

Don't Judge Me!

Anti-Judgementalism and Anti-Moralism in the Corona Pandemic

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the routines of everyday life were disrupted and re-arranged. This crisis was accompanied by reflections and debates on the (un)ethical character of practical decisions concerning one's own personal actions as well as those of others – reflections that were seen to have direct or indirect life-or-death consequences.¹ Governments, public health officials and many others communicated in strongly moral terms.² As people maneuvered through these unprecedented circumstances, a sense of moral urgency gained prominence. On the other hand, being confronted with a series of moral demands, many people took the view that it is wrong – or even unjust – to judge others for their behavior, and that, consequently, they – and others – should not be judged.

In the following, we take up the principle foundational to this attitude which we term *anti-judgmentalism*: a felt and/or argued opposition to others' moral judgments in which implied demands are rejected not primarily for their inherent right- or wrongness but rather for being illegitimate in a more categorical sense. Anti-judgmentalism can be seen as a general critique of a propensity for making moral judgments that are seen as overreaching, excessive, inadequate, underinformed, or hypocritical. In consequence, apodictic anti-judgmental statements – such as “don't

1 This is reminiscent to what cultural anthropologist Jarret Zigon terms “moral breakdown” (2007).

2 Moralized (which in this case means focused on others' interests) public health communication was recommended for example, by Luttrell and Petty (2021), based on a psychological study. At the same time, this study also found that people who did not see public health as a strongly moral issue in general were also much less responsive to moral communication.

judge me!” – imply a reference to common-sense understandings of the “right” and the “wrong” place of moral judgments and morality in life.³

Recently, moral philosophers have addressed the problem of overreaching or hypocritical moral judgments as core aspects of moralism (Neuhäuser and Seidel 2020; Mieth and Rosenthal 2020). Anti-judgmentalism in the sense in which we are analyzing it here can indeed be seen as a (sub-)form of *anti-moralism*⁴: a generalized rejection of the moral register that is, we argue, rooted in everyday, vernacular culture, and that circulates in popular media as well as in a broader discursive sphere. As researchers of everyday life, we are less interested in developing a general philosophical concept or conducting a straightforwardly normative discussion, but rather in conceptualizing anti-judgmentalism as a “cultural theme” (Lindner 2003) that is embedded in and emerges from everyday narratives. Our goal in this chapter is to explore this theme and its meanings in different arenas; we aim to situate it in its societal contexts and conditions. For this purpose, we use tools from transdisciplinary cultural analysis, combining an analysis of public – including pop-cultural – discourses with a close, ethnographic attention to lifeworld-level dynamics, everyday (linguistic) practices and subjective attitudes and sentiments. Our explication and contextualization of moral (counter-)claims is inspired by (descriptive-analytical) sociological and cultural-anthropological studies of ethics and morality that have shown how social practices establish ethics and morality as seemingly self-evident domains (Thompson 2012; Fassin 2015; Fassin and Lézé 2014; Hinrichsen 2019). This includes work on the “problematization” of morality in relation to shifting forms of subjectivity and subjectivation (Foucault 1992; 1997; Collier and Lakoff 2005; Ege 2022), on public moral panics and moral regulation (Hunt 1999; Hier 2011; 2019), or the morality and politics of humanitarianism (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2015).

By exploring the sources and the intertextual connections and resonances that define anti-judgmentalism as a cultural theme in the present moment, the chapter will contribute to a phenomenology of “aversive sentiments” in moral interpellations and counter-interpellations, as well as their narrative constitution, and thereby to an analysis of the subjective side of the current conjuncture.⁵ Long before the pan-

3 We follow a Gramscian approach to common-sense as historically sedimented, heterogeneous and potentially contradictory (Gramsci 1971: 324; cf. Crehan 2002; Hall and O’Shea 2013; Sutter 2016).

4 See, for example, Coady 2006; Neuhäuser and Seidel 2020 and the contributions to their edited volume, which primarily focuses on moral philosophy and ethics. On anti-moralism, cf. the ongoing research project “Disintegration through morality? Moral argumentation and the moralism charge in public debates,” directed by Cord Schmeltzle at the research institute on social cohesion.

5 Literary theorist Amlinger and sociologist Nachtwey (2022) have argued that recent protests against COVID regulations exemplify a new political formation of “libertarian authoritarian-

demic, Lawrence Grossberg, Wendy Brown and other critical theorists pointed out that the experiential plane of the present conjuncture is characterized by widespread confusion over the relation and the borders between morality and politics (Brown 2020; 2001; Grossberg 2018).⁶ While their diagnoses point to different societal problematics, their basic argument is that there is *dissensus* about these questions, but also widespread (affective) *uncertainty*: what is the status of demands for moral or ethical behavior in contemporary public and private lives – when there is so much obvious *systemic* injustice and hypocrisy?⁷ What are we to make of demands of morality and moral orientations for the conduct of everyday life that are expressed by authorities of various types that otherwise set demands for people to be ruthlessly competitive? Are “we” demanding moral purity – from ourselves and others – in ways that are unrealistic despite our knowledge that humans and their practices have all sorts of motivations that differ radically from moral self-images and rationalizations? These questions are often experienced as personal and emotional – as our empirical investigation will demonstrate.

Overview

Anti-judgmentalism's roots transcend our present historical moment.⁸ To lay the groundwork for an understanding of the rejection of moral claims and judgments during the Coronavirus pandemic, we first need to survey a broader semantic and discursive field and introduce different genealogical strands of the theme. For that purpose, we will first take a closer look at semantics of the German-language equivalences of “to judge” (*urteilen*). Building on the exploratory methodology suggested for the analysis of cross-domain cultural fields by Williams (1977), Lindner (2003), Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk (2016), and others, we then follow anti-judgmentalism through

ism”: According to these authors, frustrated demands for autonomy and an “expansion of the zone of narcissistic hurt” (2022, 146–163, dt. *Ausweitung der Kränkungszone*) have given rise to a radically individualistic and resentful formation of protest subjectivities. “Aversive sentiments” are a central aspect in this context.

- 6 Fassin, Ticktin and other anthropologists have stressed the depoliticizing dangers of humanitarian moralism, while also stressing that the ethical and the political are impossible to disentangle (Fassin 2015; Ticktin 2011).
- 7 Some commentators in left-leaning Cultural Studies such as Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams (2022) come to the political conclusion that “moralism” (which they connect to “liberal identitarianism”) should generally be avoided, arguing instead for a politics of solidarity centered around the realization of collectively shared (material) interests. The problem with this position is that definitions of moralism differ widely, as we will see below. It may be more difficult to draw the line between ethical-political positions (in a Gramscian sense of the hyphenated term) and “moralism” than the authors suggest.
- 8 In the sense of their genealogical *Herkunft*, not their *Ursprung* (Foucault 1978).

very different discursive fields where it has been expressed and shaped – the Bible, pop songs, as well as popular psychology and self-help writings.⁹ We then turn to anti-judgmentalism during the rise of the Corona virus to show how people make use of those circulating themes in order to make sense of and navigate through the ethico-political challenges of the pandemic in 2020/2021. We trace anti-judgmentalism through German-language newspaper articles and commentaries which were published during the outbreak of COVID-19. Here, critical reflections on and invectives against “judging” could be found especially in political discussions about the pitfalls of the state’s governance of public behavior, and the links between populist and anti-judgmentalist discourse becomes palpable. We then shift registers and draw from Schmitzberger’s ethnographic study, which includes extensive and repeated qualitative interviews with partygoers and club culture participants in Germany that took place during the acute phase of the pandemic – i.e., we shift from public narratives to everyday narrations. As putative representatives of a hedonistic fraction of a younger generation, the interviewees provide a particularly interesting case study of the moral experience of life during the COVID crisis.¹⁰ Building on this, we suggest a new typology of two main forms of anti-judgmentalism – and, ultimately, anti-moralism more broadly – which have very different social and political implications.

Verurteilen/judgen: A Note on Semantics

Specific words, expressions and idioms in different languages matter greatly here as they give shape to vaguer sentiments. Our examples are from Germany and German-speaking Switzerland where most people speak of *verurteilen*, one of the two most common translation options for the English word “to judge.” “*Verurteilen*” is the main term used in situations in which English-speakers would commonly be speaking of “judging.” It refers to negative judgments, primarily to moral condemnation (as in politicians publicly “condemning” acts of other governments), but also to legal judgments.¹¹ *Verurteilen* not only has the meaning “to judge,” and “to condemn,” but also “to sentence,” as in the activity of judges – or of God.¹² The other German

9 In doing so we draw from an ongoing investigation of popular cultural (anti-)moralisms (Ege 2022, 2024).

10 A few notes on the methodology and contexts of these interviews will be provided below.

11 The role of the “juridical unconscious” and the permutation of trials as models and metaphor will have to remain unexamined here; cf. Felman 2002.

12 Here also is the partly synonymous, more anachronistic German verb “*richten*” – which Martin Luther used in his translation of the gospel of Matthew in the New Testament (Jesus says: “*Richtet nicht, damit ihr nicht gerichtet werdet*,” Matthew 7:1-5).

translation option for “judging” is “*beurteilen*.” It means to judge by merit, aesthetics, or morality in professional contexts (e.g., in the work of teachers or prize juries), but it can also refer to everyday classifications and evaluations, including judgments about attractiveness.¹³ *Beurteilen* is also related to a broad spectrum of institutionally embedded social practices.

Most of the sources and data we have surveyed speak of *verurteilen* and *urteilen* where English speakers would only use “to judge.” Moreover, the anglicism *judgen* (to judge) has been incorporated into German, especially among younger people. Even the adjective *judgy* appears regularly in some variants of everyday, vernacular language. At first sight, anti-judgmentalism as a cultural theme mostly seems to concern judging in the sense of *verurteilen*. But as we will show, the other semantic elements (including *beurteilen/bewerten*) regularly play into anti-judgmentalist statements as well, and the use of the anglicism can imply further ambiguities. These ambiguities, we argue, are not only crucial for their appeal but have profound consequences on how everyday life – especially in times of the pandemic – is being made sense of and narrated.

Sources of Anti-Judgmentalism

The causes for a generalized desire (and demand) not to be judged to some extent fall into a psychological domain that is difficult to access for cultural researchers. As we are concerned here with anti-judgmentalism as a theme and pattern, we are interested in the sources and the practical logics of common-sense thought, narratives, and arguments, rather than in causal explanations. What, then, are the historically concrete and specific sources of the common-sense “knowledge” that is expressed by an apodictic statement such as “Don't judge me!”?

A provisional sketch of such an inventory can draw from different domains, including religious teachings, popularized secular philosophy, psychology, guidelines for conduct, conventions in vernacular language (sayings, proverbs, quotes) and other popular cultural representations. The Bible contains what are probably the most famous proverbial formulations against judgmentalism: the speck of sawdust in another's eye and the plank in your own; he who is without guilt shall cast the first stone; judge not so that ye be not judged. Judging (*richten*, *verurteilen*) is seen as the domain of God in which mortals with their limited knowledge – and

13 In that sense, *Beurteilung* is close to *Bewertung* and could be translated as “evaluation” as well. It can be argued that judging has taken on specific qualities (and perhaps also a qualitatively different quantity) in the current sociopolitical and technological conjuncture (Fourcade 2016; Groth 2019).

authority – should not interfere.¹⁴ Popular music represents an arena in which normative cultural meanings, including religious ones, have long been activated, translated and recontextualized. This is particularly strong in the – near-globally influential – African American tradition, which famously relies on the Black church, especially in the Gospel/Soul/Disco/House trajectory (“Mother, mother / Everybody thinks we’re wrong / But who are they to judge us,” Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On,” 1971). In popular rap anthems like Tupac Shakur’s “Only God Can Judge Me” (1999), theological meanings blend with a form of “hard” sociological naturalism, which represents another discursive thread: In these lyrics, the rapper prototypically claims that “judging” someone like him, a streetwise hustler and gangster in a racist society, should be left to God; those who haven’t lived this kind of life (“each and every black male’s trapped”) and lack the basis for understanding it should not judge it. In newer usages such as FKA Twigs’s experimental RnB/rap song “Don’t Judge Me” (2021), moral fallibility is also traced back to societal forces and hostile circumstances, whereas judgments are depicted as a form of (internalized) oppression.¹⁵

There are numerous other discursive threads and arenas that could be considered as sources of contemporary anti-judgmentalism. For present purposes, we confine ourselves to one: In contemporary popular psychology, life coaching and self-help discourse, judging (in the sense of *verurteilen*, but also *beurteilen*) is a particularly prominent theme. These discourses reach a much wider audience than academic philosophy and ethics. Podcasts – a crucial medium of today’s popular culture – and life advice blogs are a good starting point for an exploration of this discursive strand. To survey some of the usages and meanings, we performed a (German-language) keyword search for *verurteilen* on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. Aside from entries in the fields of crime/law/jurisdiction and religion/religious ethics, the search led us to podcasts in the intersecting fields of popular psychology, life coaching, self-help and guides for mental health and spiritual mindfulness.¹⁶ Such podcast episodes

14 While this is well-known core teaching in Christian and post-Christian contexts, the English term “judging” seems to be more obviously connected to the Biblical interdiction than the German term *verurteilen*, if only because in most Bible translations the word *richten* is used. A more modern English version is “[d]o not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. / Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to your own eye” (NIV).

15 Cf. Ege 2024.

16 We examined five podcasts in-depth in regard to how the word *verurteilen* is used, as well as the argumentative patterns in which such statements are embedded, and the normative beliefs and bodies of knowledge on which those reflections are based. In doing so, we methodologically follow the approach of qualitative content analysis, although our research results are more illustrative in nature rather than claiming to fully represent the popular discourse

have titles like “Life is a walk in the park. How to live a joyful life: Why we judge others,” “Love Balance Remembrance: Why it doesn't matter what others think of us – why we evaluate and judge and how we stop our judgment,” or “Words don't fail me. Your non-violent communication podcast: 3 reasons why we judge others – and how to transform your judgments.”

In most of these texts, judgmental attitudes and judging as a practice are presented as bad habits or as weaknesses to be overcome. Therapeutic writers tend to identify the “subconscious” as the guilty party – the problematic “ethical substance” in the terminology of Foucault's analysis of ethical subjectivity (Foucault 1992). They often propose a plan for better, more efficient self-care: being happier and mentally healthy is the main stated goal. They usually also formulate a related ethical program. This is illustrated by a listicle-style BuzzFeed blog article from 2018.¹⁷ The German version is titled “10 Tipps für alle Menschen, die gerne mal über andere urteilen” (“10 pieces of advice for all people who like to judge others”). It includes statements like “[j]udging others doesn't only hurt the people it is directed at. It also very much damages the person who voices the criticism. So be nice to others and show them (and yourself!) some compassion!” The overall goal is to “climb down from your high horse” and become a better, “more loving and caring” person. Coaches recommend therapeutic practices like biographical self-examination, breathing exercises and aromatherapy for relief against judgmental habits. The latter, they believe, are ultimately forms of externalized auto-aggression.

Such snippets from self-help/life-coaching texts offer a glance at the common-sense variant of anti-judgmental, anti-normative discourse. While we based our search on “*verurteilen*,” it is remarkable that here and in many other examples, there is no clear distinction being made between *verurteilen*, *beurteilen*, *urteilen*, and *bewerten* – these words are used almost interchangeably. They are presented as “bad” practices, psychologically unhealthy and presumptuous classification, and reproach. In this context, it is important to point out that the objects of everyday judgments are not always of a straightforward “moral” type: the BuzzFeed article, for example, mentions judgments in everyday situations such as not liking the best friend's new boyfriend or judging a colleague for wearing an outfit that one finds unsuitable for a day at the office. Such criticism is directed at the enactment of other forms of normativity, such as evaluations of others' adherence to social conventions, their aesthetic competence, or, to some extent, their chances on the path to a “good life.” While morality

on the topic. Our method only yielded empirical data explicitly addressing contemporary understandings of *verurteilen*.

17 The article was partly rewritten and translated into German one year later (Hallett 2018; BuzzFeed 2019) – which illustrates mechanisms of transnational popular cultural circulation and transfer.

and other forms of normativity can be separated analytically, as can the different semantic components of (*ver-*)*urteilen*, the actual usage of the term “judging” and its equivalents often merges them.

In following these texts, one also learns that those who make judgments about others are per se depicted as problematic subjects. They suggest that this anti-judgmentalist attitude should be common-sense knowledge. While some of the texts also accept judging as a natural human tendency, based on the need to compare oneself to others, they argue that those who judge uninhibitedly are in a sense pathological.¹⁸ They are criticized for projecting their own feelings and needs onto others, and for being unmindful, over-hasty, or superficial – and therefore unjust. But while it is clear, within this logic, that judgmental people are problematic people, the BuzzFeed article also warns of potentially paradoxical effects of thinking through the problematic of judging *in an overly judgmental manner* in reference to one's own self: “Be forgiving to yourself if you have a bad conscience because you judge others. To criticize someone else and then judge yourself for it is a psychic muddle that you don't need!”

While such second-order dilemmas can be seen as amusing, we do not intend to ridicule this discourse here, but to better understand its implications. It has become clear already from this brief overview that the psychological pathologization of “judging” suggests an ego-centered view of human relations and responsibilities: The ability to solve problems relies primarily on one's own capacities and training; it is suggested that it is better to work out problems on your own instead of having arguments with others – or a public debate about them. In that sense, it can be seen a symptom and conveyor not just of a broad sociocultural trend of “therapeutization” (Maasen et al. 2011), but of a neoliberal culture (Hall and O'Shea 2013) that is pervaded by selves that are schooled in reflexive psychological knowledge. The blurring of the lines between judgments of taste and aesthetics, personal and idiosyncratic aversions, and classic tropes of morality, is particularly important in this context. In this logic and in this rhetoric, which is often apodictic, the taboo of judging tends to be understood as a generalized maxim that should be applied to all sorts of circumstances. These texts propagate a generalized ethic of non-normativity and also of non-engagement. This non-engagement and the concomitant abdication of responsibility are the libertarian flipside of an anti-judgmentalism that defends the integrity of the self. As therapeutic vernacular would put it: “you do you!”

18 A common, but usually unspoken reference point are psychological concepts from “social comparison theory” (Festinger 1954), which are standard elements of (academic) psychology curricula. According to Festinger, there is a human drive to evaluate each other's abilities and opinions. Comparing oneself to others is a way of determining how individuals fit with certain groups of people and, more broadly speaking, it is a means by which oneself finds a place in the world.

Having sketched these discursive strands and briefly alluded to their political implications, we now turn to anti-judgmentalism during the COVID-19 pandemic, for which these strands provide context and resonance. We will look at German-language newspaper articles, including opinion pieces and more subjective-introspective text genres, during the first year of the pandemic.¹⁹

The “Don’t Judge” Theme in Diagnostics of the Present Moment during the Coronavirus Pandemic

In an opinion piece in the newspapers of the Tamedia group in Switzerland in summer 2021, author Andreas Kurz warned of a coming “*Corona-Apartheid*.”²⁰ The piece is presented as a liberal-conservative take on the pandemic, in line with the country’s liberal tradition. Kurz opposes the policy proposals brought forth by the people whom the author calls “the over-cautious,” such as requiring vaccination certificates as a prerequisite for using public transportation or entering restaurants and other semi-public spaces. The author goes on to argue that as there are people who have good reasons for not wanting to be vaccinated, there should be no policies that result in disadvantages for the unvaccinated: “These are legitimate opinions which one shouldn’t judge (*die man nicht verurteilen sollte*). Firstly, because it is bad form in a democratic society (*weil es sich ... in einer demokratischen Gesellschaft nicht gehört*). And secondly, because it does not work, as the hardening of debates in recent weeks has shown.” The presentations of these matters in the anonymous third person is typical here: speakers/authors of such texts often present observations (or speculations) about the ways in which others, mostly nameless “everyday people,” perceive unfair judgments – usually without citing empirical evidence that supports their argument.

Why has the author chosen the term “*verurteilen*” that primarily denotes moral condemnation? Implicitly, the argument claims that “the overcautious” propose a direct path from their own moral judgments (about others) to legal rules, but that those moral judgments are spurious and even categorically illegitimate: in a democracy, opinions one disagrees with (at least within a certain corridor) *should not be morally condemned*. This is not a self-evident argument: Many people will feel that some political opinions are indeed morally wrong (as, for example, adhering to them

19 Articles were collected through a search for “Corona” and “verurteilen” (starting in February of 2020) in the LexisNexis newspaper database in September 2021. The sources cited here represent themes collected from this set.

20 Andreas Kurz, *Eine Corona-Apartheid darfes nicht geben*, Kommentar, *Der Tagesanzeiger* (and other Tamedia newspapers), July 24, 2021.

may – like in the Coronavirus case – lead to avoidable deaths). The argument is, however, reminiscent of a prominent strand of writings in German-language political philosophy and theory opposed to “political moralism” (some prominent examples: Gehlen 2004; Kosselleck 1979; Lübke 1985; 2019; Cappenberger Gespräch et al. 1985; Luhmann 2008a) that has been revived in recent years, especially on the political right and among self-described post-left “realists” (Grau 2017; Stegemann 2018; Bolz 2021).²¹ In this realm, moral discourses are seen as simplifying complex institutional matters into theology-derived distinctions between good and evil, which necessitate arguments *ad personam* (i.e., from a moralist perspective, good or evil positions are almost inevitably taken by good or evil persons) that are strongly judgmental. Furthermore, from this self-described realist, anti-moralist perspective, moralism is “polemogenous” (Luhmann 2008a), it creates strife because moral absolutism precludes compromise and a sober negotiation of interests.

Whether or not one finds these arguments compelling, it is notable that the author chooses to shift his article onto a (meta-)level reminiscent of that debate in the first place. His argument moves the political debate onto the level of a debate over the legitimacy of moral judgments in general. At the same time, its main thrust concerns government policies, i.e., *legally* binding prescriptions. These can (and, one may add, should) of course be supported by moral arguments, but they are nevertheless different in character, as is the political process of putting them in place. After all, the most pressing political question in that situation could arguably be whether such certificates were in themselves useful and legitimate policy, not whether in calling for such policies, people were making overly moral arguments. A first observation about the “don’t judge” theme in this context, then, is that anti-judgmentalists like this author move the framework from discussions of actual policy to questions about the tactfulness (or legitimacy) of moral arguments in general.²²

This discursive strand involves loose phenomenological observations as well as references to more codified forms of psychological knowledge. Maja Beckers, writing for *Die Zeit* in the fall of 2020, observes a new type of sentiment in public life which she terms “*Corona-Scham*”: in her perception, there are now many cases where showing symptoms such as coughing in public means “being in danger” of “being judged as not cautious enough” (*läuft Gefahr, als unvorsichtig verurteilt zu werden*) in everyday situations. This is seen as problematic and unfair; in typical fashion, the argument is supported by anecdotal narratives about the author’s emotional experience.

21 Some of this – including Gehlen’s work – goes back to the works of Carl Schmitt, the fascist legal theorist and critic of liberalism. However, there is a much longer (and international) genealogy of such arguments that involves (politically ambiguous, but often conservative) arguments such as Burke’s critique of anti-traditionalist universalism and Hegel’s critique of Kant’s ethics.

22 On tact as a necessary suspension of moral demands, cf. Luhmann 2008b.

The term “*Corona-Scham*” (probably best translated as “Corona shame” or “embarrassment”) implies both unfair judgments and a vague but powerful sense of internalized self-aggression.²³ It thereby evokes popularized psychological concepts such as ego-ideal, super-ego or the guilty conscience.

Aversions to being judged are part of a broader landscape of negative feelings that merge and articulate with “aversive sentiments” of a stronger political character. The “don't judge” theme is a specific strand here. The fact that the problem of suffering under others' moral judgments becomes assigned to all sorts of situations and groups during the Coronavirus pandemic through such narrations suggests that it is indeed part of an important contemporary (moral) *structure of feeling* (Williams 1961; 1973). Furthermore, this section has shown that the theme is not only present in everyday language and informal talk, but it is also evoked by professional intellectuals of various kinds. Specialists in “diagnostics of the present moment” (*Zeitdiagnosen*) take up this theme, and they do so in ways that often seem rhetorically and politically strategic. Their empirical claims about psychological-political dynamics are not necessarily self-evident – which is not to say that they are all-around counterfactual. What matters more here is that they potentially have performative effects, providing resources for and guiding everyday narrations. Overall, we are witnessing a process in which articulations between everyday affects, identities and political projects are being established and “common sense” is being shaped and negotiated both on a cognitive-discursive and affective-emotional level.

Critics of judgmentalism in this vein, then, depict demands for specific policies as unrealistic, hypocritical, and morally overdemanding and exhausting, and in doing so, they also claim to refer to common-sense knowledge about the proper place of morality in life.

Don't Judge Me: A Lifeworld Perspective on Anti-Judgmentalism(s) in Hedonistic Youth Cultural Contexts

In the next section, we move from public discourses to everyday experience and to common-sense narratives and reflections. How do anti-judgmentalist complaints about the “injustice” of judgmentalism during the Coronavirus pandemic resonate in life-world contexts?

To think through these questions, we draw on Julian Schmitzberger's case study about the world of club cultures among people mainly in their 20s and 30s in Berlin,

23 The article “teaser” claims very broad societal relevance for that observation: “A feeling comes to be in charge of social control” (*Zeit Online*, 13. Oktober 2020). The term is reminiscent of the neologism *Flugscham*, which refers to the feeling of guilt that is connected to air travel due to its impact on the world's climate.

Germany.²⁴ We chose this field for pragmatic reasons and as an exploratory case. Obviously, this scene does not represent the social attitudes of the population more broadly. However, our interest in the overall theme of anti-judgmentalism was piqued here: in interviews conducted with club-goers living in Berlin during the pandemic, research participants repeatedly brought up this topic without having been prompted by the interviewer. For exploratory research, the case is particularly interesting because of the apparent tensions between a hedonistic orientation – partying – prevalent here and the nature of the moral demands during the pandemic. As we will show, anti-judgmentalism does indeed resonate here, but in more differentiated ways than could be expected from a reading of public discourses alone. To illustrate and thickly describe these dynamics and to place them in their life-world contexts, we will introduce Fabian, a university student, Lena, also a student, and Marie, an actor.²⁵ As will become clear, all three perceive a pervasive societal judgmentalism and are highly critical of it – and of moralist attitudes more broadly. They tend to reflect on these matters in a searching mode that accommodates contradictions – but at times fall into a rather apodictic tone as well. While criticizing others' overreaching moral judgments in a generalizing manner, they also make highly moral statements themselves, producing an ambiguous position between moralization and anti-moralism. The implications of these statements, however, are very different – and in this, they point to different forms of anti-judgmentalism that, we suggest, contribute to the landscape of common sense in the current conjuncture.

24 As part of his ethnographic research project on club cultures and nightlife, Schmitzberger planned and conducted 25 interviews with partygoers from Berlin during the acute phase of the pandemic between November 2020 and February 2021. Due to the legal measures which banned cultural events, he contacted his research participants via social media, especially Instagram and Facebook. The interviews took place in a private atmosphere and collected data on how clubbing is experienced and thought of as well as how club-goers dealt with the COVID-19 crisis in particular. Although the conversations were based on a guideline which included a broad range of topics, they were not structured in a strict manner and must be imagined as guided but "organic" dialogues. This narrative approach is meant to guarantee that interviewees can formulate thoughts and views in an open manner; the dialogical aspect also implies that interview statements do more than "reflect" pre-formed thoughts. The following interview quotes have been translated from German by the authors.

25 We use first names here because this reflects the informal atmosphere during the interviews. Those three interviewees are not the only ones who referred to forms of (anti-)judgmentalism. The following passages must be seen as case studies that exemplify general cultural dynamics. Among the things that set these interviewees apart from many other people, however, are their age, urban residence, their high level of education and their orientation to a hedonistic lifestyle.

Fabian, the Anti-Moralist

When Fabian takes a seat on the couch for an interview about clubbing in Berlin, it is late December 2020. A lockdown to reduce the spread of COVID-19 has been in force in Germany for almost two months. Public life is heavily restricted, though the protective measures are not as severe as they had been in the first lockdown from March to May of the same year. Businesses that aren't part of the country's critical infrastructure must remain closed. Keeping physical distance remains the main goal of official epidemiological policies. According to newly introduced legislation, only two people from a maximum of two households are allowed to meet in private. In the beginning of the interview, Fabian talks about his plans for New Year's Eve. He seems to be of two minds: on the one hand, a party he's heard of – which will be in violation of the regulations – attracts him strongly. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, he went out clubbing almost every weekend. "It's going to be lit. Dancing on three floors in a squatted house, somewhere on the outskirts of Berlin," he says. "Real underground shit." On the other hand, he also points out that it is selfish and "irresponsible" to attend such an event during a pandemic that is life-threatening to some. He might go there, he ponders, but then he would feel ashamed – even if he measured his temperature in advance and did a rapid test. As the interview progresses, the self-avowedly hedonistic twenty-year-old gives a detailed and lively report on an unauthorized rave (one out of two) he hosted this year, during the pandemic, in a forest somewhere in the adjacent state of Brandenburg. He had no reservations when he was organizing the event. "After all, the case numbers were very low at that time," he says with confidence.

The second interview with Fabian takes place in January 2021, about three weeks later. The lockdown is still in effect and the COVID-19 death toll has reached its historic high. Fabian didn't go the New Year's Eve party he was speaking of the last time – primarily for pragmatic reasons. "We didn't get the GPS location until six-thirty in the evening, so we didn't feel like it anymore," he says at the beginning of the conversation. Instead, he celebrated in a small circle of good friends. He seems quite content, speaking of getting up early on New Year's Day to jog while listening to a good DJ set playing through his headphones. The pandemic has given him the chance to read more books, to get enough sleep and to cope with his everyday life, as he puts it. However, even though Fabian appears to be fine with New Year's Eve not having been a big night out, his inner turmoil has not ended. He seems to have a hard time distancing himself from the magnetic world of clubbing and claims he would spend a hundred Euros to be able to go to his favorite club if that were possible.

Then, quite suddenly, he changes the subject to the way he deals with the current situation. Fabian states that he complies with the latest government policies, at least to a large extent:

In principle, I only see only one person at a time. I'm meeting a lot of people over-all but almost everyone I know does so. All of us stick by the rules for the most part, but no one is trying to be perfect, you know. Otherwise, you'd go nuts, that's for sure. Don't get me wrong. I don't want to start a debate about righteous behavior during COVID. I just want to tell you how I do it. I won't let anybody judge me either (*Ich lass mich dafür auch nicht verurteilen*). I've already come to blows with others who'd say things like: "That's so unnecessary. Try to limit your contacts." And I was like: "Yo, sorry not sorry. Who are you to tell me how to live my life?" I keep following the rules, most of the time. Maybe not on New Year's, but nevertheless.

Fabian says that he does not want to be judged – i.e., morally condemned – for planning to invite a few friends over for his birthday this week, either, even though, strictly speaking, this would violate legal measures. Like many others, at this point in the pandemic he has established an ambiguous position towards the rules, going back and forth between rule-following and -breaking. He resents that many people consider him “egotistic” for meeting up with groups of others: “I think it’s absolutely insincere that everyone is suddenly running around acting like utilitaristic do-gooders (*utilitaristische Gutmenschen*).” Reflecting on these matters in the second interview, Fabian talks himself into a rage – and begins a monologue about moral contradictions. His arguments are addressed to an undefined, imaginary counterpart (not the interviewer), switching back and forth between defending his stance and going onto the offensive, attacking others’ hypocrisy. Fabian criticizes that it is considered socially acceptable to buy clothes at fast fashion brands like Primark or SHEIN: “If a garment factory in Bangladesh collapses, everyone is like ‘Oh, my god!’ but two weeks later, they’re walking into a store to buy a new top.” Whilst others leave these everyday habits unquestioned, he claims to at least feel remorse when succumbing to them occasionally. Fabian is a vegetarian – for ethical reasons, not because he does not like to eat meat. Even if he boards a plane for a flight once a year, he at least does so having “calculated” the downside effects for the environment, he states. He argues that his conscience weighs more heavily on him when he buys ice cream at McDonald’s than when he organizes an open-air rave during a pandemic. To him, any allegations in this regard seem “ridiculous” and presumptuous: “Those people wear outfits by H&M, they just had a *Wiener Würstchen* and then they judge you (*verurteilen dich*) because you did two raves. This simply doesn’t add up.”²⁶ Fabian’s spontaneous rant ends with a small concession – and unexpected sympathy for those who may turn against him:

26 These are everyday consumption choices that, seen through the lens of claims to social justice and environmental protection, have long been publicly defined as morally problematic (Thompson 2012; Milkman 2017).

It's ok if people judge me (*Ich kann es auch verstehen, wenn Leute mich verurteilen*). I get it, totally. I don't think they're stupid. Probably, they could be right, but we still live in an individualistic world – take it or leave it. I don't claim that everything I do is advisable or righteous. I just know if something's worth doing. In this respect, it's all about me and maintaining my wellbeing.²⁷

Fabian's tirade and its ambiguities situate the demands for "good" behavior during this exceptional time in the context of a broader, contradictory "moralization" of everyday life – in spheres such as shopping, food, and mobility. Reflections like Fabian's are, as we have shown, enmeshed in a range of public discourses on (anti-)moralism, taking up the unclarity of the role of morality in everyday life that theorists like Grossberg and Brown see as typical for the ways in which the present conjuncture is experienced. His statements present high moral standards and a concern for global injustices on the one hand and a radically individualistic rejection of moral demands on the other. Referring to maintaining his wellbeing can be seen as a symptom of the diffusion of therapeutic self-help culture. At the same time, public debates about the effects of epidemiological policies which included social distancing measures were often also framed in terms of psychology. Commentators warned about the risks of permanently damaging the mental health of youth if they cannot meet in groups or in person – Fabian's reasonings echo these discussions as well.

Furthermore, in these arguments and narrations, he enacts a performative shift similar to what we have seen in the case of the journalist who frames public debates about COVID-19 as arguments about the status of morality in general: Instead of spelling out the potential implications of illegal raves, Fabian talked about others' hypocrisy and his own moral weariness and the societal context of individualism. His stance illustrates how such ethical "problematizations" of everyday routines (Collier and Lakoff 2005) challenge individuals and their self-image as moral beings, spur their reflexivity, and produce numerous contradictions and inconsistencies – as well as observations on and heated discussions about them. In speaking about these matters, Fabian presents himself as a reluctant individualist, a realist who understands his own needs as well as societal hypocrisy, and a reflexive, morally motivated, but also pragmatic and morally exhausted self. While he is obviously torn in

27 Fabian also claims that his social environment, by which, it seems, he primarily means his family, perceives a difference in the way the pandemic is handled between West Germans, whom he classifies as strict believers in authority, and East Germans, who rather tend to resist the legal measures, as he says. Essentially, the self should be responsible for its own actions, not the state. "You have to find out for yourself which rule to follow and which to break, but break it if you need to. We live in a free country," his East German family members allegedly instructed him.

different directions, exemplifying the heterogeneity of common sense, his admonishment that people should not pretend to have ethical ambitions beyond radical individualism, that they should “take it or leave it” (i.e., affirm individualist logics overall or reject them overall), exemplifies a – perhaps surprisingly – authoritarian variant of defensive-hedonistic anti-moralism. The stance is reminiscent of what Amlinger and Nachtwey (2021, 13) term “libertarian authoritarianism,” a stance that combines individualism with an aggressive disregard for the needs of vulnerable societal groups.

In contrast to this position, our last section we will highlight another version of anti-judgmentalism that is prevalent in some club cultures. In talking about clubs and dancing and narrating its meanings for their biographies, several interviewees, predominantly women, consistently stressed the importance of not judging and not being judged. Moralistic normativity is seen as oppressive, especially in the realms of gender and sexuality, and defined as an obstacle for individual happiness and societal progress that should be overcome. In doing so, these interviewees also speak about what they were missing during the Coronavirus pandemic, and they provide another example for the prevalence of anti-judgmentalist attitudes in the present conjuncture.

Lena and Marie: Dancing without Judgments, Club Cultures as Safe Spaces

As mentioned above, the verb *judgen*, the German-language anglicism derived from “to judge,” has become quite common in German-speaking youth cultures. For some clubgoers, the term is closely tied to the notion of *safe* or *safer spaces*: as something like their antonym. The contrast between those terms is key for defining the cultural norms of venues that represent a certain vision of “authentic” club culture. Many clubgoers see this ethic of clubbing as an oppositional order that stands in stark contrast to prevailing norms of everyday life and societal normativity. As Lena, a 22-year-old social law student, puts it in an interview, a proper club is “a safe space” (*ein Safe Space*), and as such, “a place where you can be yourself and let it all out, without any restrictions – where you can be who you are without being judged” (*ein Ort, wo du dich ausleben kannst, wie du bist, ohne Restriktionen – dass man frei sein kann, so wie man ist, ohne gejudgt zu werden*). Safe spaces, seen as places where certain ethical rules of communication and behavior apply, offer a temporary “solution” to the problem of being judged by others, both on a discursive and an affective level.²⁸ During the

28 The history of the concept “safe space” can be traced back to gay and lesbian movements in Los Angeles of the 1960s. At that time, the expression referred to gay bars where one could seek refuge from police violence as well as spaces in which activists could gather to form political alliances to organize themselves against patriarchal and heteronormative power struc-

pandemic, it is not least these non-judgmental spaces that interviewees like Lena painfully lacked.

Club cultures in the disco, house and techno veins have traditionally been associated with freedom and mutual tolerance, especially for women and sexual minorities. One could argue that those signifiers are, amongst other things, produced and regulated by emotions such as the feeling of (not) being judged. Entering the realm of “true” club culture – rather than mainstream “discos” – for the first time is often described by aficionados as a process in which one learns to be “open minded,” and break down one’s own prejudices and is in turn “accepted” by others, as Lena puts it.²⁹ For her, the club is a safe space not only because people tolerate each other but also because she can safely consume drugs. This illustrates how the notion of safe space is not limited to “classic” forms of discrimination. On the other hand, not being judged (*nicht gejudgt werden*), which is fundamental to her vision of safe spaces, is reflected in the looks that others give her, the ways in which people dance with each other and the fact that “people simply leave you in peace.” In this case, not being judged is less about verbal communication than it is about patterns of (sexualized) interaction and the perception of the gaze and the classificatory schemata and rankings of others.

Another excerpt from an interview can exemplify this dynamic. Marie, an actor in her thirties, talks about one of the first times she went to a club where a sex-positive event was taking place. She describes her experience as an epiphany: “I danced myself to ecstasy. Everyone being naked, sweaty bodies all around me. I could feel the bass, this amazing beat. I really thought, I’ve been enlightened (*erleuchtet*). [...] I didn’t worry if my breasts are too small, if my butt is too big, no. I could let it all go, completely.” Marie believes that she gained a new form of self-confidence in this moment of sudden insight. Through dancing, she explored “her sexuality” and was able to “get to know my body in a completely new way,” as she says. In retrospect, it was this exact moment that helped her stop judging herself.

The atmosphere of clubbing and the pronounced non-normativity that is a norm in certain clubs can be best described by pointing to what potentially disrupts them. As Marie moves on with her story, she talks about a group of young women – “girlies”

tures. Early safe spaces have been described as variants of feminist consciousness-raising groups (Kenney 2001). Starting from the mid-2010s, the concept gained popularity through debates about safe spaces on college campuses, primarily in the English-speaking world (MacKinnon 2018). Academic safe spaces are safe in the sense that they are meant to be places for marginalized or vulnerable groups. They are intended to prevent acts of hate speech, but also to avoid more subtle forms of potential harm sometimes called microaggressions.

- 29 The distinction between the supposedly “true” club culture and mere mainstream discos is not an objective representation of the field of nightlife scenes, but rather a “partial truth” and an expression of a specific position within this field (a classic analysis of related dynamics can be found in Thornton [1995]).

(*Mädels*), she says³⁰ – who did not adhere to the codes of nightlife she herself has learned. Marie disapproves of them for visually “scanning” others and “comparing” themselves to these others. She interprets their looks and gestures and equates them with discriminatory behavior based on perceptions of age, physical handicaps, or body types:

I've been observing those girls who were constantly doing this [she takes her hand and throws her hair back], clinging to their handbags, looking around – you can tell, if people are scanning you or if they compare themselves to you. I could tell by looking at them. That really bugged me. This is not a zoo! Well, there is some 60-year-old with a 60-year-old dick, yes. Deal with it. *Don't judge!* [...] I think, you should stop yourself a bit from making judgments, generally (*Ich glaube, man sollte ein bisschen die Wertung rausnehmen aus allem*). The pleasant thing about KitKat [a club] is that you see a range of people, of different bodies, young and old. For quite a while there has been a guy in a wheelchair. That's the reason why it is a *safe space*. You really shouldn't judge (*Man sollte wirklich nicht urteilen*). It's not exclusively for girls with bodies shaped like a model. [...] Once, I've met a woman, about my age, who was flirting with me that night. She must have weighted more than 200 pounds – she was so hot, so sexy, so self-confident. Somehow, I was attracted to her. I can't imagine that this is the same in other clubs where other rules apply.

Here, to judge by appearances in a conventional sense, and to value or devalue others accordingly, is equated with discriminatory behavior and “lookism” (Tietje and Cressap 2005). Marie claims that people who have learned not to judge have overcome this and have reached a higher stage of enlightenment. “Don't judge!” – spoken in English – is presented as a general maxim that helps to transcend oppressive societal norms. These norms are of different kinds, but they have a similar anti-empiricist logic. Marie's use of the phrase and her narrative of an epiphany clearly have a feminist sound. Her narrative of her learning process was not so much about self-exploration as an active confrontation with her own personality – the dominant theme in many self-help guides. Rather, it was the sense of not being evaluated and judged (*beurteilt*, primarily) by others that opened a new space for redefining and enjoying herself. In contrast to Fabian's rejection of judgmental moralism during the coronavirus pandemic, and the rhetoric of newspaper commentary, her admonition “don't judge” is less about a rejection of potential accusations from people with whom she generally shares crucial moral norms, but about establishing an actual social and spatial figuration in which values such as tolerance and mutual respect take shape – and in which “better” moral norms prevail.

30 The wording – including the reference to handbags – and argument are closely reminiscent of Thornton's analysis.

While it may seem that Marie is concerned purely with rejecting (or even condemning) *aesthetic* judgments about attractiveness, a closer reading shows that moral norms in a very classic sense play a prominent role here as well: by learning not to judge others and herself, she overcomes norms restricting promiscuity and fostering heteronormativity – basic cornerstones of “traditional” morality. In that sense, she argues – in a generalized fashion, too – against judgments that adhere to a traditional morality that she sees as limiting and discriminatory, and in favor of a stance that could also be described as rationalistic, universalistic, and opposed to all forms of discrimination. There is a utopian political quality to such statements, an idea of societal progress being foreshadowed, even if it remains unclear whether the delineated sphere of nightlife with its temporary “heterotopias” (Foucault 1986) will really prefigure “better” and – in this sense – non-judgmental worlds more broadly. While there is no direct connection to public health policies during the pandemic, this kind of ethic seems to easily segue into a discourse centered around notions of mutual care.

Discussion

We do not, however, suggest making a systematic and straightforward comparison between these case studies from club culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. The frame of reference in Fabian's narration on the one hand and Marie's and Lena's on the other remains different: whereas the latter speak about certain clubs as spaces in which an egalitarian, non-judgmental ethic is lived, Fabian explicitly reflects on moral dilemmas during the COVID pandemic and everyday life in general. We also do not intend to make claims about the actual political orientations of Fabian, Marie and Lena. Rather, we have used their statements to ideal-typically exemplify different logics and for showing different ways in which subjects position themselves towards the problematic of being judged.

Fabian takes recourse to living in an individualistic society and claims his right to a “realistic,” common-sense individualism (“take it or leave it”) that may be harmful to others but, in his view, fits with the reality of a society whose rules are set by competitive individualism. He questions others' authority – neither do they know enough nor are they without fault. He also, importantly, points out the disconnect between “moralized” fields, especially those of consumption and social distancing, and less moralized fields, and highlights that – if one takes morality seriously – ethical-political convictions should not stop at the borders of those delineated areas. This enables him to point out others' hypocrisies. He creates a personal balance sheet of ethical decisions. While his reflections are in many ways idiosyncratic, his critique of judgmental moralism resonates with discursive interventions by journalists and public intellectuals who partake in the mediated construction of common sense.

On the other side, the two advocates for the concept of safe spaces present a stance in which traditional morality and judgments harm some, especially (historically) devalued groups, and limit others from reaching personal freedom. Therefore, judging (*urteilen*, *beurteilen* and *verurteilen*) is also seen as wrong in a generalized way. Overcoming this, however, can only be achieved through responsiveness to others' needs and through mutual attunement for which some club cultures offer a concrete utopia. Theirs is a stance against being judgmental that many critics of (politically progressive, universalistic) "moralism" would find *particularly moralistic*: here, not to judge demands a radical break with many aspects of traditional morality and the everyday normativity built upon it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we surveyed anti-judgmentalism as a cultural theme that crosses different discursive fields. During the coronavirus pandemic, this took on a particular urgency: many people felt that the moral climate was getting harsher. However, as we have shown, the pandemic was neither the origin of nor the only reason for such developments. Since the term "to judge" and its German-language equivalences are semantically vague, we analyzed the components of their usage. Having identified and surveyed different strands in public discourses and the narratives of clubgoers during the Corona virus pandemic, we summarize that although these terms are semantically slippery and their usages are far from consistent, they share certain features which have become engrained in common sense ways of speaking about morality and its limits.

It is worth noting that the anti-judgmentalist reasonings presented by the people quoted here overlap with arguments made against moralism by moral philosophers, for example concerning the judgmental moralist's typical disregard for non-moral reasons for actions and their potential legitimacy.³¹ However, our exploration goes beyond this literature in a number of ways: for one, in our analysis, anti-judgmentalism is as much a heterogeneous assemblage of citations, beliefs, sentiments and interpersonal relationships – a form of common sense – as it is a set of clear-cut arguments. Its evocation blurs the distinction between ethical-political, aesthetic, performance- or conventions-related critiques – all of them are presented as illegitimate judgments from which a fragile, vulnerable self must be protected. The supposed wrongness of judging is therefore claimed to be *felt* emotionally as much as it is recognized intellectually. To put it more broadly: the discourse on anti-moralism in general and anti-judgmentalism in specific tends to contextualize political debates through a (political) psychology of morality and moral sentiments.

31 Cf. the summary in Neuhäuser and Seidel (2020).

Our survey of this cultural theme has also shown – at least in an exploratory fashion – how anti-judgmentalist attitudes are articulated with a specific sociopolitical conjuncture, and it has hinted at how they contribute to it. Our analysis thereby provides both an update and a concreteness – as a piece in a puzzle – that is lacking in larger-scale diagnoses by cultural theorists like Brown, Grossberg or Gilbert about the unclarity of the relation of ethics and politics in the contemporary conjuncture and the contradictoriness of moral rigorism and systemic complicity prevalent therein. There also is a technological side to this: social media worlds are pervaded by quick classifications, evaluations, comparisons. Platform designs afford and encourage a specific range of quasi-judgmental practices such as liking, rating, swiping, commenting. Similar tendencies pertain to the field of work, where indicators for the comparison and ranking of employee performance have in many cases been formalized electronically (Fourcade 2016; Groth 2019). Arguably, echoes of this can be heard in the interviewees' reflections on being judged.

Adding to conjunctural analysis, our investigation also shows that the anti-judging verdict has become articulated with different sociopolitical identities and projects – even if they are not fully formed and determined, which is itself an important point that suggests a certain (ethical-political) openness among people like the interviewees. Simplifying gradual matters, it can be said that the harsh and resentful rejection of moral interpellations during the pandemic *as overdemanding* tends to align with (broadly right-wing) populist and libertarian rhetoric, which can also link to seemingly anti-authoritarian subcultures and scenes (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022), whereas the rejection of morality (and its demands) *as traditionalist morality* leans left(-liberal).

At this point, it is worth remembering that for conjunctural analysts such as Grossberg and Brown, the much-criticized “moralization” of public life – whether it is understood as an actual tendency or a discursive construction, whether it is supported or objected to – should be contextualized in a historical situation where there is wide-spread disillusion or even cynicism towards larger-scale, straightforwardly political strategies for societal transformation and emancipation. This skepticism also pertains among many people who are generally critical of the status quo. In such a situation, individualized and individualizing moral interpellations are plausible at least in part because other strategies for social transformation seem inaccessible and unrealistic. In that sense, the popularity of the “don't judge”-theme is a symptom of the uncertainties that Grossberg and Brown have written about, and it illustrates two emergent ways for navigating through these dilemmas. The immediate COVID crisis, however, represented an exceptional state of moralization where moral demands – and subsequent judgments – were less about broad questions of (in-)justice and social transformation than about a clear and limited goal of halting the virus's spread.

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