

CORPOREAL POLITICS, PANDEMICS, AND AFFLUENT DEMOCRACY

In spring 2020, as the Covid pandemic was spreading through Europe, many European countries instituted 'lockdowns' to stem the virus's spread. Governments created legal measures to ensure cooperation. Police enforced these measures by issuing tickets, often in surprising and sometimes intrusive ways. In German cities people responded by going on unregistered 'walks', sometimes called *Spaziergänge*, to demonstrate against the Covid measures they saw as anti-democratic. Later demonstrations would be officially registered with the government and would become politically polarized¹ using Covid as a backdrop to debate other issues. But these initial walks and gatherings were loose assemblies of several to a few hundred people from diverse backgrounds and ages. As one interlocutor told me during one walk, *"Alle sind hier zusammen, Links, Rechts, Konservativ. Wir spazieren für die Demokratie. Wir spazieren für die Freiheit."*

In response to these actions, riot and local police were regularly dispatched in large numbers to monitor people and enforce legal consequences. But then something unexpected happened: On a sunny, spring day, Minister President of Saxony Michael Kretschmer peddled his bike across the bridge over the Elbe River to the Große Garten where a protest action was taking place. He spent an hour and a half talking with disgruntled citizens and emphasizing the importance of democratic exchange. Kretschmer defended these people who were critical of his government: he saw these actions as forms of freedom of assembly and expression, even though his government, in alliance with Merkel's federal government, restricted freedom of assembly during this Covid period. In essence, Kretschmer upheld the rights of these people to gather, even though his government had revoked that right during Covid and claimed they were acting democratically.

After this initial response, government officials and politicians began meeting extensively with estranged citizens in various settings. A few hundred relatively privileged protestors seemed to force discussions with the highest state leaders; they achieved responses by politicians *without* formally organizing. Of course, during past crises in Saxony, Kretschmer and his government ministers have met with citizens in structured,

1 Loveday Morris and Luisa Beck, Germany's protests against coronavirus restrictions are becoming increasingly radical, in: *Washington Post*, 12 November 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/germany-coronavirus-lockdown-protests/2020/11/12/3e9879ea-2422-11eb-9c4a-0dc6242c4814_story.html. Accessed 24 Nov 2020.

state-directed meetings. This design would later be mimicked by government officials during the Covid situation, but the initial gatherings I describe here preceded such organized state response, evident by Kretschmer's spontaneous visit to the Großer Garten in casual, weekend clothes, riding his bike, without a mask and not adhering to his government's physical distancing regulations. The entire production was a display of affluent democracy, where already-privileged citizens engage with reigning government ministers to perform democracy. That is the crux of this article: the point where the instability created by pandemics produces platforms on which advantaged citizens and state arbiters perform democratic imaginaries in symbiotic actions where privilege reaps privilege. I examine how viruses and pandemics irradiate the politics of privilege, acting as a sieve for affluence and reproducing already empowered citizens through mutually constitutive performances of democracy-making by politicians and people. While politicians' engagement with constituents is generally commendable, protestors capitalized on the initial instability of a new and locally experienced pandemic in such a way that rehearsed common democratic practices and confirmed relative affluence. Politicians also participated in the political theater, thus legitimizing the participants and themselves. In contrast, other protest actions during 2020 that were registered, such as *Querdenken* and Black Lives Matter, received limited to no attention or received negative attention. While many participants likely engaged in both *Querdenken* and the protests I describe here, the protests I analyze were not official *Querdenken* demonstrations. Contrasted to the lack of response to other 2020 demonstrations, the quantity and quality of government responses to these informal and unregistered walks legitimated the democratic nature of the participants and their actions; politicians' engagement with 'democratic' participants, in turn, avowed the 'democratic' nature of the rather exceptional Covid government. In this sense, these actions and responses became narratives of circular affirmation. The participants were already idealized, democratic citizens, but local and regional government leaders avowed participants' democratic nature, as if this status had been, or somehow could be, called into question. By engaging with 'democratic' citizens, government leaders and politicians were, in turn, democratically legitimated.

The term 'walks' should be understood loosely. Sometimes, these protest actions involved walking, but more often, they entailed white people lingering and inhabiting places such as parks and squares that, according to Covid regulations, were supposed to remain uninhabited. In the initial weeks of the lockdown, the German government had forbidden outside gatherings of more than two people from the same household. These actions – the unofficial gatherings – challenged the efficacy and justification of the government's decisions, particularly regarding the right to assemble.

In this article, I focus on some initial, unofficial gatherings that took place in Saxony, Germany at the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020 and continued until the more stringent lockdown measures ended in May 2020. I first position the relative privilege of these protestors and then frame participants' concerns within personal (or inherited) experiences of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In the final section, I examine narratives of protest actions, highlighting three strategies of corporeal politics and embodied democracy – lingering, remaining silent, and singing.

Privileged protestors

The data presented in this article stands in stark contrast to research that investigates biopolitics and grassroots activism.² Such research illuminates abject suffering transected along hemispheric, racial, and socio-economic lines. My view concentrates on the other side: the northern hemispheric, white, economically secure, civically proficient, and socially loud (even in its' silence) citizen. Biehl observes, "Those occupying the upper strata of society not only live longer; their right to live longer is bureaucratically decreed or biomedically ensured through the mechanisms of the market."³ Jean Comaroff calls it "but for grace of geographical chance."⁴ Povinelli describes it as "biosocial spacing." "The geographical component of this biosocial spacing of environmental harm presupposes and constitutes the connection between race, class, and health."⁵ As Carduff writes, "Not every life and not every death are equal. Some deaths are more important than others, drawing more attention, triggering a bigger response and mobilizing more resources."⁶ These scholars point to the direct connection between social affluence, including race and geography, as governments determine which bodies to care for. The Covid pandemic, like other pandemics, illustrates the luxury of some to speak about the infringement of democratic rights rather than the lack of hospital beds, healthcare options, militarized police action, or long-term and more stringent lockdowns. The walks I describe below evidence considerable privilege – the privilege to demonstrate for rights already embodied in civic action, to use legal structures that support civil and business rights, to *choose* to be silent, to languidly defy the state in a way that makes the state and its authorities *seem* impotent, and to have the chance to live in a comparatively wealthy and healthy country.

Affluence is a relative concept that requires grounding in this context. By affluent I mean racial privilege, middle-class status, and civic proficiency. First, at the actions I attended, all were white. While one cannot conflate white bodies with socio-economic affluence, whiteness represents a generally privileged status in Germany. Germany is perceived as a country inhabited "by a 'settled' white population with age-old traditions which has secured a unique cultural status in the world."⁷ Whiteness becomes so entwined with Germanness that it remains invisible, and the term *Ausländer* is often used

2 João Biehl, Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment, in: *Social Text* 68. Vol. 19(3) 2001; Jean Comaroff, Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neoliberal Order, in: *Public Culture*. 19(2), 2007, 197-219. Elizabeth Povinelli, The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality, Duke University Press, Durham 2006; Antina Von Schnitzler, Performing dignity: Human rights, citizenship, and the techno-politics in South Africa, in: *American Ethnologist*. 41(2), 2014, 336-350.

3 Biehl, Vita (see footnote 2), p. 136.

4 Comaroff, Beyond (see footnote 2), p. 207.

5 Povinelli, Empire (see footnote 2), p. 33.

6 Carlo Carduff, What Went Wrong: Corona and the World after the Full Stop, in: *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 34(4), 2020, 467-487, p. 477.

7 Carmen Faymonville, Black Germans and Transnational Identification, in: *Callaloo*. 26(2), 2003, p. 364; see also Karein K. Goertz, Showing Her Colors: An Afro-German Writes the Blues in Black and White, in: *Callaloo*. 26(2), 2003, 306-319.

to denote a racialized Other⁸ in the absence of naming race, which was made socially inappropriate in Germany after the end of World War II.⁹ Because whiteness denotes ethnic belonging in Germany, it is often translated into civic belonging. “Non-Europeans and Other Germans are lumped into the category foreigner and are, thus, excluded from a full participation in German society.”¹⁰ Furthermore, German citizenship’s long legal history is replete with ethno-cultural exclusion interspersed by recent changes that extend legal access, but retain hindrances, to full participation in the German political community.¹¹

Further implicating the affluent positions of these walks is that many early participants of these leisurely, languid actions were in the broadly construed middle class, an admittedly slippery status to ascertain. Almost every second household in Germany is supposed to belong to the middle class. Such generous and inclusive boundaries mean that social classes do not run along the so-called collar line. Skilled ‘blue collar’ workers belong to the middle class just like more educated and highly trained ‘white collar’ workers.¹² Without personal data, I cannot be sure of every participant’s financial status, but I saw people (including some I knew) who were off-duty police officers, well-dressed parents with their children, local business owners, and students. Politicians’ fears of angering the middle class became apparent during this Covid period. Marco Buschmann, parliamentary affairs manager of the FDP, warned: „Der Zusammenhalt der deutschen Gesellschaft ist angesichts der Coronakrise beeindruckend. Doch niemand sollte sich täuschen: Lange werden sich das die Leute nicht mehr gefallen lassen. Zugespitzt formuliert: Bald könnte Revolution in der Luft liegen, wenn das so weitergeht. Stellt die deutsche Mittelschicht irgendwann fest, dass ihr Betrieb pleite, ihr Arbeitsplatz verloren oder ihr Aktiensparplan wertlos ist, dann wird sie sich radikalisieren.“¹³ Buschmann began by complimenting the cohesiveness of German society

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- 8 Eske Wollrad, *Weißsein im Widerspruch: Feministische Perspektiven auf Rassismus, Kultur and Religion*. Ulrike Helmer Verlag, Königstein/Taunus 2005, p. 12.
 - 9 Maria Alexopoulou, ‘Ausländer’ – A Racialized Concept? ‘Race’ as an Analytical Concept in Contemporary German Immigration History, in: Mahmoud Arghavan/Nicole Hirschfelder/Luvena Kopp (Hg.), *Who can speak and who is heard/hurt? Facing problems of race, racism, and ethnic diversity in the humanities in Germany*, Bielefeld 2019, S. 45-68; Andre Gingrich, Concepts of Race Vanishing, Movements of Racism Rising? Global issues and Austrian Ethnography, in: *Ethnos*. 69, 2004, 156-176.
 - 10 Ulrike Anne Müller, Far Away So Close: Race, Whiteness, and German Identity, in: *Identities*. 18:6, 2011, p. 623; see also Andreas Hieronymus/Lena Schröder, ENAR Shadow Report: Racism in Germany. http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Germany_2006.pdf.
 - 11 Jacqueline Gehring, Race, ethnicity and German identity: a media analysis of the 2010 world cup men’s national soccer team, in: *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 39:11, 2016, p. 1975; see also Ruth Mandel, *Cosmopolitan Anxieties: Turkish Challenges to Citizenship and Belonging in Germany*, Duke University Press, Durham 2008.
 - 12 Elena Erdmann et al., Wer ist Mittelschicht?, in: *Zeit Online*, 6 December 2018, <https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2018-12/mittelschicht-einkommen-deutschland>. Accessed 27 January 2021; Judith Nieheus, Die Mittelschicht in Deutschland, in: *IW-Trends*, 7 February 2017, <https://www.iwkoeln.de/studien/iw-trends/beitrag/judith-niehues-die-mittelschicht-in-deutschland-vielschichtig-und-stabil-322410.html>. Accessed 21 February 2021.
 - 13 Marco Buschmann, Droht eine Revolution der Mittelschicht?, in: *Der Spiegel*, 29 March 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/corona-krise-droht-eine-revolution-der-mittelschicht-a-b900b343-fa69-4fb6-98e2-bb0fe4e3615c>. Accessed 27 January 2021.

during the Covid pandemic, but then warned that “people” will not tolerate the restrictions for long. In this brief statement, “society” and “people” become conflated with “the middle class.” But more centrally, Buschmann presages the radicalization of the middle class, even using the term, revolution. Such a demographic, which is often imagined to be committed to democracy, disciplined, which gives back to society, and which also represents (at least on paper) almost 50% of the population, is certainly to be curated and catered to by politicians. And at the first signs of potential rage and “radicalization” of the middle class, these middle-class participants did receive responses from political leaders.

These protestors displayed a relatively high level of civic proficiency. For instance, some demonstrators carried pocket copies of the *Grundgesetz* while others wrote on signs *Grundgesetz* articles that the government had infringed. Even the methods of protesting challenged boundaries between legal and illegal action. These actions generally stayed, sometimes barely, within the Covid ordinances. The civic proficiency of these participants was also evident in the presumed apolitical nature of these actions, which provided additional leverage. Once the demonstrations became officially registered under political organizations such as *Querdenken* or Alternative for Germany (AfD), for instance, the actions lost leverage and the empathy of government leaders. But in the initial weeks, these actions remained quasi-legal and outside of political connivance, making it easy for the Minister President to defend the actions as expressions of the freedom of assembly, even though this civic right had been suspended.

The combination of whiteness-as-civic belonging and middle-class democratic suitability imparted an unspoken power on these actions that demanded to be reckoned with, especially within the context of the inception and political success of the AfD in 2014 and Pegida and similar *Bürgerbewegungen* in 2015. Protestors exhibited defiance against a government portrayed as unjust to these relatively privileged actors. In reaction, state arbiters attempted to rectify the perceived civil injustices through democratic responses – roundtables, meetings, invitations to politicians’ offices, speeches, and interactive, online events. Rather than an unracialized, apolitical, ‘radical middle class,’ these protestors and state arbiters created tandem performances of affluentially structured democracy.

GDR backgrounds

In naming such privilege, I do not discount the strong sense of injustice many interlocutors expressed. Interlocutors often told me that their rights had been violated by a government that was usurping power. Governments have considerable power despite neoliberalism, globalism, and the many other -isms assumed to steadily chip away at state sovereignty. The Covid regulations demonstrate the inherent tensions between liberal democracy and civil rights. Whether or not one agrees with the regulations, it was unnervingly fascinating how governments large and small, federal and local, could, and did, restrict people’s movements and businesses’ operations. As many minority groups already experience, democracy does not guarantee civil liberties.

Among interlocutors, personally experienced (or inherited) histories of the GDR shaped their expressed motivations for participating in these actions. Scholars may be right that the postsocialist period and the socialist “Transition” are over¹⁴ and that the memory of the socialist era is alternately kept alive by political elites to promote neoliberal policies¹⁵ and by right-wing activists to rally “narratives of a ‘loss of control.’”¹⁶ But the memory of the GDR is also fostered in everyday methods through stories, family histories, local museums, church exhibits, memes, jokes, and political action. Such tangible collective memories foster an entitlement to democracy and engender discourse of democratic *possibility*. Yet interlocutors could be extremely (and contradictorily) critical of democratic governments. As Boyer and Yurchak aptly describe it, “knowing socialism teaches you not so much to recognize the liberties of Western civil life but, rather, to pay greater attention to the West’s internal tensions, crisis points and to its own tendency toward overformalization.”¹⁷ It is these “internal tensions” that seem so obvious to former GDR citizens, who see themselves as democracy’s caretakers: *they* see the tensions and *they* see the possibilities of a democracy that is perpetually in-progress rather than a finished product. Several interlocutors said that it was the “desire to protect democracy,” built on opaque (my word) memories of the GDR, that brought people “back” onto the streets in these early Covid actions. These quotes from interlocutors should not be understood as progressive notions of radical democracy. Rather, these quotes represent a backward gaze at transitional governance, specifically that which occurred between 1989 and 1991, and describe a democracy that has not yet fully matured because it is continually threatened by an enduring GDR. “Aus ihrer Sicht ist die friedliche Revolution eine unabgeschlossene Geschichte steckengebliebener Reformimpulse. Oder, wie der Theologe Heino Falcke schrieb: ‘Sie ist unabgegolten, sie steht an unter veränderten Verhältnissen. Sie liegt vor uns. Das Gedenken weist nach vorn.’”¹⁸

The 1989 *Spaziergang* label has become an all-purposed rallying cry. Trade unions, social system reformers, Pegida, and other groups have used the label for their protests.¹⁹ These 1989 demonstrations are collective memory and accessible to even those who did not participate in the original walks three decades ago. The name invokes “ein

14 Srećko Horvat/Igor Štiks, Welcome to the Desert of Transition! Post-socialism, the European Union and a New Left in the Balkans, in: *Monthly Review*, 63, 2012, 38-48; Caroline Humphrey, Does the Category ‘Postsocialist’ Still Make Sense, in: Chris Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies Practices in Eurasia*, London 2001, p. 12-14; Christian Giordano, Transition, Transformation and Crisis: Investigating Southeast European Societies through Conceptual Expedients, in: *Ethnologia Balkanika*, 18, 2015, 27-45.

15 Liviu Chelcea/Oana Druță, Zombie socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, in: *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57:4-5, 2016, 521-544.

16 Aleksandra Lewicki, Race, Islamophobia and the politics of citizenship in post-unification Germany, in: *Patterns of Prejudice*, 52(5), 2018, 496-512, p. 499.

17 Dominic Boyer/Alexei Yurchak, American Stio: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West, in: *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(2), 2010, p. 180.

18 <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/295461/umkaempftes-erbe-zur-aktualitaet-von-1989-als-widerstand-serzaehlung>. Accessed 20 May 2021.

19 Achim Beier, „Mythos Montagsdemonstration“, in: Deutschland Archiv, 23 December 2020, <https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/deutschlandarchiv/324912/mythos-montagsdemonstration>. Accessed 8 February 2021.

authentischer Volkswille”²⁰ not influenced by political institutions. The iconic chant, “We are the people,” now operates as a free and unbounded signifier available in sovereignty disputes. As one of the few remnants of the 1989 *Spaziergänge*, the phrase, “We are the people,” elicits the continual sense of the sovereign people fighting the elites above – a romantic, if not always accurate, sentiment. The term “Spaziergang” also implies a non-threatening strategy to express a collective political will. In these and other demonstrations, “‘1989’ war die Selbstbefreiung eines gefangenen Volkes.”²¹ This is the hegemonic interpretive legacy of the 1989 demonstrations, “demzufolge sich das “gefangene Volk” selbst befreit hat. Es beherrscht nach wie vor die offizielle Erinnerungskultur.”²² The actions I describe below occurred in the context of this enduring view of 1989 and an unfinished democracy. While my thesis is that the instability of pandemics provided affluent demonstrators to access once again their privileged voice, I recognize interlocutors’ deep-rooted concerns that amid a German history of authoritarianism, German democracy may not yet be fully realized or might be threatened.

With this background of these protestors’ relative affluence and GDR histories, I share narratives of political actions, focusing on three strategies participants employed to display discontent with the Covid measures: lingering (white) bodies, silence and singing.²³

Going walking: Strategies of corporeal politics and embodied democracy

13 April 2020 - Dresden (pop. circa 555,000)

I passed through the Dresden Altstadt on my daily walk today. Despite the sunny day, the city center was deserted. The intense silence was broken by the occasional breeze blowing the limited debris in this tidy town along the cobblestones.

Even crows and pigeons seemed surprisingly absent, perhaps because there were no people with food. I tried taking photos, but how does one take pictures of a people-less city without their looking like stills from post-apocalyptic cinematography?

The statues lining the Brühlsche Terrasse – of deceased, famous German artists and poets who once frequented Dresden – wore nose and mouth masks, humorous statements open to interpretation. Did people put the masks on these statues as a joke? As a protest? Out of boredom?

20 Beier, Mythos (see footnote 19).

21 <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/295461/umkaempftes-erbe-zur-aktualitaet-von-1989-als-widerstandserzaehlung>. Accessed 20 May 2021.

22 <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/295461/umkaempftes-erbe-zur-aktualitaet-von-1989-als-widerstandserzaehlung>. Accessed 20 May 2021.

23 This article is influenced by anthropology of sound, such as Steven Feld/Donald Brenneis, Doing anthropology in sound, in: *American Ethnologist*. 31, 2008, 461-474; Steven Feld, Sound Structure as Social Structure, in: *Ethnomusicology*. 28, 1984, 383-409; Steven Feld, Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression, Duke University Press, Durham 2012.



Abb. 1
Ludwig Richter Statue
in Dresden, 2020 (Photo:
A. Reber).

Other than two elderly people who passed me under the centuries' old arched passage-way, I only saw a few police cars patrolling the streets. Police were tasked with ensuring everyone adheres to the strict measures established by the federal and Länder executives. I am surprised by the apparent civilian obedience. Everyone is presumably at home, obeying the regulations (and avoiding fines). Locked inside, they evade the dangerous virus lurking beyond their front door.

After a few weeks of the Covid restrictions and during the first few spring days, I noticed that more people began venturing outside to walk city streets and linger in city parks. As more people went out, groups mobilized through chat networks to challenge government restrictions. One of the first walks that took place in Saxony was in Pirna towards the end of April. While the intention was that couples would walk outside, enjoying one of the few permissible activities during the Covid lockdown, to create a semblance of gathering without really gathering, the police identified it as a large gathering which was not permitted during this phase of the lockdown. The police issued verbal warnings for participants to disseminate after which the walk ended. The unofficial walk in the small town of Pirna made regional and some national newspapers.²⁴



Abb. 2
Workers Statue
in Dresden, 2020
(Photo: A. Reber).

24 Sächsischer Polizist organisiert Anti-Corona-Demo in Pirna, 23 April 2020, <https://www.rnd.de/panorama/sachsischer-polizist-organisiert-anti-corona-demo-in-pirna-K55EGNB4JR73XSRUT7XCYRA5IU.html>. Accessed 27 July 2020; Sächsischer Polizist organisiert Anti-Corona-Demo in Pirna, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 April 2020. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/demonstrationen-pirna-saechsischer-polizist-organisiert-anti-corona-demo-in-pirna-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-200423-99-807689>. Accessed 27 July 2020; Pirna: Protest gegen Corona-Beschränkungen hat Nachspiel für Polizist, in: *MDR Sachsen*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.mdr.de/sachsen/dresden/freital-pirna/corona-polizist-organisiert-demo-100.html>, Accessed 27 July 2020.

This first walk proved to be a tipping point. In the following days and weeks, people gathered in similarly dispersed actions presumably arranged over chat networks. In Dresden, people gathered and lingered in the *Neumarkt*, in front of the historic and iconic *Frauenkirche* and around the Martin Luther statue, with signs demanding all kinds of rights and criticizing the Covid measures. Only a few wore face masks since at the time they were not required outside. Weekly Sunday gatherings also took place in the *Großer Garten*, the largest public park in Dresden. At these gatherings, there was no obvious leader reported. Rather people gathered and strolled around the park, keeping distance from each other but taking part in collective actions.



Abb. 3 Walk in Meissen, 2020 (Photo: A. Reber).

Some people carried signs such as, “Isolation von Patienten kann tödlich sein” and “Ja zu unseren Grundrechten; Nein zum Impfzwang; Angst [crossed out], Selbst denken!” In several cities and villages across Saxony, people deliberately lingered in town squares and went on walks to defy government restrictions. The walks rarely had more than a few hundred participants in the rural province of Saxony. In one weekend alone, there were rallies in Leipzig, Görlitz, Zittau, Freiberg, and Plauen.²⁵

These rallies were not uniformly against the COVID regulations. Some were counter demonstrations. One, called “Gender und Corona,” drew attention to the threat of sexual violence predominately against women during the Covid ‘Lockdown.’ In some cases, more people watched protestors than took part, as happened in Zittau, where about 30 demonstrators attracted 150 onlookers.²⁶ Below I describe an early action I observed and two strategies I focus on – lingering (white) bodies and silence.

25 Kretschmer stellt sich im Großen Garten Corona-Demonstranten, in: MDR Sachsen, 16 May 2020, <https://www.mdr.de/sachsen/corona-massnahmen-demonstrationen-sachsen-100.html>. Accessed 22 October 2020.

26 MDR, Kretschmer (see footnote 25).

6 May 2020 - Pirna (population: circa 39,000)

I hurried to the square to observe another gathering in Pirna. Around me, people talked quietly, furtively, and held facemasks in their hands. No one else was in the streets but people peered down at us from open windows and balconies.

An AfD city council member had received permission by the local government for 350 participants to assemble for a few minutes, but the gathering was not registered under the AfD. Participants were required to remain 1.5 meters away from each other within an area the police had demarcated. Presumably anyone over these 350 permitted participants would have to leave or be fined. Anyone who walked would be fined. Anyone who lingered longer than the allotted time would be fined.

Police vans and riot officers divided up the market square to partition off the area demarcated for the minutes-long rally near the market. At the city hall, a newly installed camera observed us from the second-floor balcony. People already seemed to know about the new camera installation; they stood facing away from it while others pointed at and took photos of it. If city officials had hoped for inconspicuousness, they must have forgotten how quickly social media and chat networks spread information and warn of increased “state surveillance.”

The police vans numbered at least ten on one side of this narrow town square. About 15-20 riot police, standing almost shoulder to shoulder and divided into two lines faced each other, forming a threshold through which participants and observers had to pass to join the rally.

Because of the regulation to remain 1.5 meters from others, and because of how close the police lines were to each other, only one person could pass through at a time. As I passed through the police line – the police helmeted, in full riot gear, batons in hand, weapons holstered and hanging from uniforms – it seemed that every officer’s eyes were on me, memorizing the details of my hair, face, clothes, height and weight, and guessing the contents of the closed bag I carried.

Face masks were optional, the government had conceded, but I still wore one; a mask covered part of my face, giving me a placebic sense of security and defense against state observation. A few others wore statement masks, like one young man with a red mask that read “Stasi 2.0.” An older man wore a mask with “Bürger, Sklaven, Maulkorb” (citizens, slaves, muzzle) written on it.

Most people, all white, dressed quite casually: loose-fitting jeans, sweaters and pull-overs, little make-up, and hair left naturally. There were several families with children. One person wore a home-made aluminum foil hat. There were many older, retired-age couples and a few middle-aged people in suits who looked like they had just come from work. Many licked ice cream cones from the local ice cream parlour as they pretended to leisurely stroll and casually gather at the confined rally point.

More than anything else, it was the silence that struck me about this anti-Covid regulation rally. Normally I would have expected a protest soundscape: chanting, shouting, speeches, or drums to protest rights’ infringements. Many walks I observed were eerily quiet. But as I looked around the square, I realized people were talking to each other, only in whispers and barely moving their mouths. It was as if these participants were



Abb. 4 Walk in Pirna, 2020 (Photo: A. Reber).

defying state arbiters – who restricted assembly rights – by not speaking, by creating a semblance of assembly without really gathering.

Eerie silence – especially politically defiant and privileged – lingers. One can't unhear that silence.

After reading a brief message, the councilmember officially ended the already short rally. He announced that, in accordance with the city's regulations, there would be no walk. I waited and watched. People did not move. I asked the person next to me what we should do. "We wait," I was told.

Minutes passed. Still we waited. The police had earlier moved in to better monitor the rally. One, with many medals on his chest and stripes on his shoulder, asked the councilman to announce again that the rally was over and that people needed to leave. Still almost everyone waited. Local and regional media teams moved in, microphone, video camera, and reporter ready to interview. We all watched as they first went to the only person with an aluminum foil hat. Chagrined, my neighbors expressed frustration that while they were there to discuss real constitutional infractions, the media talked to the one person with the aluminum foil hat.

Several minutes passed. A policeman spoke over the loudspeaker in a very long announcement telling everyone to disperse. People waited, facing away from the police,

watching each other, speaking in low tones. Several minutes later, another announcement came. Some people started to slowly leave, but most waited. People started speaking louder, moved to new groups, stirring from their previous, almost comatose, state. My neighbor said, "Here it comes." And then the third, more stringent and threatening police announcement came. After this, almost everyone left. Most of the police got into their vans and vacated the square.

I walked towards the train station when I heard singing in the intersection in front of me. A large, loose group had gathered in a circle, facing each other and away from the riot police that surrounded the group. The group started singing, "Die Gedanken sind frei" (The thoughts are free), a historic German protest song with lyrics that critique censorship. Police, spectators, and singers carried cameras and phones, video recording the event. I watched until the song was finished; the singers stood still in their circle, 1.5 meters away from each other, silent. I continued to walk, finding other small clusters of people lingering in cobblestoned intersections of this small town, surrounded by police. The people ignored the police. Some chatted quietly, some drank beers, some stood silently. Lingered.

Lingered (white) bodies

In all these actions, people defied governments' 'undemocratic' restrictions by lingering in places they were not meant to inhabit during this period. People spread out on city park lawns or stood in city centers in the spring sunshine. By "standing still against the busy background of historical agitation,"²⁷ demonstrators demanded alternative narratives and alternative solutions. "The ordinary and rather undramatic practice of standing"²⁸ creates a theatrical pause in the otherwise unchallenged politics of pandemic lockdowns and rights' restrictions. "Stasis...derails, if only temporarily, normative presuppositions"²⁹ about permissible politics. By lingering, walking, and standing still in pairs in state-decreed, uninhabitable places, participants disrupted the normative methods of crisis governments where executives determine the main Covid restrictions.³⁰ Because lingering alone or in pairs was one of the few activities permitted under the regulations, police were unable to coerce or disperse these growing groups.

I write "lingering" instead of "loitering" because these gatherings were never framed by state arbiters as loitering. In the almost intangible politics of affluence and privilege, these white, probably middle-class participants' actions were broadly framed as lingering and gathering. Such framing implicates once again the varying influence bodies

27 Andre Lepecki, Undoing the Fantasy of the (Dancing) Subject, in: Steven de Belder (ed.), *The Salt of the Earth*, Brussels 2001, p. 3.

28 Judith Butler/Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Cambridge 2013, p. 150.

29 Butler/Athanasiou, *Dispossession* (see footnote 28), p. 150-151.

30 Matthias Lemke, Ist das noch normal? Krisenreaktionspolitik auf Bundesebene im Rahmen der Corona-Pandemie. <https://www.pw-portal.de/verfasser-veroeffentlichungen/41081-ist-das-noch-normal>. April 6, 2020. Accessed 20 May 2021.

wield in corporeal politics. Krause writes how certain human bodies contribute “to systematic inequalities of power”³¹ noting that this reality should inform our understanding of the role of, and access to, democratic citizenship. Not all bodies have the same access to, or are able to equally implement, democratic rights, but some bodies are especially privileged in democratic structures. As Gundula Ludwig writes, “Even though contemporary western democracies claim to have overcome exclusions based on bodily difference, the ideal of a democratic citizen is still imagined to be a white, male, heteronormative individual void of bodily necessities, dependencies, and relationalities.”³² Civic belonging, ‘the people,’ is still identified as mobilized, white, affluent bodies whose mere presence is rendered as practicing democracy. These simple, quotidian actions of lingering and waiting became a display of democrats who were worth politicians’ responsive engagement through roundtables, online events, and in-person visits from political leaders.

Silence

By the time the Pirna rally occurred, protestors had gathered for weeks throughout Saxony. Aside from the councilman’s short speech criticizing the COVID regulations, the rally was full of silence, a key strategy of many actions I observed during this period. Participants’ silence was an active, collaborative, political engagement, “inserting a pause into the machinery of the State apparatus.”³³ In these contexts, silences represented a “focused absence” amid the “expectations of ‘voice.’”³⁴ Such unexpected silences subvert traditional power relations³⁵ and reject normative politics³⁶ that often occur in parliament or, in the case of Covid, on phone calls between state ministers. Silences garnered the attention of passersby who often paused and stared at the protestors, read the signs, and took photos before walking off. Local political leaders succumbed to the need to confront these silences through speech in written statements, roundtable discussions, and Facebook livestreamed *Bürgersprechstunde*, for instance.

These silences were also politically constitutive.³⁷ In this particular action, the police continued to break the silence by using the loudspeaker to demand that participants disperse, to remind people to wear masks and keep 1.5 meters away from each other. Journalists attended these actions and broke the silence to take photos of and interview participants, soliciting responses and engaging interlocutors. Local and regional

31 Sharon R Krause, Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics, in: *Political Theory*. 39, 2011, p. 301.

32 Gundula Ludwig, Body politics and democracy, in: *Constellations*. 2020, 1-18.

33 Erin Fitz-Henry, Limits of the Carnavalesque: Re-thinking Silence as a Mode of Social Protest, in: *Liminalities*. 12 (3), 2016, p. 10.

34 Theo Jung, Mind the gaps: silences, political communication, and the role of expectations, in: *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. 2020, p. 2, original italics.

35 Mónica Brito Vieira, Silence in political theory and practice, in: *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 2020, p. 3.

36 Fitz-Henry, Carnavalesque (see footnote 33).

37 Kennan Ferguson, Silence: A Politics, in: *Contemporary Political Theory*. 2, 2003, p. 59.

politicians engaged with their constituents. In these actions, demonstrators' silence demanded narrative exchange. Of course, at many actions people spoke to each other, particularly when there were media or politicians around. But other than the singing I describe above and below, I observed no collective soundscape involved in these gatherings to captivate participants such as drums, chants, or slogans. Surreal silence prevailed as quotidian, white people turned their backs to state arbiters. Participants reflected remarkable communal discipline in these loosely organized gatherings that permitted "ordinary citizens with a means of resistance, at least to the degree that it renders them unknowable to their leaders."³⁸

As I described in the introduction, on 16 May 2020, Saxony's Minister President Kretschmer spontaneously, according to the state chancellery, visited some 400 protestors in Dresden's *Großer Garten*.³⁹ Headlines announced that Kretschmer appeared on his bike without a mask. Photos of him without a mask, surrounded by other people without masks, filled social media and newspapers. Remaining for about an hour and a half, Kretschmer debated and discussed the Corona-related restrictions with people fostering diverse concerns, including forced vaccination and questioning the coronavirus' existence. He called for open discussion and reportedly defended the protests as part of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

In the moment Kretschmer peddled his bike to an unofficial and loosely organized gathering of several hundred people who were frustrated by his government's measures, he demonstrated how powerful silent, unpermitted lingering is when done by affluent protestors. When Kretschmer engaged with demonstrators and framed their actions in terms of democracy, he took part in the tandem theatre occurring in pandemics' wake that enables privileged protestors and state arbiters to perform mutually constitutive, democratic imaginaries. Government responses contributed a legitimacy to these actions and participants' claims that their constitutional rights were being curtailed. Government leaders' actions showed that these participants were worth listening to and talking with. The silent and almost haphazard lingering of these initial actions, combined with relatively privileged protestors, spurred responses from political leaders to respond to these anonymous, silent actors.

While the above-mentioned Pirna rally was saturated with silence, the next protest I describe was punctuated with German folk and protest songs.

38 Sophia Hatzisavvidou, *Disturbing Binaries in Political Thought: Silence as Political Activism*, in: *Social movement Studies*. 14, 2015, p. 513.

39 Zwischen Verschwörung und Protest: Kretschmer stellt sich in Sachsen Demonstranten, in: Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 16 May 2020, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/zwischen-verschwörung-und-protest-kretschmer-stellt-sich-in-sachsen-demonstranten-TALLPPGJWWTFRNS7MDQG47OG2I.html>. Accessed 22 October 2020. Anzeige gegen Kretschmer: MP verteidigt Demo-Besuch ohne Maske im Großen Garten Dresden, in: *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.dnn.de/Dresden/Lokales/Anzeige-gegen-Kretschmer-MP-verteidigt-Demo-Besuch-ohne-Maske-im-Grossen-Garten-Dresden>. Accessed 22 October 2020; Ministerpräsident besucht Corona-Demo, in *Sächsische Zeitung*, 16 May 2020, <https://www.saechsische.de/plus/dresden-sachsen-ministerpraesident-besucht-corona-demo-5205159.html>. Accessed 22 October 2020. See also footnote 24.

16 May 2020 - Bautzen (population: circa 40,000)

Between forty or fifty white, German, middle-aged and elderly people stood silently, 1.5 meters apart, in a semi-circle around the fountain in the main square of Bautzen. Suddenly they started singing a German folksong. When they finished, the people stood silently again, lingering in the square, eyes fixed on the space in front of them, bodies barely moving, but all facing away from the police.

Around twenty police officers with three police vans, stood next to the orange and gold astronomical clock tower in the corner of the small square. The police watched the turned backs of the middle-aged and elderly people. People at cafes and passersby gazed at the demonstrators. The old man next to me laughed and told me that these protestors were ridiculous – demonstrating when they had everything so good. He told me that they were the same kind of people who burned down the asylum house in Bautzen a few years ago. People did not want asylum seekers here, he said. The police and fire department, he intimated, stood by and let it happen. Bautzen is a very white German town, I thought to myself, knowing that many people use “asylum seekers” and “migrants” as code for Germans and foreigners of color. Everyone in this town was white – the police, the demonstrators, the couples and families gathered at the cafes, myself and the man next to me.

The police announced over a loudspeaker that the protestors had to leave. The group then sang “Die Gedanken sind frei” – a German folk song about freedom of thought that has a long history as a protest/revolution song. The song chronotopically linked these white, middle-aged and elderly participants to earlier protest actions over the last several days, weeks, decades, and even centuries.

The old man laughed again and said, this is another song we used to sing as children. Another police announcement came as the orange and gold astronomical clock tower struck 12.30 pm. The protestors started the trek towards the Kornmarkt at the other end of the city center, keeping some impression of 1.5 meters away from each other. They deliberately and unhurriedly moved through the narrow, cobblestoned streets, passing the people sitting in the sun at the now-open cafes and the shoppers moving in and out of the now-open stores. The protestors moved silently through a town center that a week ago was dramatically quiet. Protestors’ silence defied the police loudspeaker and the small-town bustle around them.

These protesters signified with their bodies how their rights to speak and assemble had been restricted. Using their white bodies, their turned backs, their folk songs that broke the silence, their gathering and lingering, and their silent anger, they demanded the right to speak and to assemble.

Song

Like the Pirna demonstration I described in the narrative above, this Bautzen demonstration was saturated with silence, but the silence was interrupted by choreographed singing, the final strategy I discuss. Song and silence, “produced through embodied

collaboration,⁴⁰ reflect the centrality of protestors' corporeality in articulating otherwise unspoken demands. This action operated as a stage for a "protest performance"⁴¹ as older Germans gathered in a quiet town square to sing centuries-old protest songs from phones or sheets of paper.

There was a palpable sense of the absurd as passersby and onlookers watched. Observers laughed while pointing fingers, rolled their eyes, and displayed other such bodily markers of disdain or joviality at the protestors' expense. One old man I spoke with also expressed ridicule for these protestors who "have it so good" and were singing "children's" songs. But the songs, particularly the iconic "Die Gedanken sind frei," invoke a protest past of censorship and restriction that contextualized this protest actions. "Die Gedanken sind frei" along with other protest songs participants sang "reveal a temporal and spatial" connection with the past that are "audible in the lyrical juxtapositions afforded by song."⁴² Such protest actions utilizing centuries-old protest songs connect – and implicitly equate – past and present actions while attempting to foster attention to protest themes.

State arbiters continued to respond to these demonstrations. On 20 May 2020, Pirna's mayor staged a counter action to create an alternative dialogue about the Covid restrictions. Participants wore masks and walked through the city streets, much like the original walks that criticized the Covid regulations. At this event, the mayor, several city councilmembers, and Minister Kretschmer took part.⁴³ The fact that Minister Kretschmer wore a mask made headlines,⁴⁴ with photos of him wearing a mask, surrounded by other people wearing masks, filling chat networks and newspapers. The three hundred reported participants represented various groups, including "Gegner von Grundrechtseinschränkungen, Zweifler an der Corona-Pandemie, Pegida-Anhänger, Unterstützer des Kurses der Bundes- und Landesregierung in der Krise sowie Bürger, die Zivilcourage zeigen und ein friedliches Miteinander einfordern wollten, aber auch meinungsneutrale, neugierige Menschen."⁴⁵ Half of the participants reportedly supported the mayor's action and walked with him and the Minister President. Roughly the other half disagreed with him and stayed on the square. As had been expressed in the Große Garten in Dresden and at several other occasions, Kretschmer and Pirna's mayor Hanke reportedly emphasized dialogue with citizens of different opinions and the democratic nature of the gatherings.

40 Omotayo Jolaosho, *Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, in: *African Studies Review*. 62, 2019, p. 14.

41 Jolaosho, *Singing* (see footnote 40).

42 Jolaosho, *Singing* (see footnote 40), p. 9.

43 Es geht auch anders: Pirna diskutiert friedlich über Corona-Folgen, in MDR Sachsen, 20 May 2020, <https://www.mdr.de/sachsen/dresden/freital-pirna/corona-kundgebung-oberbuergemeister-hanke-pirna-100.html>. Accessed 7 February 2021.

44 Demonstration in Pirna – Sachsens Michael Kretschmer mit Mundschutz, 20 May 2020, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/demonstration-in-pirna-sachsens-michael-kretschmer-mit-mundschutz-GO77SETCFRLUUNAKURGT4BFLM.html>. Accessed 7 February 2021.

45 MDR, Pirna diskutiert (see footnote 43).

At the end of May, minister president Kretschmer and some cabinet members held a roundtable discussion that was broadcast online.⁴⁶ The event was moderated by Frank Richter, a former GDR civil rights' activist, current SPD politician and himself a symbol of a dialogic approach to responding to frustrated citizens that Kretschmer and others employed in these months⁴⁷. Attendees at the roundtable were mayors and other political leaders, virologists, a preschool teacher, a board member of a local parents' group, and a high school student representative of the Landesschülerrat, among others. A few days later Minister Kretschmer, Grimma's mayor, and Grimma's Saxon parliament representative held a partially virtual question-and-answer event with people who tuned in either to Kretschmer's Facebook page or to the local television channel.⁴⁸ Because of Covid spacing regulations, the in-person attendance was limited to 50 people, including media. The middle-aged and elderly participants sat 1.5 meters away from each other in the hall with the windows open but did not wear masks.

These examples show just some of the government's responses to affluent democratic practices that I highlighted here – lingering (white) bodies, pre-planned (yet apparently spontaneous) singing, and unexpected silences. In the instability created by the pandemic, advantaged citizens and state arbiters acted out democratic imaginaries in mutually constitutive ways that upheld hegemonic concepts of civic belonging and democratic citizenship. The pandemic operated as a sieve, sifting through levels of privileged circumstances to reproduce already empowered citizens and democratic structures of affluence.

Corporeal politics in a Covid pandemic

During the earliest days of the first German Covid-19 lockdown, relatively small groups of people in Saxony took to parks and streets in loosely organized actions. Face masks became political accessories to signal frustration with the government. But not wearing face masks operated as an even larger measuring stick to test both government regulations and show citizen disapproval. Seemingly spontaneous singing of politically charged folksongs (such as *Die Gedanken sind frei*) operated as obvious, if passive, signs of discontent. Facing away from police and government cameras, people defied state arbiters and forms of surveillance. Relatively affluent bodies inhabiting spaces they were not meant to inhabit during this period challenged governments' "undemocratic"

46 "Runder Tisch" zu den Maßnahmen der Staatsregierung zur Eindämmung der Corona-Pandemie, Freistaat Sachsen, 29 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-m2081O5YL8>. Accessed 8 February 2021.

47 Interview with Martin Machowecz. "Ein Ministerpräsident alleine kann das Land nicht retten." *Die Zeit*. 14. January 2021, p. 17.

48 Direkt: Michael Kretschmer zum Bürgergespräch in Grimma, in: Sachsen Fernsehen, 2 June 2020, <https://www.sachsen-fernsehen.de/mediathek/video/direkt-michael-kretschmer-zum-b%C3%BCrgergespr%C3%A4ch-in-grimma/>. Accessed 8 February 2021.

restrictions. Silence and passively defying government restrictions by languidly sitting in and strolling through public places embodied “inherent” *Grundgesetz* rights.

The kinds of corporeal efforts people engaged in were simple and small scale, but with enough force that at least in Saxony, mayors, parliament members, and even the minister president felt obligated to meet both formally and informally with citizens to discuss grievances. These actions and subsequent responses were a way for privileged demonstrators to performatively declare that their rights had been curtailed, media to report on these actions, and privileged politicians to respond in collaborative and democratic ways in order to hear the voice of ‘the people.’ It was an exercise in privileged democracy. The narratives I share attest to the politics of affluence operating in the uncertainty created by pandemics. When protestors with relative privilege remained silent when they were expected to speak and lingered in places they were supposed to avoid, they received rather considerable media and political attention, even when protestors were considered foolish, absurd, ‘Corona-liars,’ or conspiracy theorists.

That such walking and lingering could be described as *doing* democracy rather than loitering, for instance, that participants were permitted to gather unharried by the riot police, entangles modes of relative affluence and rhetoric of democracy-making within the structure of privilege and recognition. Saxony’s minister president, mayors, and state parliament members met with disgruntled citizens; newspapers reported on the actions, and journalists interviewed people with homemade aluminum foil hats; restrictions were temporarily eased. Corporeal protest strategies by privileged protestors reproduced empowered citizenship; empowered citizenship, in turn, upheld democratic structures of affluence.