Though certainly aware of antisemitism, the writers associated with the Frankfurt School wrote little about it in the Weimar era, or, for that matter, in the years immediately following the Nazi seizure of power. Horkheimer described fictional antisemitic incidents in sketches he wrote in 1917, long before he became director of the Institute for Social Research. But the first significant piece by any of the major thinkers of the Frankfurt School to attempt to provide a theoretical explanation of antisemitism – Max Horkheimer’s “The Jews and Europe” – was not written until 1938 (and was published in the issue of Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, the Institute’s periodical, dated 1939–1940).

In the opening lines of Horkheimer’s article, which was written in New York, Horkheimer proclaimed,

> Whoever wants to explain anti-Semitism must speak of National Socialism. Without a conception of what has happened in Germany, speaking about anti-Semitism in Siam or Africa remains senseless. The new anti-Semitism is the emissary of the totalitarian order, which has developed from the liberal one. One must thus go back to consider the tendencies within capitalism.

(Horkheimer 1989: 77)

Horkheimer pointed out that Jews had obtained political equality in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, which brought with it both the consolidation of the bourgeois relation of production and of liberalism. But liberal society “which set out as the progressive one in 1789 carried the germs of National Socialism from the beginning” (Horkheimer 1989: 89). Thus, Horkheimer insists “wer vom Kapitalismus nicht reden will, sollte auch von Faschismus schweigen” [“whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism” (Horkheimer 1989: 78)].

This declaration forms the framework within which Horkheimer grappled with contemporary antisemitism. In the liberal societies of Europe, such as that which had existed in Germany before the Nazi era, Horkheimer argued, Jews had often been concentrated in “the sphere of circulation” (that is, had often made their living as merchants, in banking, or as middlemen). Horkheimer’s father had owned textile factories. Friedrich Pollock, a member of the Institute whom Horkheimer first met when both he and Pollock were teenagers, and who remained a close friend of Horkheimer for the rest of Pollock’s life, was the son of an industrialist. Both the Horkheimer family and the Pollock family were Jewish. In making the claim that the sphere of circulation “was decisive for the fate of the Jews,” Horkheimer
was reflecting the experiences of that portion of the German Jewish community in which he, and his closest associates, had been raised. But the sphere of circulation, the sector of the economy which had not only provided a livelihood to German Jews in an earlier era but also provided a foundation for bourgeois democracy, was, Horkheimer believed, losing its economic significance. Whereas markets were of crucial import in liberal societies, they were unimportant in those lands in which the state took direct control over distribution. Precisely because they had played such important roles in market economies, and the import of markets themselves had, in totalitarian countries, dramatically diminished, the position of contemporary Jewry in fascist Germany had become extremely precarious. “The Jews are stripped of power as agents of circulation, because the modern structure of the economy largely puts that whole sphere out of action” (Horkheimer 1989: 90). The now powerless Jews become “the first victims of the ruling group that has taken over the canceled function. The governmental manipulation of which, which already has robbery as its necessary function, turns into the brutal manipulation of money’s representatives” (Horkheimer 1989: 90). In sum, Horkheimer’s explanation for the rise of antisemitism in Germany in “The Jews and Europe” was one which rested on a dramatic alteration in the economic structure of Germany (a movement from one form of capitalism to another) and the emergence of fascist political forms in that country. If Horkheimer’s perception, at the time that he wrote this article, of the historic position of Jews in society was one reminiscent of “On the Jewish Question,” his understanding of antisemitism in 1938 owed a great deal to the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.

However, Horkheimer also argued in “The Jews and Europe” that Judenhass, hatred of Jews, “belongs to the ascendant phase of fascism … It serves to intimidate the populace by showing that the system will stop at nothing. The pogroms are aimed politically more at the spectators than the Jews” (Horkheimer 1989: 92). Thus, Horkheimer predicted, “Anti-Semitism will come to a natural end in the totalitarian order when nothing humane remains, although a few Jews might.”

Horkheimer’s article is deeply pessimistic. The concluding paragraph noted that “the progressive forces have been defeated and fascism can last indefinitely” (Horkheimer 1989: 94). And yet, his wording also suggested that he anticipated that since fascist antisemitism was merely a tool of the ruling power, Nazi antisemitism would not continue indefinitely.

“The Jews and Europe” provoked strong reactions – both positive (from, among others, Walter Benjamin) and negative (from Gershom Scholem) (Jacobs 2015: 48–52). Benjamin gushed, after the Second World War had already begun, “the entire time I was reading this essay, I had the feeling of coming upon truths” (Adorno and Scholem 1994: 622). Scholem, on the other hand, described Horkheimer’s article as “an entirely useless product… The author has neither any knowledge of nor any interest in the Jewish problem. It is obvious that at bottom no such problem exists for him” (Scholem 1981: 222).

In the period following publication of “The Jews and Europe,” Horkheimer came to supplement, and, thereby, alter, the view of antisemitism he had propounded in “The Jews and Europe.” However, the understanding of antisemitism in “The Jews and Europe” was not replaced, but rather aufgehoben.

Current events (that is, horrifying news of the brutal treatment of Jews in Europe), and the influence of Adorno on Horkheimer (which increased markedly beginning in 1938, at which time Adorno left Europe and joined other members of the Frankfurt School living in the United States), help to explain the differences between Horkheimer’s analysis of antisemitism in “The Jews and Europe” and the far more impressive explanation of this phenomenon evident in “Elements of Antisemitism.” This is not to suggest that Adorno disagreed, in 1938–1940, with the central thesis of “The Jews and Europe.” He did not. In fact, Adorno put a great deal of effort into helping Horkheimer prepare that piece for
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publication. However, by the time that Horkheimer’s article appeared in print (if not necessarily earlier) Adorno seems to have believed that the economic approach evident in Horkheimer’s piece should not stand alone: “Fascism in Germany,” Adorno wrote to his parents in February, 1940,

which is inseparable from anti-Semitism, is no psychological anomaly of the German national character. It is a universal tendency and has an economic basis . . . namely the dying out of the sphere of circulation, i.e. the increasing superfluity of trade in the widest sense, in the age of monopoly capitalism. The conditions for it – and I mean all of them, not only the economic but also the mass psychological ones – are at least as present here [in the USA] as in Germany...

(Adorno 2006: 40–41)

Adorno’s sense that not only the economic but also the other underpinnings of antisemitism ought to be explored and delineated lay at the heart of “Elements of Antisemitism.” In the summer of 1940, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer that

I am beginning to feel, particularly under the influence of the latest news from Germany, that I cannot stop thinking about the fate of the Jews any more. It often seems to me that everything that we used to see from the point of view of the proletariat has been concentrated today with frightful force upon the Jews. No matter what happens to the project,

[a research project on antisemitism for which the Institute for Social Research was seeking funds at that time], I ask myself whether we should not say what we want to say in connection with Jews, who are now at the opposite pole to the concentration of power.

(Wiggershaus 1994: 275)

Horkheimer wrote to Adorno that “I’m convinced that the Jewish question is the question of contemporary society – we’re in agreement with Marx and Hitler on this but, in other respects, we are in no more agreement with them than with Freud” (Horkheimer 2007: 166). During this period, Adorno suggested to Horkheimer that the joint theoretical work they planned to write ought to revolve around antisemitism. Horkheimer did not merely assent, but repeatedly asserted that he was determined to write on that theme.

The bulk of “Elements of Antisemitism” (theses 1–5) was written, in 1943, by Horkheimer and Adorno and with input from Leo Lowenthal. Two components of “Elements” (theses 6–7) were added at later points in time.

“Elements” begins with a thesis which is fully consistent with “The Jews and Europe”: the notion that fascism emerges from liberalism. The second thesis, however, heads off into new territory, for it argues that plausibly rational explanations of antisemitism, including economic and political explanations, “however correct their individual observations” – like, we can presume, Horkheimer’s own explanation of antisemitism in 1938–1940 – do not suffice, because rationality itself is linked to the dominant social process, and thus “submerged in the same malady” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 139).

Horkheimer and Adorno clarify this point in their initial preface to Dialectic of Enlightenment, dated May 1944:

The discussion . . . of ‘Elements of Anti-Semitism’ deals with the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism in reality. The not merely theoretical but practical tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the
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first, not only in the present phase when it is emerging nakedly. For this reason a philosophical prehistory of anti-Semitism is sketched. Its ‘irrationalism’ derives from the nature of the dominant reason and of the world corresponding to its image.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xix)

Several months before writing this preface, Horkheimer had begun to give a series of lectures at Columbia University. These lectures ultimately gave rise to Eclipse of Reason, and it is in this volume (not published until 1947) that we see Horkheimer’s understanding of changes in reason spelled out and developed. Horkheimer described two kinds of reason in Eclipse – objective and subjective. Objective reason, Horkheimer tells us, “asserted the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world” (Horkheimer 1974: 4). This was the kind of reason on which were founded the systems of Plato, Aristotle, and the German idealists. The emphasis in such systems is on ends, not on means. Subjective reason, on the other hand, “is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable” (Horkheimer 1974: 1). Subjective reason has come to the fore, and has become the dominant form of reason, in capitalist societies – which is precisely why Horkheimer and Adorno depict the “rational” explanations of antisemitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment as linked to the prevailing relations of production, and therefore insufficient.

In addition to explanations of antisemitism, infused, as Horkheimer would likely later have put it, by subjective reason, Horkheimer and Adorno propose in the second thesis in “Elements” that we consider the ways in which “the blindness of anti-Semitism, its lack of intention, lends a degree of truth to the explanation of the movement as a release valve. Rage is vented on those who are both conspicuous and unprotected” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 140). As the authors made clear in an earlier version of “Elements,” Blacks and Mexicans were among those who were glaringly powerless in other contexts. In fascist Germany, on the other hand, Jews were an obvious target for the enraged.

This is not to say that antisemitism does not also have economic roots. The third thesis argues that “bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic purpose: to conceal domination in production.” But the emphasis placed by some – including Horkheimer himself just a few years earlier – on the sphere of circulation is misleading, for it deflects attention from non-Jewish power holders. To be sure, there were Jews who held considerable power in the German economy in the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras. But overemphasis on these individuals can distort the overarching distribution of power insofar as it underplays the many and varied roles of powerful non-Jewish Germans in other spheres.

Horkheimer and Adorno turn next to religious roots of antisemitism, underscoring that, the claims of the Nazis that they disregarded religion and focused on race notwithstanding,

the religious hostility which motivated the persecution of the Jews for two millennia is far from completely extinguished. Rather, anti-Semitism’s eagerness to deny its religious tradition indicates that that tradition is secretly no less deeply embedded in it than secular idiosyncrasy once was in religious zealotry.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 144)
Religiously based antisemitism lived on.
In the last of the original theses, Horkheimer and Adorno focused on the relationship between mimesis and antisemitism. Mimesis has existed since prehistoric times, during which humans attempted to become like that which they feared. So too in fascist Germany:

All the gesticulations devised by the Führer and his followers are pretexts for giving way to the mimetic temptation … They detest the Jews and imitate them constantly. There is no anti-Semite who does not feel an instinctive urge to ape what he takes to be Jewishness. The same mimetic codes are constantly used: the argumentative jerking of the hands, the singing tone of voice, which vividly animates a situation or a feeling independently of judgment, and the nose … which writes the individual’s peculiarity on his face.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 151)

In the first half of 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno added a sixth thesis and argued in it that antisemitism is based on pathic projection. Lowenthal contributed to this thesis by sending Horkheimer his ideas on this notion. Horkheimer, in turn, wrote to Lowenthal that “the projection of aggression or destruction is the most obvious psychological fact of Antisemitism” (Horkheimer 1996a: 549). The sixth thesis as ultimately written suggests that impulses within fascists which they are unable and unwilling to acknowledge are attributed by these fascists to Jews. False projection makes use of age-old mechanisms.

Those impelled by blind murderous lust have always seen in the victim the pursuer who has driven them to desperate self-defense, and the mightiest of the rich have experienced their weakest neighbor as an intolerable threat before falling upon him. The rationalization was both a ruse and a compulsion.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 154)

“Elements of Antisemitism” was published as the final chapter of Dialectic of Enlightenment. In the original preface to Dialectic, the authors explain that “Elements” “deals with the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism” – that is to say “Elements” explores, confirms, and clarifies a central contention of the book as a whole. Horkheimer and Adorno also explicitly declared in this preface that “the ‘elements’ are directly related to empirical research by the Institute for Social Research” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xix).

The empirical studies to which Horkheimer and Adorno allude here include both studies undertaken over a period of years with the financial support of the American Jewish Committee, and a study on antisemitism among American workers conducted with the support of the Jewish Labor Committee (sometimes known in Frankfurter School circles as the labor study) (Jacobs 1997: 573–575, 2015: 66–74, 78–82). A final report submitted by the Institute to the American Jewish Committee underscored that antisemitism “appears as an expression of hostility which is an inherent trait of our particular civilization” (Institute for Social Research, “Studies in Anti-Semitism: A Report on the Cooperative Project for the Study of Antisemitism for the Year Ending March 15, 1944, Jointly Sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and the Institute for Social Research,” Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, IX 121: 24). Adorno, Lowenthal, Pollock, and Institute for Social Research affiliates Arkady Gurland and Paul Massing all contributed to one or another of the empirical projects. Adorno’s study (conducted in 1943) of the techniques used in radio addresses by the American fascist agitator Martin Luther Thomas, including Thomas’ use of antisemitism, was eventually published (Adorno 2000: 120–123), albeit decades after it had been written. Much of the research on antisemitism in the empirical studies conducted by other Institute associates, however, never appeared in print.
But there are short, published pieces by Horkheimer and by Adorno which draw on the empirical studies— including revised versions of talks which each of these writers first delivered at a symposium on antisemitism held, in June of 1944, in California. Horkheimer began his talk by asserting that he had been aware of the seriousness of the problem of antisemitism as early as 1930, and that he had, at that time, attempted (unsuccessfully) to convince communal leaders in Germany, France, and elsewhere of just how serious a problem antisemitism had become. Horkheimer may well have engaged in such efforts. However, it is likely that he did so very quietly and, so to speak, under the radar.

Horkheimer went on to note, in his talk, that his understanding of antisemitism suggested that appeals to “the conscious mind” would not be efficacious “because anti-Semitism and the susceptibility to anti-Semitic propaganda spring from the unconscious” (Horkheimer 1946: 2). He added that though there were obvious differences between antisemitism in Europe and in the USA, the underlying psychological processes evident in both areas were very similar: “The basic features of destructive hatred are identical everywhere. Socio-political issues determine whether or not they become manifest” (Horkheimer 1946: 5–6). Horkheimer alludes to the argument he had made in “The Jews and Europe” while discussing the history of antisemitism in this talk, arguing that “the only time when destructive anti-Semitism remained more or less dormant was during the nineteenth century, the classical age of liberalism… But that liberal period has definitely come to an end in Europe, mainly for economic reasons” (Horkheimer 1946: 7–8). The reason this had occurred was “the disappearance of the intermediary sphere of circulation…” Centralized agencies had taken over the sphere which had formerly been occupied by independent entrepreneurs. They had not only eliminated much of the economic area previously employing Jews, but had also abolished the individual. Horkheimer’s argument here on alterations in the state of individuality is particularly noteworthy. It was a core contention of the Critical Theorists that individuality had markedly diminished in contemporary societies and that humans were increasingly manipulated. “The individual … undergoes very profound changes under the impact of monopolization and standardization” (Horkheimer 1946: 8). The changes which had rendered Jews powerless were linked to changes transforming (other) individuals into members of masses – more easily swayed by antisemitic agitators.

Adorno’s talk at this same conference, based in part, as he explicitly stated, on work which had been done by Lowenthal and Massing as well as his own prior research, focused directly on the antisemitic propaganda by American fascist agitators and organizations. It emphasized that the agitators and organizations in question attempted to win adherents via unconscious mechanisms, not by advocating on behalf of positive political ideas. It also underscored that this tactic was conscious and planned (Adorno 1946). Both talks strongly suggest that the empirical studies of antisemitism conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Social Research were intertwined with the theoretical works of Horkheimer and Adorno.

Additional evidence in support of this contention is provided by a long memorandum by Adorno on the labor study written near the end of 1944. Adorno argues in this memorandum that antisemitism had an “essentially psychological, irrational nature … The object plays but a minor role as compared to the tendency of the subject” (“Memorandum from T. W. Adorno re Evaluation of Participant Interviews (Labor Project): 16, November 3, 1944, P. F. Lazarsfeld Collection, Box 20, Columbia University). He also argues, among other matters, that “proof of the interconnection between antisemitism and ‘compelled mimicry’ may be gleaned from the interviews” conducted in conjunction with the labor study.

The interconnections between the empirical work on antisemitism conducted by individuals associated with the Frankfurt School and the theoretical work on that theme written, primarily, by Horkheimer and Adorno are also apparent in the five book series “Studies in Prejudice,” sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. Horkheimer was a co-editor of
the series. The most influential volume in this series was and remains *The Authoritarian Personality*, a significant portion of which was written by Adorno. The section of this book credited to Adorno, “Qualitative Studies of Ideology,” argued – as had “Elements” – that antisemitism is projective and “that anti-Semitic prejudice has little to do with the qualities of those against whom it is directed” (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford 1950: 607). Adorno pointed, in other words, to the ways in which antisemitic attitudes may be explained not by Jewish attributes or behaviors, but rather by the psychological needs and wants of antisemites. Adorno also noted that there is a link between antisemitism and antidemocratic ideas. Indeed, antisemitism often has antidemocratic consequences.

At a marginally later point in his contribution to *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno discussed so-called ticket thinking – the core notion of the seventh and final thesis in “Elements of Antisemitism,” added to “Elements” sometime between the end of the Second World War and mid-1947. This thesis began with the provocative sentence “But there are no longer any anti-Semites” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 165). By this the authors meant that antisemitism was not, in the postwar era, a monistic ideology. It had, rather, become “a plank in the platform,” part and parcel of a fascist orientation, alongside, for example, an anti-union stance and opposition to Bolshevism (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 166). The actual experience one may have had with Jews becomes irrelevant. When one accepts the ticket, one accepts its components.

The empirical studies assessed by Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality* were reported by him to have found evidence of ticket thinking. These studies were also said to have pointed to a distinction between “what the subject professes to think about politics and economy and what he really thinks” (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford 1950: 671). This distinction was a crucial one in the work on antisemitism conducted by Adorno in the 1950s.

*The Authoritarian Personality* emphasized the subjective aspects of prejudice and antisemitism. However, in an unpublished piece, “Remarks on ‘The Authoritarian Personality,’” which was most probably written in 1948 (and which reads as if it may have been intended to serve as an introductory chapter to the published book), Adorno took pains to underscore that

> We are convinced that the ultimate source of prejudice has to be sought in social factors which are incomparably stronger than the ‘psyche’ of any one individual involved… Thus we fully realize that limiting the study to subjective patterns does not mean that, in our opinion, prejudice can be explained in such terms.

(Adorno, “Remarks on ‘The Authoritarian Personality,’ by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford,” Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 1 D: 72)

Adorno’s “Remarks” also noted that he did not see contemporary, totalitarian antisemitism as deriving from

a specific [historical] antisemitic tradition. Its historical roots are rather to be found in the general trend towards ever-increasing “integration” of the individual into the social totality and, concomitantly, the increasing sacrifices that civilization demands of its supposed beneficiaries. There is no unbroken historical continuity between older forms of anti-Semitism and the present totalitarian brand… Modern anti-semitic ideology is the antidote against the sufferings entailed by rational civilization rather than the immediate expression of either this civilization or the kind of irrationality boasted by the anti-semite.

By the time The Authoritarian Personality was published, both Horkheimer and Adorno had moved back to Germany. Together with Pollock, they reestablished the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The first significant project organized by the Institute during this period was the study which was ultimately published under the title Group Experiment.

The subject of The Authoritarian Personality was rather different than of the Group Experiment – the former focused on links between the personality traits of those (Americans) studied and their prejudices during the course of the Second World War; the latter looked at psychological legacies of Nazism among Germans after the end of that war. The methodologies used in these two books were also quite different from one another. The Authoritarian Personality was rooted, in part, in a questionnaire which was intended to identify attitudes toward Jews and other themes indirectly, that is without explicitly asking questions about Jews. Adorno informed Horkheimer in 1944 that he had distilled a number of these questions “through a sort of work of translation from the ‘Elements of Antisemitism’” (Adorno to Horkheimer, November 9, 1944, Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 1 B 194). Group Experiment, on the other hand, was based not on a questionnaire, but rather on a series of meetings with small groups, each of which had a moderator and each of which was presented with a stimulus intended to provoke revelations about relevant views. But these differences notwithstanding, the understanding of antisemitism in these two works was broadly consistent.

Even before the end of the Second World War, Adorno already believed, as he wrote to Lowenthal, that

unconsciously every German knows what happened to the Jews but … they repress this knowledge for the sake of their own psychological comfort. In the first years of the Hitler regime I heard again and again whenever the atrocities were mentioned people say ‘but the Führer does not know that’. I think they use the very same pattern for psychological self-excuse.

(Adorno to Lowenthal, September 25, 1944, Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 17 223)

This sense of the matter, also implicit in Group Experiment, sheds light on the meaning of the empirical studies on antisemitism for the Critical Theorists. The empirical studies were not so much raw material on the basis of which theoretical explanations were created. They were, rather, often seen as ways to test and confirm ideas and theories which had already crystallized. As Adorno once put it, “sometimes social psychology and sociology are able to construct concepts that only later are empirically verified” (Adorno 1998b: 198).

The empirical research discussed in Group Experiment was conducted in 1950 and 1951. A number of small groups of Germans, of varying generations, classes, and occupations – such as a group of unemployed women, one of high school students, members of a youth group, a group of local Bavarian dignitaries, and a group made up of self-employed merchants – were constituted. Each of these groups was told of a letter, purportedly written by a soldier who had served with the occupation forces in Germany. The letter presented this fictional soldier’s impressions of the Germans who he had allegedly encountered, and noted, among other matters, that these Germans “have the feeling that the world did the greatest injustice to them” and that these Germans “are still hostile to the Jews.” Having been exposed to this document, the groups of Germans gathered by those conducting this experiment proceeded to discuss relevant matters in the presence of a moderator and in a context in which, the Critical Theorists believed, participants would expose not only their manifest opinions but also those of their opinions which were latent. Horkheimer conceived of these conversations as emulating those among passengers who happen to encounter one another on a train.

Much of Adorno’s qualitative analysis of a sample of the results of these experiments revolved around the defense mechanisms evident among German participants in the group
experiments through which these participants coped with feelings of guilt, often unconscious, for actions by Germans during the Nazi years. Those participants in the group experiments who were, in Adorno’s terms, most open minded were most likely to concede guilt and least likely to manifest strong defense mechanisms against admitting such guilt. Those who were “nationalistic,” on the other hand, rationalized and repressed their latent guilt. Adorno’s analysis led him to explore (among other matters) German attitudes toward Jews in the era following the Holocaust.

Adorno discussed, for example, projection of guilt from the perpetrators to the victims. Certain participants in the group discussions insisted that Jews were “themselves to blame for everything that happened to them. The legend of ritual murder, Jewish unscrupulousness, the shirking of physical work – no anti-Semitic accusation against the Jews” was “too absurd to not be repeated” (Adorno 2010: 153). He also comments that antisemitism, which transfers negative stereotypes to a whole group, would be unthinkable without the method of false generalization (Adorno 2010: 104).

Group Experiment was published in 1955 – and was greeted, by some, with skepticism. The methodology of Group Experiment was particularly harshly criticized by Peter F. Hofstätter, who published a review in the Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie in which he argued that the study in question was attempting to unmask and accuse the entire German nation (Adorno 2010: 189–196). Adorno, however, strongly defended the Institute’s work and responded to Hofstätter – who actually had good reason to feel guilty about his own relationship to the Nazi regime – by bitingly commenting that “in the house of the hangman, one should not mention the noose; otherwise one might be suspected of harboring resentment” (Adorno 2010: 208, 32).

Max Horkheimer shared the views on antisemitism propounded by Adorno in Group Experiment. In a letter to Franz Spelman (a correspondent for Newsweek) written in mid-1956, Horkheimer noted that one of the key sources of the antisemitic passion in Germany stemmed from “unmastered, repressed, guilt feelings” (Horkheimer 1996b: 351).

Both Horkheimer’s attitude toward antisemitism in the 1950s and that of Adorno were affected by their own experiences in Germany during that decade. At a faculty meeting in 1956 which had been called in order to discuss the promotion of Adorno to the rank of professor, a historian, Helmut Ritter, proclaimed that such a step would be an example of favoritism. “To make a career in Frankfurt,” Ritter asserted,

you had only to be a Jew and a protégé of Horkheimer. Horkheimer was present at the meeting. He accused Ritter of anti-Semitism and left the room, slamming the door. He then applied to the ministry in Wiesbaden for early retirement.

(Müller-Doohm 2005: 368–369)

This incident was not merely infuriating for Horkheimer, but all but certainly humiliating for Adorno.

Adorno expanded upon the Institute’s approach to the study of antisemitism in “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” first presented in 1959. He argued in this piece that “National Socialism lives on” (Adorno 1998a: 89) and that he considered “the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy” (Adorno 1998a: 90). Referring to the antisemitic notion that the Jews had furnished an instigation of some kind or another for their treatment at the hands of the Nazis – the same phenomenon as that which he had described in Group Experiment – Adorno proclaimed “the idiocy of all this is truly a sign of something that psychologically has not been mastered, a wound, although the idea of wounds would be rather more appropriate for the victims” (Adorno 1998a: 91). Adorno’s piece contains explicit ideas
as to how to grapple with antisemitism – and as to proposed or potential tactics that would not be likely to help:

Attention to the great achievements of Jews in the past, however true they may be, are hardly of use and smack of propaganda. And propaganda, the rational manipulation of what is irrational, is the prerogative of the totalitarians... Panegyrics to the Jews that isolate them as a group already give anti-Semitism a running start. Anti-Semitism is so difficult to refute because the psychic economy of innumerable people needed it and, in an attenuated form, presumably still needs it today.

(Adorno 1998a: 101)

Organized encounters between Jews and non-Jewish Germans would, likewise, not have a significant impact:

All too often the presupposition is that anti-Semitism in some essential way involves Jews and could be countered through concrete experiences with Jews, whereas the genuine anti-Semite is defined far more by his incapacity for any experience whatsoever, by his unresponsiveness. If anti-Semitism primarily has its foundation in objective society, and derivatively in anti-Semites, then – as the National Socialist joke has it – if the Jews had not already existed, the anti-Semites would have had to invent them.

(Adorno 1998a: 101–102)

Ultimately, Adorno pointed out in closing, because of the objective power underlying anti-Semitism,

subjective enlightenment will not suffice... the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.

(Adorno 1998a: 102–103)

It was clear to Adorno in 1959 that “working through of the past” had not been successful and that this was so because “the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism” continued to exist (Adorno 1998a: 98).

Adorno returned to the subject of antisemitism in a talk dating from 1962, “Zur Bekämpfung des Antisemitismus heute.” Adorno admiringly mentioned in this work the phrase “secondary antisemitism,” which had been coined by Peter Schönbach and which Adorno used here when referring to attempts in the postwar era by onetime active Nazis to defend to their own children the positions they had held in the era of the Third Reich. In the course of doing, these individuals “rewarmed” their antisemitism (Adorno 1986: 362). This was itself a symptom of the defense mechanisms used by Germans after the war. More generally, Adorno was concerned, in this piece, to suggest that a dangerous crypto-antisemitism remained present in the Federal Republic of Germany. He described antisemitism as a medium which manipulates and strengthens unconscious conflicts and tendencies, linked the origins of antisemitism in the individual to an authoritarian character structure created in early childhood, and recommended, as a long-term program, that educators who encounter young children with ethnocentric (antisemitic or racist) attitudes establish contact with the parents of such children, discuss issues directly with the children concerned, and “in some manner” or another attempt, if necessary, to “give the children what they lack at home” – by
which Adorno meant provide such children with warmth and understanding if their parents
did not (Adorno 1986: 374). Adorno ends this piece by pointedly noting that antisemitism
was not a phenomenon first introduced into German culture from the outside by Hitler.
German culture, he writes, was saturated with antisemitic prejudices [“mit antisemitischen

As in the exile era, so too in the 1950s and 1960s, Horkheimer shared Adorno’s concern
with antisemitism and with how it ought to be combatted. This continuing concern is evident
in Horkheimer’s essay of 1961, “The German Jews.” In a passage devoted to the roots of
Zionism, Horkheimer noted,

Antisemitism may have religious origins but it is no longer essentially a religious
phenomenon; it is rather a means of manipulation in an age when every economic
weakness can be a weak point open to attack by any foreign nationalism that hap-
pens to be more vigorously and thoroughly organized. The striking power of the
military depends ever more fully on that of the population as a whole, and anti-
Semitism is a means of assuring the latter.

(Horkheimer 1994: 110)

The key to this passage – the notion that antisemitism is a means of manipulation – was in
full accord with the studies of fascist agitators which had been conducted by Adorno and
other writers associated with the Institute while in the USA.

Horkheimer’s ongoing interest in grappling with antisemitism after his return to Europe is
also evident in an article by him published in 1963, in which he discusses the phenomenon
directly, and in which he makes use both of the notion of projection and of the need to a-
scribe negative qualities to others rather than grapple with the negative within (Horkheimer
1963: 66), and in scattered notes by Horkheimer, written over a period of years. In one such
note, for example, Horkheimer writes,

Eine psychologische Erklärung für den Fanatismus, der für viele antisemitische
Bewegungen charakteristisch ist, liegt in dem Umstand, daß hier wie in vielen
anderen Fällen (Hexenverfolgung, Religionskriege) der Fanatiker weiß, daß der
andere, zum mindesten in weitem Maß, recht hat und er selbst unrecht.

(Horkheimer 1988: 362)

Antisemitism and its implications remained of special interest to the key theorists of the
Frankfurt School in later years, even in works in which they do not explicitly mention either
Jews or hatred of Jews (or mention one or the other only in passing). In Negative Dialectics,
the manuscript of which was completed in 1966, Adorno argued that “A new categorical
imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and
actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno
1994: 365). Can there be any doubt that Adorno used the term “Auschwitz,” in part, as short-
hand for the mass murder of millions of Jews? His essay “Education after Auschwitz” (an early
version of which was delivered as a radio lecture in 1966) begins from the same point as does
the passage just cited: “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen
again” (Adorno 1998b: 191). Auschwitz made it impossible to simply go on thinking as one
did before (Müller-Doorh 2005: 309). There is rupture, not continuity, between the pre-
Auschwitz and post-Auschwitz worlds. And yet, at some points, “Education after Auschwitz”
makes use of notions and positions also evident in the empirical studies of antisemitism
which had been done under the auspices of the Institute for Social Research during the
1940s and of ideas propounded in “Elements of Antisemitism.” “It is not the victims who are
Adorno and Horkheimer had pointed to the image of the Jews as having happiness without power, and the relationship of this image to the hatred directed against them, in thesis six of “Elements.”

And yet Adorno takes pains in “Education after Auschwitz” to point out that the personality types of what he calls “the world of Auschwitz” are not simply one and the same as the authoritarian personality which the Frankfurt School had described years earlier. On the one hand, the personality types produced by Auschwitz “epitomize the blind identification with the collective. On the other hand, they are fashioned in order to manipulate masses, collectives…” (Adorno 1998b: 197). Moreover, he concludes this essay by pointing out that if there was a revival of nationalism, the factors which had made Auschwitz possible might well lead to the victimization of groups other than Jews – such as the elderly, intellectuals, or “simply deviant groups” (Adorno 1998b: 203). The techniques and psychological roots of antisemitism are paralleled by those of other hatreds.

The members and associates of the Institute for Social Research did not, by and large, feel themselves to have been deeply affected by antisemitism either in their youth or in the Institute’s founding years. Writing about the childhood of Siegfried Kracauer (that is, about the end of the nineteenth century) Adorno, who was himself raised in Frankfurt, acknowledged that Kracauer had suffered antisemitic abuse while a pupil in the Klinger Upper School, but also noted that antisemitism had been “quite unusual” in Frankfurt in that era (Adorno 1991: 161). Horkheimer did not remember any of his teachers as having been antisemitic, and dismissed “as a sign of their envy” prejudiced remarks he heard from time to time from other students (Abromeit 2011: 21). When asked by an interviewer when he first came “physically” into contact with antisemitism, Lowenthal replied “personally, we hardly experienced it at all” (Lowenthal 1987: 27). Decades after the end of the Weimar Republic, Friedrich Pollock informed Martin Jay that “All of us, up to the last years before Hitler, had no feeling of insecurity originating from our ethnic descent” (Jay 1986: 81). Felix Weil, similarly, insisted, in another letter to Jay, and probably referring to the heyday of the Weimar era, “Discrimination against Jews” in Germany “had retreated completely to the ‘social club’ level” (Jay 1986: 81). Herbert Marcuse, who was raised in Berlin and who did not begin working for the Institute until 1933 (and who, like Lowenthal, Weil, Pollock, and Horkheimer, was of Jewish origin), repeatedly said that though he had known about antisemitism in his earlier years, he had seldom been “directly victimized by it” (Lowenthal 1987: 27).

To be sure, not all of those most closely associated with the Frankfurt School completely escaped being subjected to antisemitism before the Nazi era. Horkheimer encountered antisemitism in the military during the First World War. Lowenthal, in turn, was subjected to what he described as “the potential anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism of the German proletariat and peasants” after he was drafted into the German military in 1918 (Lowenthal 1987: 45). His experience was so awful that he volunteered for a front-line unit in order to
attempt to escape from those who were tormenting him. Adorno may also, retrospectively, have been interpreting an incident which occurred when he was a boy as arising from antisemitism when he wrote, in *Minima Moralía*,

In a real sense, I ought to be able to deduce Fascism from the memories of my childhood... children already equipped with Christian names like Horst and Jürgen ... enacted the dream before the adults were historically ripe for its realization.

(Adorno 1974: 192)

The experiences of Horkheimer and Lowenthal during the First World War notwithstanding, none of the writers of the Frankfurt School studied antisemitism in a sustained manner during the 1920s, or, for that matter, at virtually any point in the 1930s. Indeed, the lack of attention to antisemitism is quite noticeable in *Studien über Autorität und Familie* – a massive volume published under the auspices of the Institute in 1936 and devoted, as the title suggests, to studies of the family and the authoritarian character structure, reflecting five years of work by Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Marcuse, among others (Horkheimer et al. 1987: 1–940). During the course of the Second World War, on the other hand, under altogether different circumstances, the Frankfurt School’s leading theorists repeatedly attempted to come to grips both with antisemitism per se and with the significance of that phenomenon. Horkheimer and Adorno in particular, I have argued, devoted sustained attention to antisemitism in the 1940s. Antisemitism was a major theme of both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Authoritarian Personality* – among the most important books of the exile era. The latter work, covering some of the same topics as did *Studien*, by no means ignored hatred of the Jews. Adorno’s role is once again of import. Adorno, who was not yet a full member of the Institute in the period during which *Studien* was produced, had not contributed to that volume. On the other hand, as we have seen, Adorno wrote a significant portion of *The Authoritarian Personality*, including the section of that volume focused on qualitative analysis.

The mass murder of European Jewry and evidence of antisemitic attitudes among post-War Germans had a great and ongoing impact on the most important theorists of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno were manifestly concerned about antisemitism not only during the Second World War, but also throughout the remainder of their lives. In the period after they moved to “the house of the hangman,” these Critical Theorists repeatedly condemned and attempted to combat hatred of Jews. That is to say, in the wake of the Holocaust, their attitudes toward antisemitism and their interest in the subject were – appropriately – notably different than they had been in pre-Nazi Germany.

References


FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND ANTI-SEMITISM


Further Reading


