

## Create, Don't Destroy: Laying the Foundation for a Public Discourse on Racial Justice in Germany

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*A night of violence left Stuttgart, a usually peaceful German city, with many unanswered questions. While politicians immediately condemned the violence as an attack on liberal democracy, some journalists saw the event as an uprising by young men of color against systemic racism. In this article, Janina Selzer makes a case for moving past these partial framings by accepting the possibility of a chaotic, multifaceted, and intersectional explanation for a destructive night.*

In the German imagination, Stuttgart, a city in the country's south, is a prosperous yet sedate city of 630,000 inhabitants near the Black Forest. Famous for its automobile industry, the city has become a model for the peaceful coexistence of people from 170 countries. But this (self-)image came to an abrupt end on June 21, 2020: shortly after midnight, a crowd of mostly intoxicated, underage men—with and without a migration background<sup>1</sup>—began violently attacking the police in front of the city's picturesque opera house. Subsequently, around 500 young men looted and vandalized shops. Of the 50 men who have been arrested, 40% are German citizens of color. An additional 40% hold an Afghan, Bosnian, Croatian, Iraqi, Lithuanian, Moroccan, Nigerian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian or Somali passport (Soldt 2020). The situation escalated after a routine drug search of a young man whom the police describes as “a 17-year-old German citizen with white skin” (RT Deutsch 2020), when dozens of bystanders began throwing empty bottles and stones at officers.

As images reminiscent of the 2005 uprisings in the Parisian *banlieues* circulated around the world (Bury 2020),<sup>2</sup> politicians and journalists hastened to offer their interpretation of the events—long before even the most basic parameters were known. While politicians from every political party—except for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)<sup>3</sup>—condemned the violence as an attack on liberal democracy by a heterogeneous group of partygoers (FDP 2020; Freie Wähler 2020; SPD 2020), some journalists saw the event as an uprising by young men of color against systemic racism (Eddy 2020; Richters 2020). From a sociological perspective, these evaluations raise more questions than they answer: To what extent do the attacks by primarily underage young men present an attack on liberal democracy? What role did the adolescents' shared experience of racism play? In this article, I offer a different analysis—one that embraces, rather than rejects, the chaos of a destructive night—to lay the foundation for a more constructive public discourse on racial justice.

### Framing destruction

Sociologists have frequently demonstrated that no event is inherently political. One day earlier, the violent attack of police officers by 250 adolescents in Berlin did not become a symbol for a

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<sup>1</sup> While the Federal Statistical Office refers to first- and second-generation immigrants as “having a migration background” (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020), the general public tends to extend the label to anyone whom they deem “foreign”. Hence, this article will use the more inclusive term “men of color”.

<sup>2</sup> This comparison was drawn by the city's commissioner for integration, Gari Pavkovic.

<sup>3</sup> The AfD used the event as further evidence for the alleged unassimilability of immigrants and refugees (AfD 2020).

political uprising (dpa 2020b). Nor did the subsequent clashes between primarily white partygoers in Munich and Frankfurt result in a visit by the German interior minister (Stuttgarter Zeitung 2020). Public events are politicized by political actors for political purposes (Alexander 2012). The success of a particular framing depends on the structural positioning of the actors. In Stuttgart, the upcoming local and national elections<sup>4</sup> presented a reason for politicians to engage with an event they might not have paid much attention to otherwise. Countering the dominant discourse of the violence as an act of subversion, journalists were undoubtedly inspired by the global movement for racial justice when they interpreted the events as a political act of resistance. Yet the actors' distinct explanations seem a better indicator for their respective social and political positionings than they are for the complex and intertwined causes of the violence.

**Figure 1. Boarded-up shop window of a knitting-supplies store in Stuttgart on June 22, 2020**



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### **Destruction as a subversive act**

At first glance, framing the violence as an attack on liberal democracy by a heterogeneous group of young men may seem far-fetched. Despite initial claims that left-wing activists were partly responsible for the looting, the police could not find evidence for an organized, politically-motivated act of subversion (Soldt 2020). On the other hand, politicians' concerns about antidemocratic sentiments seem less inept when considering that global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic accentuate the vulnerability of democratic societies (Bieber 2020). In addition to containing the spread of a virus, the German government was faced with thousands of far-right protesters who accused the state of unnecessarily restricting their basic rights (*Tagesschau* 2020). In

<sup>4</sup> Stuttgart will elect a new mayor in November 2020. State and federal elections will follow in 2021.

this light, politicians may have interpreted the growing frustrations over lockdown measures in the party scene as just another indicator of a growing anti-state sentiment.<sup>5</sup>

The politicians' initial emphasis on the heterogeneity of the young men appears to be a more viable aspect of the framing—although it did not include an analysis of the root causes of the violence. The decision was primarily an attempt by the Green mayor Fritz Kuhn to protect already marginalized communities from racist attacks by the far-right (Rülke 2020). At the same time, by de-emphasizing the men's race and ethnicity, politicians attempted to avert the suspicion of systemic racism as a potential explanation. Sanctioned by the symbolic capital of various experts (Bury 2020; Koopmann 2020), politicians argued that accounts of racism that had emerged in response to the global Black Lives Matter movement should themselves be classified as subversive.<sup>6</sup>

### **Destruction as a political act**

Given that the majority of German politicians have consistently refused to acknowledge systemic racism after the Holocaust (Terkessidis 2012)—frequently dismissing evidence as isolated cases—the interpretation by some journalists that the violence was an act of resistance is not unfounded: Suspicion toward the state has intensified since 2011, after it was revealed that police officers in at least six states had, over the course of seven years, systematically failed to consider racist motives behind a series of murders, costing the lives of 10 people of color—murders later attributed to the National Socialist Underground (in German: Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund; NSU) (Bernhard 2019). Furthermore, the public announcement by the police in Stuttgart that tracing the young men's ancestry would help the investigation (Maier 2020)—suggesting that their race or ethnicity in itself could explain the behavior—shows that Stuttgart is not immune to systemic racism. Nevertheless, it remains unclear why the situation escalated that Saturday night, right after Black Lives Matter activists had praised their productive cooperation with the police—which had not enforced social distancing rules at a rally when organizers were overwhelmed by the number of protesters (Niess 2020).

Further complicating the framing, by foregrounding the young men's race and ethnicity, journalists implicitly assumed that an explanation was needed for why so many men of color had become violent in the first place. What is omitted is that around 60% of under-18-year-olds in Stuttgart are people of color (Bury 2019). The young men's presence during the events may, thus, partially be a reflection of Stuttgart's diversity. While these young men have a higher likelihood of being discriminated against, the array of nationalities and legal statuses would suggest that their experiences are far from homogeneous. Hence, the singular emphasis on one explanatory variable risks obscuring additional social factors that could have triggered the violence.

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<sup>5</sup> However, tensions between a segment of partygoers and the police emerged long before the pandemic: after growing unrest among primarily disadvantaged youth, the city introduced a street-worker program in 2012. Owing to its almost immediate success, the program was discontinued in 2013 (Obst 2020).

<sup>6</sup> In June 2020, an anti-discrimination law in Berlin, which shifts the burden of proof in racial-profiling cases onto police officers, was criticized as an affront to the police (dpa 2020a). Concerns over systemic racism in the German police force, voiced by the Social Democrat Saskia Esken and the journalist Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, have been cited as primary drivers of the violence in Stuttgart (dpa 2020c; Koopmann 2020).

**Figure 2. “Diversity”: the opera house in Stuttgart, a popular gathering place for young adults**



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### **Laying a new foundation**

If emphasizing the heterogeneity of the young men has precluded a discussion of systemic racism in Germany, and the sole foregrounding of the men’s race and ethnicity has prevented a more granular analysis of the causes, what would a multifaceted and intersectional analysis look like? First and foremost, such an analysis has to accept the possibility for chaos—that is to say, not one but many interrelated explanations may be required to comprehend what happened. Statistically speaking, for example, the vandalism in Stuttgart is not part of a larger trend. Juvenile delinquency has been decreasing since the mid-2000s and has remained relatively stable since 2015 (Baier 2020).

Historically, the vandalism is part of a social phenomenon with roots in the “beatnik riots” in the 1950s, when young white men across Germany clashed with the police on several occasions without apparent reason (Kurme 2006). What unites the otherwise diverse groups of actors, then and now, is their gender and their level of intoxication, as well as their relatively low societal position. Although politicians and journalists seem to take the young men’s gender for granted, the absence of women indicates that the influence of hegemonic masculinity on the men’s behavior is worth examining (Connell 2000). Moreover, a multifaceted analysis should investigate the reciprocity between hegemonic masculinity, excessive alcohol consumption, and an increased propensity to violence, weaving together social and nonsocial factors (see Smithsimon 2018).

More importantly, frustrations over their marginalization—due to both economic inequality and experiences of racism—need to be taken seriously (Drobinski and Henzler 2020). With a poverty rate of 8.9%, for instance, Stuttgart falls below the national average. Yet people of color are disproportionately represented (*Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg* 2018). In the summer of 2020, the already tenuous situation was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, when schools, libraries, and gyms remained closed, forcing young adults from disadvantaged

backgrounds to stay home under precarious conditions (Langer 2020). Frequently, the only affordable option for less affluent adolescents of color was to congregate in the city's public parks, where they were regularly targeted by the police (Bilger *et al.* 2020).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive analysis of the events, the intricate interplay between social and nonsocial factors, economic inequality, as well as racial and gender oppression, demonstrates the shortcomings of partial explanations (see Crenshaw 1991). At best, they offer an incomplete account of a violent night; at worst, they become a tool for continued colorblind racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Although a sociological analysis cannot dismantle the multiple forms of oppression by itself, it can lay the foundation for an empirically grounded, differentiated, and critical discourse on racial justice. If the goal is to create a more egalitarian society, not to destroy its very foundations, then politicians, journalists, and social scientists alike have a responsibility to reflect the chaos of the night.

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