Article

The "New Normal" and "Pandemic Populism": The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right

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Abstract: The paper is meant as a timely intervention into current debates on the impact of the global pandemic on the rise of global far-right populism and contributes to scholarly thinking about the normalisation of the global far-right. While approaching the tension between national political elites and (far-right) populist narratives of representing "the people", the paper focuses on the populist effects of the "new normal" in spatial national governance. Though some aspects of public normality of our 21st century urban, cosmopolitan and consumer lifestyle have been disrupted with the pandemic curfew, the underlying gendered, racialised and classed structural inequalities and violence have been kept in place: they are not contested by the so-called "hygienic demonstrations". A digital pandemic populism during lockdown might have pushed further the mobilisation of the far right, also on the streets.

Keywords: far-right populism; structural violence; national elites; normalisation; COVID-19; "anti-hygienic" demonstrations in Germany

1. Introduction[1]

In 1953, Hannah Arendt argued that the subject of a totalitarian state is the individual, who cannot distinguish between fact and fiction and, in consequence, the totalitarian threat could be witnessed to the degree to which the individuals' capacity of differentiating true from false information is undermined (Arendt 1953). Since 2016, and with the election of US President Donald Trump, the notion of post-truth as blurred boundaries of fact and fiction—in an Arendtian sense—has become the litmus test for detecting a politically explosive and divisive situation in the US. It is embodied in the electoral success of a populist political leader, whose "America first" slogan swept him into highest office. Lowndes (2017) argues that the "norms of respectable political behavior" are transgressed (Lowndes 2017, p. 240), and that Trump's presidential campaign was characterised by violent rhetoric, appealing to white nationalist voters. (Lowndes 2017, ibid.) With respect to the situation in the UK, in 2016, the Tories—the British Conservative party—shifted further to a parochial right wing and adopted a populist post-Empire island view (Freeden 2017) when giving in to anti-European Union hardliners within the party, and offering the UK constituents the Brexit vote. This vote had been pushed vehemently and discursively by UKIP, the far-right leaning UK Independence Party, for years.

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[1] I borrow this term from German colleagues Boberg et al. (2020), who recently published a paper with this title, introducing findings of a pilot study on social media communication of the current global pandemic in Germany. See for details: Boberg et al. (2020). "Pandemic Populism: Facebook Pages of Alternative News Media and the Corona Crisis—A Computational Content Analysis", Muenster Online Research (MOR) Working Paper 1/2020.

In the context of the pandemic triggered by COVID-19, a relatively high percentage of Black and Asian minority community individuals have died[2] This is true with respect to the UK[3] and has also been recorded in the US. Statistical facts expose the systematic failures of the *White* House, ignoring foremost the structural vulnerability of its working-class, non-white citizens[4]. Institutional racism (Carmichael and Hamilton 1992; Phillips 2011; Vieten 2014) as a form of structural violence (Galtung 1969) is framing the normality of majority-white societies, where—by and large—Black lives seem "not to matter". Rottenberg and Yuval-Davis (2020) went as far as to denounce Westminster's and Boris Johnson's failure to respond adequately to the pandemic as "banality of evil"[5]. It is open to further and future investigation in what ways the shift to far-right populist rhetoric and parochial orientations prepared the stage for populist leaders in both countries.

Though medical expert knowledge currently is in high demand, the limits of accountable expertise and the lack of an anti-virus drug add further complication to nationally divergent views[6] of how to combat best the spread of the deadly virus, and, by now, how to ease and manage lockdown measures. Germany with its experienced leader, Chancellor Merkel, and a federally organised and well-equipped regional as well as local health system, for example, was able to keep the death toll of COVID-19 victims low, and the infection rate also distinctively lower in comparison to the UK and the US. Further, from the outbreak of the epidemic, early March 2020, testing was established in a systematic way, and accessible to the population (Sepkowitz 2020)[7]. However, in the same Germany, the differing anti-COVID-19 public health measures across the 16 federal lands when it comes to social gatherings or practices of wearing a face mask, for example, have caused confusion what do to and what is right, among the population, too. This situation of confusion might blur further the boundaries between facts and fiction, an indicator of a dangerous post-truth political and social space.

This paper is meant as a timely intervention into current debates on the impact of the pandemic on the rise of global far-right populism, and contributes to scholarly thinking about the normalisation (Wodak 2019; Vieten and Poynting 2020), mainstreaming (Kaya 2018; Mondon and Winter 2020) or respectablisation (Poynting and Briskman 2018) of the global far-right. It focuses on the blurring boundaries between legitimate democratic political protest and racist far-right populist positions challenging democracy, and the blurred boundaries between fact–knowledge and fiction–speculation, in this respect.

The wider implications of the virus pandemic on this development need to be analysed with data from larger comparative studies in different countries, in future. For now, the author takes stock of a small-scale study of online communication in the early days of the pandemic (e.g., Boberg et al. 2020), and further analysed coverage of populist protests against lockdown and health measures, in international media outlets (*Open Democracy; The Guardian; Financial Times; die Tageszeitung; Frankfurter Rundschau*) and websites/blogs of the new German protest movements against COVID-19 health measures, between mid-March and late-August 2020. The articles and blog statements—as data—considered here, problematise far-right white political protests during the public space lockdowns, named "anti-hygienic" protest. A content and thematic analysis (Lepper 2000; Graneheim et al. 2017) of the different media, mentioned above, support the following argument of the

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[2]　Available online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[3]　Available online: https://www.cebm.net/covid-19/bame-covid-19-deaths-what-do-we-know-rapid-data-evidence-review/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[4]　Available online: https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/06/05/there-is-no-stopping-covid-19-without-stopping-racism/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[5]　Available online: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-banality-evil-200505075710643.html (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[6]　Available online: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/health-economics-policy-and-law/hepl-blog-series-covid19-pandemic (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[7]　Available online: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/24/opinions/germany-low-death-rate-for-coronavirus-sepkowitz/index.html (accessed on 30 August 2020).

normalisation of far-right groups joining "anti-hygienic protest" demonstrations in Berlin (1.8. and 29.8. 2020), which were initiated mainly by a grassroots group, called "Querdenken 711".

The leading research questions are, firstly, in what ways do the boundaries get blurred between mainstream political mobilisation against government interventions and restrictions on COVID-19 and activities of the extremist and racist far right? Secondly, what does this development tell us about the normalisation of the far right with respect to the "new normal" of pandemic populism?

First, I will discuss the notion of crisis with respect to national governance and the role of governmentality when closing international borders and reversing "normal" freedom of movement in different nation states. I am interested to understand in what ways this re-territorialised nationalism is distinctive to far-right populism, and to which degree social network mobilisation of the far right is following this "nationalist" territorial closure. Far-right populist strategies have to be linked to wider battles over entitlements and (white) supremacist claims of who belongs to the people, and the paradox of inclusion/exclusion. To illustrate some of the paradox, I will approach and analyse in what ways anti-hygienic public demonstrations in Germany visualise the contradictory amalgamation of what triggers white anti-government protests, taking on board some of the findings on online populist communication[8]. I focus here on the German situation where populist initiatives such as Querdenken 711 and Widerstand 2020 (Thoms and Rehm 2020)[9] were founded in direct response to the government's policy tackling the pandemic. Since then, these grassroots groups mobilise citizens from different walks of life on the streets, e.g., 20,000 assembling in Berlin, on 1 August 2020, and even 38,000, on 29 August 2020. Germany is a particularly interesting case study as mainstream media and public opinion rather assume that the Berlin central government dealt very well with the first wave of infections, which seems to contrast populist mobilisation ("Anti-Hygiene Demos") and dislike of Chancellor Merkel's government.

The paper ends with the note that the violent signals of pandemic populism are back on the streets buoyed by its outlets in the digital alternative world.

2. Far-Right Populism, Xenophobia, and Spatial Governance in Crisis

Do the current COVID-19 pandemic and the overall global health crisis we are in change the perception of what (far-right) populist leadership can achieve? A small-scale comparative study, conducted by Strandberg in April 2020, showed that due to their lack of immediate and systematic responses to the acute COVID-19 pandemic, the UK and US governments lost the trust of their citizens (Strandberg 2020)[10]. However, the lack of adequate responses might be related to deeply running long-term failures in social policy with respect to the lack of good public welfare provision and health care, and an endemic inequality with respect to race, gender, and class, for example[11]. The recent collaborative report, "Populism and the pandemic" by Katsampekis and Stavrakakis (2020), is based on the views of experts in 16 different countries in Europe and beyond. Among others, the question was posed how populists fare against moderates in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and, further to the point, what does this tell us about the success of populist political leadership? The preliminary findings (Katsampekis and Stavrakakis 2020, pp. 6–8) suggest that there is a variety of either adequate or irresponsible responses on the side of populist leaders and governments. Thus, any prediction that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis might help to push back the far-right populist problem is premature, to say the least.

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[8]   I am focusing here on the so called "anti-hygienic" demonstrations, the mobilisation against public lockdown, and do not discuss further the significant role of "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations.

[9]   Available online: https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/hintergrund-widerstand-2020-100.html (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[10]   Available online: https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-us-and-uk-governments-losing-public-trust-137713 (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[11]   Available online: https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/bame-women-and-covid-19/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).

The ideological tension between national political elites and (far-right) populist narratives of representing "the people" needs further scrutiny in the current global pandemic crisis; here, the discussion will focus on the "new normal" in spatial governance. I argue that though some aspects of public normality of our 21st century urban, cosmopolitan, and consumer lifestyle have been disrupted with the pandemic curfew, imposed in March 2020, gendered, racialised, and classed structural inequality and violence continue and are likely to have worsened in the hidden world of private lives. Not only are the unequal social–economic effects of the pandemic feeding widespread populist anger against government public health strategies, but the social fabric of the protestors also indicates citizen's views of "normal entitlements" and what their "normal" consumer life would look like.

Recently, (far-right) populism has been interpreted as a symptom of transformation and the crisis of democracy (Fitzi 2019), and as a more fundamental crisis of governmentality and governance (Yuval-Davis 2012). As Fitzi (2019, p. 7) argues, "(Populism can be understood as a symptom of a wider crisis of legitimation affecting democratic political systems that demands examination as to which extent its development depends on the depletion of the welfare state, the deregulation of the markets and the deconstruction of political culture that characterized the last decades."

Spatial governance ties together various layers of national jurisdictions as social–political ordering and bordering (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Specific localities, such as neighbourhoods, cities, or counties, or with respect to federal political systems' different lands or devolved regions within a nation state, but also belonging to majority or minority religious or ethnic groups, all frame participation of citizens and denizens distinctively, and provide hierarchical access to the public good. The glocal (Robertson 2014; Roudometof 2016) effect of political extremism such as terrorism, but also the series of "natural" disasters, on the one hand, and international wars as well as economic fiascos, on the other, shrank spaces for territorial governmentality and juridical control of nation-state bounded governance, in the last twenty years. The national(ist) cry for safety, such as "keep our nation safe" (Andreas 2003; cited in Yuval-Davis et al. 2019, p. 2), however, misreads possibilities to control global interconnectivity.

Experts on populism, such as Jansen (2015), Zùquete (2015) and Mudde (2010, 2017), agree that foremost, the populist mood is driven by strong anti-elite anger and, further, that there is a claim to be nativist, and nativism here means, to have an inherited entitlement to the common good of a society. Yuval-Davis (2011) is sceptical of the term "nativist", and instead suggests "autochthony" following the writings of Geschiere (2009). According to Geschiere autochthony connotes the belonging to the land and marks politically a global return to the local. In the Netherlands, for example, the social categories of "autochthon–allochthon" framed[12] policy, academic research, and political debates since the 1970s, and by doing so racialise(d) post-colonial visible minorities as well as migrant newcomers to the society, particularly Surinamese-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch.

This "global return to the local" is most relevant in the pandemic political situation as not only a national lockdown, but regional closures within different nation states confronted citizens and denizens alike with a quite sudden penalisation of their right to free movement.

Wodak (2017) refers to the power dynamic of claiming local space, and distinguishes between those who are "established" and those who are "newcomers" when referring to Elias and Scotson's (Elias and Scotson 1994) seminal work, *The Established and the Outsider*. Elias and Scotson's study analysed the way established families in "Winston Parva" kept power, and how "insider" and "outsider" configurations operate in a local neighbourhood. As mentioned above, the notion of "local neighbourhood" has been reframed in its claim making meaning in the last few months: urban dwellers, for example, were not allowed to visit rural communities, and the easing of lockdown measures yet is creating new COVID-19 regional hot spots, such as Oldham in North England, for example. Other European countries such as Belgium, Spain, and France, for example, were abruptly labelled as "non-safe" by the

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[12]　Only in March 2016, the Dutch parliament decided to review and abandon the terminology (publication concealed).

UK government, in August 2020, which meant holiday makers or people trying to (re)enter the UK have to quarantine for two weeks, automatically. Further, at the end of August 2020, fears of the next big wave are imminent.

We only can speculate about the societal consequences these individual experiences of rupture to individual life as mass phenomenon might have, in the long run. It relates both, to potential anger towards current governance, but also to an increasing fear of encountering *any Other*, adding to existing xenophobia. If it is true that populism operates within the parameters of the "national" associated with the nation state, what makes it different from nationalism, and how does it operate alongside a neo-nationalist paradigm? One crucial angle to approach some of the differences between nationalism and populism is the claim to represent or speak on behalf of "the people". Though a constructivist definition of nationalism (Billig 1995; Jenkins and Sofos 1996) avoids the essentializing of what makes up a nation in terms of primordial belonging, it cannot avoid the spill over to populist claims of defining who is "the people", and who belongs to it (e.g., newcomers against established; autochthon against allochthon). Additionally, consider that democracy historically carries the marker of ethnos (e.g., homogenous and autochthonic) rather than demos (e.g., heterogenous). However, what marks populism as different is the role of "the (established) elite" as polemically positioned in opposition to "the people". Nationalism discursively includes the elite in the notion of the national people.

Whereas some national elites, and the government of the day, are not willing or able to tackle efficiently the COVID-19 pandemic, global media offers us the chance to compare governments though not having the electoral power to choose a new one, immediately. That said, transnational populist mobilisation in global social networks is on the rise though the articulation of it might be restricted to local and national demonstrations. According to De Cleen (2017, p. 349), "A truly transnational populism is more profoundly transnational in that it constructs a transnational people-as-underdog as a political subject that supersedes the boundaries of the nation-state, rather than merely linking up national people-as-underdogs."

What is striking in the context of the 2020 pandemic is the re-territorialisation of governance and governmental responses dealing with the global health crisis, within the national legal frame and through the nation-state lens. As argued elsewhere (Vieten 2019, p. 113), and even before the global outbreak of COVID-19, there were strong indications that "the continuity of national(ist) territorial democracy, on the one hand, and a global transformation of socio-cultural belonging, identity and solidarity, on the other, clashes and creates *populist territorialism*." The pandemic is read as health governance "crisis", as the policy and political responses to the COVID-19 public health threat evoke state power in ways Hay (1996, p. 255) describes as "the ability to identify, define and constitute crisis" cited in (Walby 2015, p. 17).

While drawing on Hay's (1996, p. 255) approach to the notion of crisis, Walby (2015, p. 17) stresses that the meaning of crisis is "subjectively perceived and brought into existence through narrative and discourse". While analysing the complexities of the 2008 financial crisis, Walby underlines the relevance of *temporality* as crisis is identified with rupture, with a state of exemption, and, accordingly, contrasts with other more "normal" times. Concluding on the 2008 economic crisis, Walby argues that "the crisis originated in the failure to regulate finance but that the main focus of political debate has become fiscal crisis and 'austerity'." (Walby 2015, p. 18)[13]. *Crisis* operates as a signifier of a malaise conveying cracks, change, instability, and lack of good governance. This meaning of crisis is helpful as it sheds light on the discursive construction of what is exposed as crisis. It underscores that the negative connotation of the previous "migrant crisis" and the current "public health crisis" is embedded in the falsification of cause and consequences of governmentality. That said, it endangers the possibility of another "moral-panic cycle" (Hall et al. 1978, p. 322, cited in Feldner et al. 2014, p. 3).

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[13]   I will come back later to the construction of what the notion of normal times might mean.

> "A moral panic circle refers to a situation where systemic crises are displaced ideologically via moral discourse aimed at placating social anxiety while, most importantly, prescribing the cause of the crisis itself as its solution ... moral panic, often artfully turned into sour resentment, against usual suspects like the immigrants." (Feldner et al. 2014, ibid.)

Moral panic serves as a delusion, distracting from the causes of a crisis. As outlined above, the absence of good governance, being watched in the failures of some political elites when responding to the immediate pandemic might trigger widespread anxieties as well as xenophobia. Coming back to the notion of far-right and racist populism (Vieten and Poynting 2016), a strong anti-establishment resentment is coupled with ethno-nationalist xenophobia (De Angelis 2003; Rydgren 2007). As some scholars argue xenophobia—the fear of "the Other" and their perception as "stranger"—rather than racism is associated with far-right populism (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). De Angelis (2003) has coined "xenophobic populism", and xenophobia of far-right populism is associated with the new immigration of refugees to Europe, since 2015 (Ruzza 2018). However, the question arises whether xenophobia is moving to other targets in the current pandemic. As such, xenophobia can be mobilised in times of crises, for example, in the bank liquidity crisis of 2008, as a symptom of "capitalism in crisis" (Feldner et al. 2014); in the run up to the Brexit referendum in 2016, when rhetorically immigration was linked to the social welfare crisis; or in the context of the economic, social, and ecological global public health crisis epitomised in the 2020 virus pandemic.

The potential of delusion and blurred boundaries of fact and fiction encompassing the reading of a crisis make the current situation exploitable to far-right populist propaganda. Different authors mention "the Manichean worldview" (Rydgren 2007, p. 246; Wodak 2019, p. 12) at the centre of far-right populist parties' political identification, which is hostile to the notion of compromise appropriated in liberal democracies (Rydgren 2007). The binary view on the world establishes opinions without shades of grey, contrasting the "us" and the "them".

This leads to the next section, exploring what normalisation means in the context of the current health crisis, and in what ways the new normal of the post-pandemic public space though framed by the influence of digital communication links into wider debates of the normalisation of the far-right.

3. Disrupted Normalisation: The New Normal of the COVID-19 Everyday Life

The systemic failures of the UK government, for example, in tackling the public and social health crisis, and not being able to hinder the high scale of death and infections, convey early signs that the post-pandemic situation is likely to mean, for many people, accelerated social insecurity and lack of good governance. In consequence, we will see a further rise in social frictions across the society and—the EU economic recovery plan aside, which the UK left through its Brexit vote in 2016, confirmed in 2020—a deepening of gendered race inequality.

> Those thrust into isolated unemployment without income and limited support will endure other potential crises unrelated to exposure to the novel coronavirus: substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health disorders, and other, less novel ways to get sick or die. Thus, the emergent backlash against quarantine policies is reproducing some of the same politics that already represented years of frustration with the economy and its management by political and business elites.
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> —Abdelal (2020)[14]

However, it is interesting enough that despite this rather devastating situation in Britain[15] we have not seen a similar mass protest of "anti-hygienic" demonstrations, as in Germany, until 29 August[16].

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[14] Available online: https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/populism-the-pandemic-and-the-crisis/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).
[15] The situation in Northern Ireland is not that devastating with much lower rates of death and infection.
[16] Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/04/coronavirus-conspiracy-theorists-far-right-protests.

Most national governments decided on a radical lockdown of public life, gatherings, and socializing, in order to stop or slow the spread of the virus, in March 2020. These measures brought normal life and day-to-day routines to a halt and reversed the experience of what 21st century commercial and visceral cosmopolitanism stood for. It could be said that this normality already is defined in classed, gendered, and racialised terms. Normality and normalisation have been criticised by Iris M Young. Young (2006, p. 96) defines her understanding of *normalisation* as follows, "I refer to processes that construct experiences and capacities of some social segments into standards against which all are measured, and some found wanting or deviant" (Young 2006, p. 101). This notion has repercussions with French poststructuralist views regarding hegemonic identities and structures as oppressive and normalisation in need of deconstruction (Foucault 1977). Further, there is an overlap in the argument interrogating (white) normality in order to alter forms of exclusion. That said, what we experienced through the radical lockdown and closure of public life also is a kind of shock to the normal capitalist system. Brotons (Brotons 2020, forthcoming) argues "the inclusion/exclusion model could project a social normality identified by the national society and participation in the socio-economic structures of the welfare state. This is the origin of one of the most notable characteristics operating at its base: "mainstream society" is conceived to be normal; exclusion from it is supposed to be the problem."

With the radical closure of normal public participation in socio-economic structures, the question arises, too: in what ways does the inclusion/exclusion nexus affect the new normal of isolated and dependent life in lockdown? What does this fragmentation mean for ideological and political views critical of the democratic status quo, and for a normalisation of extremist views?

Since 2016, we notice a rapid normalisation of far-right populist views across different societies; racist rhetoric and discursive tactics have been adopted by mainstream politics and media (Kaya 2018; Wodak 2019; Vieten and Poynting 2020, forthcoming).

The electoral success of the far-right party "Alternative für Deutschland"—Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, for example, meant that mainstream media is hosting far-right AfD politicians, like any other democratically elected party politicians. In effect, far-right perspectives become respectable and normalised (Speit 2020)[17]. However, this process of normalisation while giving media space to far-right racist views could be noticed years earlier, back in 2010. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician, Sarrazin, was regularly invited to TV talk shows uttering his racist views of immigrants, on numerous occasions (Vieten 2016). His book *Germany does away with itself* became a bestseller with 1.5 million copies sold. (Vieten 2016, ibid.) How does this normalisation of racist views relate to the current 2020 health emergency crisis?

Though Germany managed the COVID-19 health emergency quite well, social and political unrest and anger are evolving across the country, as some people do not agree with the government strategies, such as legally enforcing face masks and temporarily closing down business and leisure spaces. Mondon and Winter (2020) argue that liberal democracies have created the "reactionary democracy" we are in as nation states have nurtured international capitalism while not delivering strategies of how to overcome social inequalities and systemic forms of classism, sexism, and racism inherent to it. (Mondon and Winter 2020, p. 2) Yet back in 2005, Mouffe pointed out that the unwillingness to accept the agonistic character of the political, and in consequence, the failure of liberal democracy to understand the role of passion and emotions, partly is responsible for the "failure to come to terms with the phenomenon of populism" (Mouffe 2005, p. 51). The role emotions and the irrational play in triggering populist authoritarian and xenophobic (e.g., including racist and anti-Semitic) views need further examination, also in the context of social class.

Whereas social class differences in normal times rather seem accepted as structural inequality aspects of liberal capitalism, the pandemic crisis brings to the fore the sensual effects of social inequality: spending time in middle class suburban neighbourhoods—possibly also having a garden of one's

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17   Available online: https://taz.de/Sommerinterviews-mit-der-AfD/!5704410/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).

own—is very different to an enclosed—almost imprisoned—day-to-day lockdown life in poorer inner-city apartment blocks. Do we accept these material differences as normal?

It could be argued that the notion of normality and processes of normalisation are disrupted by the central decisions of national governments to lockdown social public life, in March 2020, nationally and internationally. Closing normal social life in public spaces, such as inner cities—e.g., cinemas, theatres, restaurants, and shops—meant immediate retreat from normal social gatherings and convivial lifestyle. Though European countries, at large, including the UK, offered furlough income support to their unemployed citizens—on a scale not known in recent decades—the overall perspective of how to overcome the health and death crisis, and how to sustain economically, is uncertain. Six months later, and with a second big wave on the horizon, it seems, the new normal looks very different to the normal socializing consumer lifestyle we were used to. Likewise, with international travel and free movement policed, a Focauldian (Foucault 1977) outlook conveys the new normal of "emergency powers that become normalized, legitimated by a discourse of social hygiene, and a regime of bio-power" (Keohane 2020, p. 222).

In what ways are all these experiences, the remote online communication during lockdown, and the mobilisation of the far-right, related to this new normal?

In the remaining part of the paper, I will discuss the phenomenon of so-called "hygienic" demonstrations in Germany against the findings of a recent study on alternative media communication with respect to far-right conspiracy theories and racist content (Boberg et al. 2020). Though in the US similar anti-lockdown rallies took place, the notion of hygienic is particularly problematic in the German historical context of Nazi "racial purity" and "race hygienic"[18].

4. Anti-Hygienic Protests in Germany: Citizens and Far-Right Mobilisation in Social Networks and on the Streets

The above-mentioned pandemic report by Katsampekis and Stavrakakis (2020) gives, among others, an assessment of the current situation in Germany. It states that since 2017, and with the electoral success of the far-right political party, AfD (Alternative for Germany), post-war Germany lost its ideological battle for a relative containment of the far-right (Karavasilis 2020, p. 24). A normalisation of far-right populist political representation could be detected in the way the AfD supported the liberal candidate of the Free Democratic Party (FDP)—alongside the Christian Democrats (CDU), also in favour of the FDP candidate—in the federal parliament of Thuringia, in February 2020. Only the intervention by Merkel, condemning the CDU's regional voting in alliance with the AfD on this occasion, and widespread public protest challenged the vote, also "leading to the resignation of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's successor in the CDU". (Karavasilis 2020, ibid.)

Beyond the focus on the populist far-right political party, AfD, what is most relevant to the question here, is how the anger about state-imposed pandemic measures is creating new alliances between the moderate, alternative left and the far-right on the streets and in social networks. While cooperating with the far-right, racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-democratic positions get amalgamated into broader critical views on the current emergency policy of the nation state.

Since April 2020, a cocktail of anarchists, "Wutbŭrger" (outraged citizens) and far-right extremists assemble regularly in major German cities, such as Berlin, Stuttgart, or Dresden, demonstrating against the Merkel-led coalition, and their anti-coronavirus lockdown measures. On 23 May, about 40 demonstrations of this kind of anti-hygienic protests, but also counter-protests, were registered in Berlin.

> Far-right groups, including the Alternative for Germany (AfD), have also been organizing 'hygiene demos' across the country for the past several weeks, targeting Jews and

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[18]　Available online: https://frieze.com/article/dirty-history-cleanliness-racist-purity-recent-right-wing-hygiene-demonstrations (accessed on 30 August 2020).

immigrant communities for the spread of COVID-19 in Germany. Along with hygiene demos, demonstrations against lockdown measures are also being organized by conspiracy ideologists, science deniers, hooligans, neo-Nazis, evangelicals, vaccine-opponents, esotericists and citizens of the Reich, etc. Groups like *Querdenken 711*, *Widerstand* (Resistance) 2020, Communication Center for Democratic Resistance, among others, are said to be involved in organizing these demonstrations.[19]

—*Peoples dispatch* (a left-wing website)

These public demonstrations, sidelining any state advice on physical distancing, received international media coverage[20]. As pointed out earlier, in comparison to the UK or to Spain, for example, the German government managed the coronavirus threat with one of the lowest numbers of deaths in Europe. Accordingly, we need to understand in what ways far-right populist protest is disconnected to the "facts" of government success, or failure. This leads to further questions of how online mobilisation and street protest intersect, and how far the current far-right online mobilisation feeds anti-hygienic populist protests, called "pandemic populism".

To illustrate some of the blurred boundaries and populist dynamics of anti-hygienic rallies, I will capture the social fabric of the two new protest groups, Querdenken 711, and Widerstand 2020, next. Their roots in the so-called "right from the heart of society" might give us some clues about the normalisation of extremist standpoints and the blurred boundaries between facts and fiction (post-truth) we are dealing with.

Querdenken 711 was founded by Michael Ballweg, an IT specialist and entrepreneur in Stuttgart, this year. The profile of his initiative explicitly speaks to German citizens' individual rights, guaranteed in the German Constitutional Law ("Grundgesetz"). By now, in late August 2020, regional groups have been set up across the German republic[21].

A first large demonstration held in Berlin, on 1 August, officially counted as having 20,000 attendees[22]. This might count as a social protest movement (Edwards 2018) able to mobilize people beyond any ideological division of "left" or "right", in recent months. Ballweg's statement, "[T]he pandemic is over when the people decide that the pandemic is over"[23], seems to make claim to the very opposite what the World Health Organisation (WHO) or scientific experts have to say on the ending of the pandemic. At the same time, Ballweg's warning words with respect to an anticipated economic collapse sound rather realistic and convey a critical perspective on the national welfare economy. The range of speakers and activists performing on stage at the various demonstrations include professionals, entrepreneurs, authors, and artists.[24]

Whereas the 1 August demonstration in Berlin and the one, planned for late August, stick to traditional forms of public articulation of alternative opinions, Querdenken also widely used social media networks.

Another new anti-hygienic mobilisation group in this context is Widerstand 2020. According to Thoms and Rehm (2020), a psychologist, a lawyer, and a medical doctor are the founders of this new group. Like the group Querdenken 711, they operated initially through their websites;

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[19] Available online: https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/05/30/progressives-in-germany-denounce-racist-hygiene-demos-and-anti-lockdown-protests/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[20] Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/21/germany-braced-for-more-protests-against-coronavirus-polices; Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/world/europe/coronavirus-germany-far-right.html (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[21] Available online: https://querdenken-711.de/regional (accessed on 29 August 2020).

[22] While revising this paper the second big demonstration in Berlin, 29 August 2020, went ahead as the court defied the initial ban by the local government.

[23] Available online: https://querdenken-711.de/inhalte (accessed on 29 August 2020).

[24] It might be interesting for future research to understand how Querdenken 711 is connected to the previous Stuttgart 21 protest movement, the latter mobilised thousands of citizens against the restructuring of the Stuttgart main train station ten years ago (Von Staden 2020).

becoming a member entails only filling in a form, as far as Widerstand 2020 is concerned. (Thoms and Rehm 2020, ibid.)

These groups function as a kind of melting pot for people who do hold sceptical views on the current government's health strategies, but also for those who buy into conspiracy theories.

Berntzen and Weisskircher (2016), in a study on the mobilisation of PEGIDA beyond Germany, found out that "online spheres" are important channels of mobilisation, and that "the interplay of offline and online mobilization" (Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016, p. 556) is crucial. While tracking Facebook groups, they could prove that "online and street activism have been interrelated–a relationship with different effects at different times" (Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016, p. 569). They also pointed out that with early state intervention, e.g., delaying or denying street protests, the "visible side" might be impacted and undermine "attention through street activism" Berntzen and Weisskircher (2016, p. 570).

These are important findings when turning now to the relevance of Facebook, e.g., online communication for the current "pandemic" protest. Boberg et al. (2020) turned to the systematic computational content analysis of Facebook use in Germany to trace the spread of "conspiracy theories" in alternative social media, from 7 January to 22 March; that means they covered the first and early stage. The researchers focused on Facebook as 21% of Germans use this social media platform on a daily basis, whereas it is only 2% use Twitter on a daily base. The notion of "alternative" media refers to the perception that alternative media is helping to correct the information and opinions explicated in mainstream media; this includes, also, left-wing alternative media. The interesting methodological details aside, the results confirm previous findings that the alternative news media framed the coronavirus crisis alongside pre-existing narratives and linked virus-related information to already established concepts (like the migration and refugee debate or climate change activism).

> "The handling of the crisis by political actors is subject to a judgmental analysis and polemic commenting based on viewpoints and patterns established before the pandemic (as visible by using concepts and derogatory terms already introduced during the refugee crisis and before, as in the case of Angela Merkel). So, some of alternative news media's coverage is, indeed, pandemic populism."
>
> —Boberg et al. (2020, p. 16)

Three different versions of conspiracy theories circulated on Facebook, among them that Bill Gates was behind the global spread or the assumption that the virus was leaked in a Wuhan chemical laboratory. (Boberg et al. 2020, ibid.) Overall, it turned out that the online communication did not primarily contribute to establish fake news and most often mirrored in comments the information suggested in mainstream media. However, there were "populist spin" and "anti-establishment tone" Boberg et al. (2020, p. 17), signalling a strong "anti-elite" resentment as characteristic to (far-right) populism.

The direct link to the hygienic demonstrations of April, May, and August is not yet established; an in-depth analysis of slogans and statements at hygienic demonstrations might discover further connections to the previous online circulation of anti-Semitic and racist conspiracy theories.

Coming back to the public and physical demonstrations initiated by Querdenken 711 and Widerstand 2020, particularly in Berlin, problematically these demonstrations provide a shared platform, which has been co-opted by the AfD, "Reichsbűrger" (Citizens of the Reich)[25], and other neo-fascist groups[26]. The organisers and those actively participating seem not to care about the presence and co-option by the far-right; this is a repercussion of the normalisation of far-right views:[27]

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[25] Available online: https://eeradicalization.com/germany-does-not-exist-analyzing-the-reichsburger-movement/ (accessed on 29 August 2020).

[26] Available online: https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-08/corona-demonstration-berlin-rechte-ausschreitungen-reportage/komplettansicht (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[27] Available online: https://www.fr.de/politik/berlin-corona-demo-kundgebung-querdenken-711-protest-polizei-zr-90033019.html (accessed on 30 August 2020).

'The uncompromisingness marks a new stage of protest against the coronavirus measures. It begets a dangerous dynamic because now the far-right scene is also taking advantage of the protest. AfD officials such as Tino Chruppalla, Alice Weidel, and Björn Höcke called for the demo, as did the NPD[28], the Third Way, and the Reichsbürger. The right-wing publicist and editor of *Compact* magazine Jürgen Elsässer wrote: "Does the freedom movement overthrow the Corona dictatorship?" Saturday will be "the most important day since 1945"' (Litschko and Wahmkow 2020)[29].

5. Conclusions: Digital and Face-to-Face Pandemic Populism

In the new normal world of 2020, which is a rupture to what normality looked like in most countries before March 2020, the mobilisation of the far-right is going on. Far-right media and activists adapt to the new reality while using confusion about the roots of COVID-19, but also the contradictory governmental responses in different countries, for their gains. This paper argued that encompassing the neo-nationalist strategies of nation states to close international borders and to monitor the internal movement of citizens, "pandemic populism" is on the rise. The latter is expanding due to the public health, social welfare, and political crises. Alongside the failure of governments to cope with the pandemic, the socio-economic crisis and moral-panic is co-producing extremist anti-elite establishment resentments. Germany is a showcase of paradox developments in this regard: whereas the current government performed quite well in comparison to other countries in handling the COVID-19 health threat, a rising number of citizens articulate resentment and disagreement with the government's health and economic strategies. Querdenken 711 and Widerstand 2020 are protest initiatives founded by (white) middle-class citizens foregrounding their interest in going back to (or keeping) the previously enjoyed "normal life" and privileges without COVID-19 restrictions. Whereas these protest movements cannot be labelled far-right populist, their anti-elite anger and willingness to share platforms with neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, and Reichsbürger, confirms the argument for the normalisation of far-right orientations and blurred boundaries put forward here.

With the three-month lockdown experiences in social self-isolation—and relying on online communication—more people might have become vulnerable to far-right propaganda and jump on the opportunities of anti-hygienic or anti-lockdown protest to articulate their grievances.

The second big anti-hygienic demonstration in Berlin, on 29 August 2020, organised by Querdenken 711 attracted about 38,000 people[30]. Not only Germans, but citizens from Switzerland, the Netherlands, and England joined the protest[31]. That means other nationals travelled to Berlin to make a physical statement and, by this, support the German anti-hygienic protest. In addition, on the same day, an anti-hygienic protest with 10,000 people attending[32], took place in London. This development and the linkages between different national protests might be regarded as indicators of what De Cleen (2017) captures as trans-nationalising dynamics of far-right populism. These dynamics add an important further layer to what Berntzen and Weisskircher (2016) argue, namely that online channels are important to the mobilisation of the contemporary far-right. The links between these different emanations of far-right mobilisation—online and on the streets—should be watched closely and carefully.

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[28]　Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschland (National Democratic Party of Germany).

[29]　'Die Kompromisslosigkeit markiert eine neue Stufe des Protestsgegen die Coronamaßnahmen. Und sie bekommt eine gefährliche Dynamik, weil nun auch die rechtsextreme Szene geballt den Protest nutzt. AfD-Funktionäre wie Tino Chruppalla, Alice Weidel oder Björn Höcke riefen zu der Demo auf, auch die NPD, der III. Weg und die Reichsbürger. Der rechtsextreme Publizist und Herausgeber des *Compact*-Magazins Jürgen Elsässer, schrieb: „Stürzt die Freiheitsbewegung die Corona-Diktatur?". Der Samstag werde, der wichtigste Tag seit 1945".' (Litschko and Wahmkow 2020, TAZ). https://taz.de/Demo-gegen-Coronamassnahmen/!5707762/ (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[30]　Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/berlin-braces-for-anti-coronavirus-protest-against-covid-19-restrictions (accessed on 30 August 2020).

[31]　I am grateful to the three independent peer reviewers for their overall constructive feedback and advice to strengthen the argument of the paper. Thanks goes also to the guest editors for the invitation to contribute to this special issue and their encouragement.

[32]　Please, see footnote 17; coverage in the Guardian, 4.9.2020.

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