

# Philosophy and Ethnonationalism: Epistemic Antisemitism from the 1920s to the Present

Adam Knowles, University of Zurich

How did the structures of ethnonationalist thinking live on after 1945? What forms did antisemitic ethnonationalism take after 1945? This paper argues that the discipline of philosophy played a decisive role in developing and sustaining a particular form of epistemic antisemitism. This epistemic antisemitism—which shared traits with *völkisch* discourses of parasitological antisemitism—aimed to combat what was commonly called the *Verjudung des deutschen Geistes*—the “Jewification” of the German spirit. By the 1920s the *völkisch* intellectual project of fighting universalism, cosmopolitanism, democracy, and the legacy of the French Enlightenment crystalized within the discipline of philosophy into a distinct academic commitment to cleansing German thought of Jewish influence.

The paper will examine two foundational works of this movement: Max Wundt’s 1924 treatise “Was heißt völkisch?” and Raymund Schmidt’s 1935 essay “Das Judentum in der deutschen Philosophie.” A professor of philosophy first in Jena and later Tübingen, Wundt represented the intellectual vanguard of antisemitic philosophers active in the Weimar era. Wundt led the academic attack on Hermann Cohen and Neo-Kantianism as “Jewified” forms of German thinking infiltrated from within. Wundt’s argument was not merely directed toward Jewish philosophers in an ad hominem manner, but attempted to identify incommensurable traits in the racial constitution of Jews which would transform any attempt to teach or write about German philosophy into a falsification and pollution from within. Schmidt, likewise an academically trained philosopher, sharpened these attacks and called for an aggressive cleansing of German philosophy from the epistemic traces of Jewish influence in order to begin the long process of returning thinking to its native forces.

Contemporary New Right narratives of ethnopluralism and civilizational incommensurability attest to the durability of the fundamental commitments of *völkisch* antisemitism. In 1949 Karl Jaspers played a critical role in rehabilitating this tradition of ethnonationalist thinking by serving as a dissertation advisor for the Swiss philosopher Armin Mohler, the intellectual father of the New Right and progenitor of the myth of the Conservative Revolution. In order for philosophy to combat these modes of antisemitism, it must first analyze the discipline’s role in creating and sustaining epistemic antisemitism.