discourse and action are increasingly narrowing regarding certain topics. The event clearly distances itself from right-wing populist positions that view discrimination—whether in the form of racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism—as a quasi-natural right to freedom. The concept of freedom itself is examined from a critical philosophical, feminist, and anti-colonial perspective.

In the run-up to the symposium, the German-Israeli Society (DIG) Stuttgart addressed an open letter to representatives of the city, demanding the withdrawal of funding. Without any basis, it accuses the event of "anti-Israel propaganda" and defames the participants—including Jewish researchers—as "anti-Semitic agents."

The WKV strongly rejects these accusations. Neither the event nor its contributors nor the WKV represent, promote, or relativize anti-Semitism. On the contrary.

The Cultural Office of the City of Stuttgart reviewed the final concept of the symposium once again and ultimately withdrew its funding. It justified this step with technical objections. It did not follow the DIG's accusations, but it did follow its demand to withdraw financial support for the project.

In response, the WKV launched a fundraising campaign, which quickly covered the shortfall.¹

These events underscore the relevance of the symposium and the issues it addresses. Recent debates in Germany about state intervention in cultural institutions and events—such as the Berlinale, the Bookstore Prize, or the Düsseldorf Art Academy—also show that political pressure on freedom of art, science, and expression in Germany has increased and that this needs to be discussed. Not least, the many donors have expressed the necessity of this debate.

We hope that this symposium will among other things send a signal to cultural policymakers to engage in this discussion in close and open exchange with institutions, organizations, and actors from the arts, academia, and society.

¹ See: <https://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/en/program/2026/veranstaltungen/donations>

The Symposium

The planned symposium is prompted by growing concern about the freedom, independence, and free spaces for art, science, and society in Germany and other liberal democracies.

We would like to discuss the contexts and implications of these concerns, as well as possible strategies for dealing with them, on a transdisciplinary level: that is, within and between the discourses of philosophy, political science, law, and cultural studies.

Modern concepts of freedom and autonomy emerged with European Enlightenment, whose not only emancipatory but also sexist, racist, classist, and colonial entanglements have been the subject of transdisciplinary research and theory since a while. Freedom and independence are not fixed social conditions but rather ones that must be constantly contested.

The symposium takes these questions as its starting point. It furthermore reflects the observation that critical spaces for discourse and action on certain topics in Germany—particularly in debates about the German concept of “Staatsräson” (raison d'état), but also with regard to climate activism and anti-right-wing-extremism activism—are increasingly narrowing.

At the same time the symposium expressly distances itself from right-wing populist positions that attempt to legitimize discrimination—whether in the form of racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism—as a supposed “natural” right to freedom. Discrimination is not a right.

The growing political and state influence on art, science, and society in Germany is currently less based on legal grounds but more on the threat (and practice) of withdrawing public funding and publicly funded spaces, as well as revoking legal statuses, ranging from non-profit recognition to residency rights².

These developments, together with experiences of sometimes enormous pressure exerted by both traditional and social media, increasingly lead to self-censorship and censorship.³ Organizations and institutions often pass on their experience of pressure: they disinvite people—or don't invite them in the first place—scrutinize biographies and social media posts, withdraw awards, terminate employment contracts, or refrain from hiring. They demand clear commitments and retractions. In the worst case, representatives of institutions that insist on their autonomous status are extremely targeted politically⁴.

The symposium aims to examine the background and consequences of these developments from different perspectives. They will also be discussed in the context of the global rise of

² The German Bundestag's resolution "Never again is now..." (2024) explicitly blames migrants "from North Africa and the Middle East" for an "alarming level" of anti-Semitism in Germany. See: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2024/kw45-de-juedisches-leben-1027708>.

³ The *Archive of Silence* lists nearly 200 cases in Germany.

⁴ See: <https://taz.de/Einladung-palaestinensischer-Kuenstlerin/!6150741>

authoritarian, right-wing populist, and extreme right-wing forces that are primarily directed against freedom of art, culture, science, and migration.

At the same time, we want to talk about the structures and relevance of various newly formed networks, platforms, and initiatives that are committed to sustain and empower open and pluralistic spaces for discourse, such as the Alliance for Critical and Solidarity Science (KriSol)⁵, the Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics (PJA)⁶, or Diaspora Alliance.⁷

The central question of the symposium is how freedom, autonomy and free spaces of action—including their limits and contradictions—can be discussed in an open, controversial, diverse and at the same time discrimination-sensitive manner.

What ethical, political, and legal foundations and methods are relevant here? How can and should institutions and civil society position themselves in this regard?

An event organized by

Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart
Schlossplatz 2 / Entrance Stauffenbergstrasse
70173 Stuttgart
www.wkv-stuttgart.de

Curated by

Iris Dressler, Hans D. Christ

Accessibility / On-site offerings

Barrier-reduced access
Wheelchair-accessible toilet, changing table, Wi-Fi
Awareness person
Drinks, snacks
Saturday: A limited number of lunches can be purchased on site

Admission

Donation-based

⁵ <https://krisol-wissenschaft.org>

⁶ <https://pja-verein.de>

⁷ <https://diasporaalliance.co>

PROGRAM

Fri, March 13, 2026

LANGUAGE: German and English, accompanied by AI-assisted translation

6:30 p.m.

Welcome / Introduction

Iris Dressler, Hans D. Christ

Directors of the Württembergischer Kunstverein

1

On the Critique of Freedom.

Reflections on the concept of freedom from a critical philosophical, feminist, post-colonial, and anti-colonial perspective.

Modern concepts of freedom and autonomy emerged with the Enlightenment, whose emancipatory, but also sexist, racist, classist, and colonial entanglements have been the subject of recent transdisciplinary research and theory. Against this backdrop, two contributions kick off the symposium, discussing the aforementioned concepts from a critical philosophical, feminist, postcolonial, and anti-colonial perspective.

7 p.m.

Katja Diefenbach

Professor of Cultural Philosophy / Philosophy of Cultures at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder)

Appropriation and Punishment: On the Illiberality of Liberalism as Reflected in the 17th Century. Natural Law Legitimations of War, Colonial Land Acquisition, and Enslavement in Thomas Hobbes and John Locke

During the transcontinental founding crises of the 17th century, when England, Holland, and France expanded colonially on the basis of plantation economies, global financial circulation, and trade across the Atlantic and Southeast Asia—thereby establishing early capitalist world systems for the first time—the idea of politics and political obligation in European philosophy was reoriented around the relationship between the individual and the state. Classical contract theories gave rise to a narrative of domination that linked self-preservation, legal personality, money-mediated property, and sovereignty in a new nexus of universal entitlement, from which Amerindian and African peoples, the poor, and women, among others, were excluded to varying degrees, up to and including total exclusion. I would like to open up a discussion on the extent to which the pathologies of modern natural law and the legitimization of warlike accumulation, land grabbing, and enslavement through 17th-century philosophy can help us understand today's boundless racist, military, and neoliberal violence. Can we read philosophy as a medium and memory of negative socialization? What does it tell us from the dis/continuum of time? What traces do we encounter? And can we still decipher them?

7:30 p.m.

[Denise Ferreira Da Silva \(Zoom\)](#)

Professor of the Samuel Rudin Chair for Humanities in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Co-Director of the Critical Racial & Anti-Colonial Study Co-Laboratory at New York University.

Denise Ferreira da Silva addresses the ethical and political challenges of the global present from an anti-colonial, Black feminist perspective. With her theory of the "transparent I," she has subjected the European Enlightenment's concept of the subject and autonomy to comprehensive criticism. Together with others, she recently launched the project *Creating a Counter-Imaginary to Authoritarianism in the United States*.

8–9 p.m.

[Panel discussion](#)

Katja Diefenbach, Denise Ferreira Da Silva (Zoom)

Moderator: Iris Dressler

Sat, March 14, 2026

LANGUAGE: German and English with simultaneous translation (German–English / English–German)

11:30 a.m.

[Welcome / Introduction](#)

Iris Dressler, Hans D. Christ

Directors of the Württembergischer Kunstverein

2

On the Narrowing of Critical Spaces for Discourse and Action in Art, Academia, and Society
Combating sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, and many other forms of discrimination and violence, as well as the global rise of right-wing extremist forces, are among the central challenges of our time. Art, science, and their institutions play a special role in this context. However, in their function of creating pluralistic and controversial spaces for discourse and action, they are increasingly being weakened politically: through cuts in public funding and growing political pressure on their freedom and autonomy.

12 a.m.

[Emily Dische-Becker](#)

Journalist, editorial member of *theDiasporist*, co-founder of *Diaspora Alliance*, researcher at Forensis/Forensic Architecture, among other things in the context of *Three Doors*

Politics of Invitation

Navigating hospitality and controversy in the context of international cultural events in Germany over the past few years.

12:30 a.m.

[Hanno Hauenstein](#)

Journalist, editor of the podcast *Nullpunkt*

Journalism and the Economy of Censorship

Restrictions on freedom of art and science in Germany today rarely take the form of formal bans. They usually unfold through media campaigns and defamatory articles in social and/or traditional media that interact with one another. The result is pressure on the reputation and social standing of individuals, as well as the threat of withdrawal of funding or public spaces. Within this constellation of media attention, political pressure, and institutional risk management, new forms of restricting debate emerge—often more indirect and subtle than classical notions of censorship. Based on the controversy surrounding this symposium itself, the question arises as to how journalistic interventions function as mechanisms of institutional discipline. What if journalism no longer primarily questions power structures, but instead becomes one of the places where institutions are provided with arguments to limit public debate? In addition to the specific case of this symposium, other examples from the German cultural sector will be drawn upon, such as debates surrounding festivals or disinvitations. This raises a fundamental question: Is campaign-style reporting becoming a successful model in media competition (keyword: Springer)? What are the consequences of this? And what would be alternative journalistic approaches?

1 p.m.

[Henrike Kohpeiß](#)

Postdoc, Leuphana Transformation Lab, Leuphana University Lüneburg

Dialectics of Freedom: Driving Practice and Civil Institutions

1:30–2:30 p.m.

Lunch

(A limited selection of lunch options will be available for purchase on site)

2:30–3:30 p.m.

[Panel](#)

Emily Dische-Becker, Hanno Hauenstein, Henrike Kohpeiß

Moderator: Iris Dressler

Break

3

3:45 p.m.

[Lily Abichahine](#)

Lawyer, researcher, and artist

Abichahine graduated from the Law School of Saint Joseph University (2007) and Paris Descartes University (2008). After obtaining her BA and MA degrees in Performing Arts from Paris VIII University in 2018 and 2019 respectively, she developed her artistic practice in the form of lecture-performances, installations and videos, exploring the intersectionality between art and law.

On the Gray Zones of Law and Geographies of Fear

The relationship between law and art is often framed as one of protection: law guarantees freedom of expression, artistic autonomy, and the institutional independence of cultural spaces. Yet law – and particularly the gray zones of law – can also be involved in the production and circulation of fear, for example through legally non-binding policies or through public and political pressure. Fear operates as a spatial force. It creates institutional geographies of caution, it produces uneven cultural landscapes, and it reshapes cartographies of cultural collaboration. It influences internal geographies – mental maps that guide behavior. Cultural spaces can, however, also create counter-geographies – networks of sites of resistance where critical debate and artistic experimentation remain possible.

4

The Politics of German *Staatsräson* and Their Challenges in National and International Legal Contexts

German Staatsräson, as well as a number of resolutions passed by the Bundestag to combat anti-Semitism in Germany are not legally binding. Rather, they constitute political positionings and normative guidelines grounded in Germany's particular historical responsibility toward Israel and the fight against anti-Semitism. What challenges arise from this within national and international legal frameworks?

4:15 p.m.

Ralf Michaels

Director at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law. Professor at Queen Mary University of London and the University of Hamburg

Freedom of Expression and Democracy

Freedom of expression, artistic freedom, and academic freedom are not merely the individual freedoms of the individual to express his or her opinion, create art, or pursue science. Freedom of expression is our collective right to exchange opinions and thus enable democracy. Artistic and academic freedom guarantee spaces in which this exchange can occur. That is why they are suspect to the authoritarian state. That is why the liberal state must enable them.

4:45 p.m.

René Wildangel

Historian and author, Berlin

On the Background, Aims, and Effects of the Expert Paper Beyond Staatsräson

On October 2, 2025, the paper *Beyond Staatsräson*, which was accompanied by numerous Middle East experts, was presented at the Federal Press Conference. It contains recommendations for a "Middle East policy shift" as an alternative to German *Staatsräson*.

Break

5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.

Panel

Ralf Michaels, René Wildangel, Lily Abichahine

Moderator: Hans D. Christ

Break

5

Phantasms and Symptoms of “Becoming Good Again”: On the Aporias of Anti-Antisemitism in German Memory Culture

Germany’s critical engagement with the crimes of National Socialism and the Shoah is widely regarded internationally as exemplary. At the same time, discourses and structures can also be identified here that suggest that it is rather the “becoming good again” (Wiedergutwerdung, Eike Geisel) of German society itself that stands at the center.

7 p.m.

Sami Khatib

Professor of Political and Social Aesthetics at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design

Palestine as Symptom and Cause

The lecture argues that the situation in Palestine and the ongoing genocide in Gaza present the negative *Geschichtszeichen* (historical sign) of our era: the open normalization of violations of international law and war crimes by Western states, the unchecked killing of civilians by a close Western ally (the state of Israel), and the propagation of long-debunked false claims by state representatives and influential media outlets. This chasm between reality and its disavowal cannot be bridged by the Orwellian distortion of political discourse: war is called "Board of Peace," security is persecution, self-defense is genocide, and acts of aggression are termed "preemptive strikes."

However, Palestine is not only a symptom of the final collapse of international law and the once-claimed rule-based world order post-1945 and 1989; Palestine also becomes an active cause of this upheaval. Gaza can thus be understood, in the Kantian sense, as a global historical marker, yet Palestine is also a material concern, an experiential cause, a real movement in and of history, through which the ideological fractures in human rights discourse and its stabilizing ideologies are not only indicated but brought to the ground. The lecture particularly focuses on the German discourse surrounding the so-called "anti-anti-Semitism."

7:30 p.m.

Hannah Tzuberi

Jewish Studies and Islamic Studies scholar, co-editor of *Jewish Friends: Contemporary Figures of the Jew* (2020), which focuses on the contemporary figure of the Jew. She is involved in the Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics and works at a community school in Berlin. Her research interests include contemporary European Judaism, processes of nation-building, collective memory, religion, and secularism

“Never again is now”. Moral Nation-Building and Anti-Antisemitism in Germany

This input will focus on the embrace of the figure of the Jew in post-unification German political discourse and this embrace's foundational importance for German political identity. By outlining the contours of the state's memory- and revival-politics, it will argue that the defense of the figure of the Jew by now enables the dismantling of democratic rights and the non-recognition of Palestinian human rights.

8–9 p.m.

Panel

Sami Khatib, Hannah Tzuberi, and others

Moderator: Iris Dressler

Sunday, March 15, 2026

10 a.m.–12 p.m.

PLENARY

Open discussion

Language: German

1 p.m.

Refreshments

1–2 p.m.

ARTISTS' TOUR

Dominique Hurth

on the exhibition *Private Handbags May Not be Carried When on Duty* on female Nazi perpetrators using the example of the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp.