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Why It Was Never About The Mask: Germany's New Protest Movement

Germany was amongst the countries that reacted fastest and most efficiently to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is now deemed the “*second safest country during the pandemic*”, with only Israel preceding it. Though like many things during this uncertain time, it is debated whether masks are the most efficient of solutions, it seems like there is a clear connection between Germany’s quick and widespread mandatory mask-implementation in public spaces and the low infection- and death-rates. In Berlin, for example, masks on public transport were mandatory over a month before the same rule was implemented in London. Berlin even went as far as fining people with 50 Euros or more if they refused to comply.

After the first wave of panic – characterized by mass-buying and toilet paper hoarding, Germany quickly entered what seems to be the second phase: ignorance – lulled into a false sense of security. This gave rise to a number of people who started questioning the necessity of the masks, deeming the virus as harmless and blaming Merkel and the Government for wanting to ‘control’ and ‘enslave’ the German population.

On Saturday, August 1st, the Stuttgarter Queerdenken 711, which has documented ties to right-wing organizations but steadily denies any political orientation – held a protest which they titled ‘*Tag der Freiheit*’ (Day of Freedom), which, according to them, was to celebrate the “*end of the pandemic*”. As unworldly and ridiculous as this may seem to some – it would be fatal to underestimate. Over 17.000 people turned up, travelling to Berlin from all over the country: from anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists, to so-called mask-oppositionists, but also people waving imperial flags, chanting nationalist songs – mask-less and distance-less. The protest was shut down after about four hours due to the steady breach of protest regulations.

‘*Covidioten*’ or ‘*Covidiots*’ is what they are being called, and while they do not make up a majority,

putting all attendees into one corner of unintelligent, right-wing idiots would just be as ignorant as one may be quick to deem them. Rather, the interesting question at hand is, what is it about masks specifically, that provokes so much unrest?

In 1976 the seatbelt requirement for cars was implemented in Germany. What is now the unquestioned first action after entering your car, at the time, was the source of heavy societal unrest: people were convinced their freedom was being taken away and women, specifically, were concerned about their health with seatbelts pressing down on their breasts. Sound familiar? Minus the breasts concern – the mask-question is essentially history repeating itself. The only difference, and what is maybe too much to ask, seat belts you wear for your safety – masks you wear for others. On the other hand, seatbelts are a permanent regulation – masks will only endure as long as the pandemic does.

However, I believe that masks (and seatbelts, for that matter) were never truly of interest to any oppositionists. Rather, they are visual markers of political and governmental compliance.

During this time, where individual cooperation to serve a greater cause is key, it is the perfect

opportunity for those unhappy with the political situation to openly and simply show their opposition. Just refuse to wear a mask and suddenly, everyone on the train, the bus or in the shop knows that you don't comply, that you do not believe what the people in power tell you.

Pictures are circulating on social media right now showing pictures of groups of children wearing masks, provocatively asking "*Is this what happy children look like?*" – quite frankly, I believe those children would be far more unhappy at their Grandma's funeral than wearing a piece of cloth on their face at school for a while. But that was never the point and arguing this way will often be pointless. Concern for children – like masks supposedly weakening the immune system and conspiracy theories about government control – are being pushed to the foreground, and behind it is massive frustration, frustration with the Government that has existed long before COVID-19. For example, over the past years one of the most significant points of contention, causing a societal split in Germany, was Merkel's refugee policy. Thus, it is no surprise that many right-wing supporters show up at anti-corona regulation protests, as they grant a new platform to show discontent.

It is here, that politics enters dangerous territory. Identifying the protestors as indicators of Germany's political and societal problems, not merely as '*Covidiot*s', is not only necessary but is the democratic thing to do.

Media coverage of the Queerdenken 711 march was surprisingly tainted with bias – interviews with attendees seemed overly provocative and the clips selected were almost exclusively ridiculing attendees. Handling it in this way gives far right-wing parties such as the AfD and NPD the tools they need to gain more support. This is because it proves them right.

Although it is uncomfortable – this is exactly the time to ask the hard questions: is the media as accurate and neutral as it could be? Was communication and transparency regarding COVID-regulations sufficient?

It is easy to label those who will not wear masks as stupid, selfish and inconsiderate, but it will not bring us further. Whether we agree or not, everyone should have the chance to speak up, and more importantly, be listened to. The problem runs deeper than the question of mask or no mask and COVID-19 provides the perfect opportunity to take some necessary steps forward.

