

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: volk@wkv-stuttgart.de

Advance notice

Language:

Friday: German, Englisch (With translated subtitles)

Saturday: German with simultaneous translation into English

This symposium was prompted by growing concerns about the freedom, independence, and free spaces of art, science, and society in Germany and other liberal democracies.

We aim to discuss the contexts and implications of these restrictions and possible ways of dealing with them on a transdisciplinary level: that is, within and between the discourses of philosophy, political science, law, and cultural studies—and beyond.

Modern, supposedly European concepts of freedom and autonomy emerged with the Enlightenment, whose not only emancipatory but also sexist, racist, classist, and colonial structures have been the subject of recent transdisciplinary research and theory. Freedom and independence are not fixed social conditions but ones that must be constantly contested. This contestation must be open.

Starting points

The symposium takes as its starting point the experience of increasing political and governmental influence on the content, programs, and positions of publicly funded organizations and institutions—especially in the arts and sciences. The focus is on a series of structural developments in Germany—above all, those political interventions that invoke the diffuse constructs of a German *Staatsräson* and of a definition of antisemitism intended to be applied to society as a whole.

In addition to attempts to delegitimize the autonomy of institutions and the freedom of art and research, these developments also include restrictions on the right of assembly, the criminalization and prosecution of civil disobedience, and the intimidation of non-profit organizations through a dubious duty of neutrality. These structures not only operate within the framework of the *Staatsräson*-doctrine, but also affect climate and anti-right-wing activists—extending even to groups such as *Omas gegen Rechts* (Grannies Against the Right). In the name of combating anti-Semitism, political non-neutrality, or extremism, feminist, queer, anti-racist, postcolonial, eco-activist, and anti-fascist discourses and spheres of action are being defamed: from Achille Mbembe and Judith Butler to documenta fifteen and Adania Shibli to *Letzte Generation* (Last Generation) or Frauke Brosius-Gersdorf—to name just a few examples.

The central political levers of restriction are not laws, but the threat of withdrawing public funding and access to publicly funded spaces, as well as the revocation of legal statuses—from non-profit designation to the right of residence¹.

These threats, the current austerity policies, and the experience of enormous pressure exerted by traditional and social media are leading to anticipatory obedience, self-censorship, and

¹ The German Bundestag's second anti-Semitism resolution, "Never Again..." (2024), explicitly blames migrants "from North Africa and the Middle East" for an "alarming level" of anti-Semitism in Germany. It calls for "legal loopholes to be closed and repressive measures to be consistently exploited," particularly "in criminal law and in residence, asylum, and citizenship law." See: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2024/kw45-de-juedisches-leben-1027708>.

mentorship². Organizations and institutions are passing on the pressure³: they are disinviting people—or not inviting them in the first place—scrutinizing biographies, withdrawing awards, terminating employment contracts, or refraining from hiring. They demand clear commitments and retractions, or reserve the right to tolerate individuals with "problematic" attitudes, but to distance themselves from their positions in case of doubt⁴. Representatives of institutions who insist on their right to autonomy, such as the recent case of Donatella Fioretti, rector of the Düsseldorf Art Academy, are subjected to massive political pressure⁵.

While the state only indirectly—and at the same time extremely effectively—influences freedom of expression in this way, it does so directly by interfering with the right of assembly, the right to civil disobedience, and the right of residence. Furthermore, possibilities for enshrining the German *Staatsräson*-doctrine or the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism in law have been and are being examined, so far without success.⁶

Symposium

Within the framework of the symposium, the background and consequences of these developments are examined from various perspectives. They are also to be discussed in the context of the global rise of authoritarian, right-wing populist, and far-right forces, which primarily target the freedom of art, culture, science, and migration. A characteristic feature of these forces is that they declare their campaigns against power- and discrimination-critical discourses and attitudes ("wokeness") as a struggle for freedom of expression—as if there were an innate right of *white* people to abuse power and discriminate.⁷

At the same time, we aim to talk about the structures, methods, and agendas of networks, platforms, and initiatives—some of them newly formed—that oppose the aforementioned restrictions, such as the Alliance for Critical and Solidarity Science (KriSol)⁸, the Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics (PJA)⁹, Diaspora Alliance,¹⁰ Verfassungsblog¹¹, and the expert paper *Beyond State Reason*.¹²

² The *Archive of Silence* lists nearly 200 cases in Germany since October 7, 2023 alone.

³ A Stuttgart example involving British playwright Caryl Churchill is particularly illustrative. See: <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.antisemitismusvorwurf-gegen-caryl-churchill-dramatikerin-wird-preis-aberkannt.136f220c-dffb-46d3-8d06-ae093bec9570.html>

⁴ See, for example: Documenta Code of Conduct (<https://documenta.de/de/code-of-conduct>); Klaus Biesenbach's speech on Nan Goldin's speech at the Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin (<https://www.smb.museum/nachrichten/detail/statement-von-klaus-biesenbach-zur-eroeffnung-der-nan-goldin-retrospektive-in-der-neuen-nationalgalerie>).

⁵ See: <https://taz.de/Einladung-palaestinensischer-Kuenstlerin!/6150741>

⁶ See, for example: *How much "Never again" is in the Basic Law? Constitutional amendments to combat anti-Semitism and for reasons of state?*, conference, <https://tikvahinstitut.de/veranstaltung/20241105>

⁷ See, for example: *Restoring Truth And Sanity To American History*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history> or <https://krisol-wissenschaft.org>

⁸ <https://krisol-wissenschaft.org>

⁹ <https://pja-verein.de>

¹⁰ <https://diasporaalliance.co>

¹¹ <https://verfassungsblog.de>

¹² <https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/jenseits-der-staatsraison>

One of the central concerns of the symposium is the question of how the debate on freedom, independence, and free spaces—including their limits and contradictions—can be conducted in an open, diverse, and discrimination-sensitive manner, thereby preventing it from being hijacked by right-wing populists and extremists.

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
70173 Stuttgart
www.wkv-stuttgart.de

Curated by

Iris Dressler, Hans D. Christ

PROGRAM

A detailed program will be published shortly.

Friday, March 13, 2026

6:30 p.m. – 9 p.m.

INPUTS + PANEL

On the Critique of Freedom

Katja Diefenbach, Denise Ferreira da Silva (zoom)

Language:

German, Englisch (With translated subtitles)

Saturday, March 14, 2026

11:30 a.m. – 9 p.m.

INPUTS + PANELS

On freedom, autonomy, and political influence from the perspectives of philosophy, law, racism research, anti-Semitism research, Middle East studies, art and cultural studies

Lily Abichahine, Emily Dische-Becker, Hanno Hauenstein, Sami Khatib, Henrike Kohpeiß, Ralf Michaels, Hannah Tzuberi, René Wildangel

Language:

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Sunday, March 15, 2026

10 a.m. – 12 p.m.

PLENARY / OPEN DEBATE

1 p.m.

EXHIBITION TOUR **with Dominique Hurth**

On the exhibition *Private Handbags May Not be Carried When on Duty* about female Nazi perpetrators.