Postmodern-Pandemics and Protests: COVID-19 as a platform

Scapegoating, conspiracy and authoritarian narratives –
The cases of Germany and Israel

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Abstract

The outbreak of a global post-modern pandemic in 2020, led to a variety of civic protests in different countries. This paper analyzes the protests within German and Israeli societies and thereby examines similarities and differences between the civic positions expressed in those countries. In the following we will focus on three main issues: 1. Xenophobia, scapegoating, conspiracy theories and authoritarianism as ideological reactions to post-modern pandemics. 2. COVID-19 related protests in Israel and Germany 3. The relation between new social conditions which result from the pandemic and attempts to instrumentalize them and use the virus in order the spread of authoritarian ideologies and excluding actions.

Introduction

After the death of US-citizen George Floyd as a result of racist police violence, a global movement against racism emerged. The protests focused not only on racially motivated police arrests, but also criticized structurally anchored, systemic and everyday ongoing racism. It is possible, that the coronavirus pandemic has not only led to a global wave of protests, but also changed the way how people protest around the world.

Public protests during a pandemic have prompted the concern that close contact of participants could lead to a spike in case counts of infections. Even though being

outdoors seems to decrease the risk of exposure, it still presents a dilemma because staying home would be safer in many cases. Nevertheless, it would be hypocritical to expect protesters to stay at home, while people have to attend to their work on a daily basis and risk their health even in industries which are not vital for society.

In Germany, especially in big cities, anti-racist protests emerged as well. With several thousand people participating in each protest and a total of around 100,000 participants nationwide, these were the largest demonstrations of civic society in Germany since the outbreak of the pandemic in spring 2020 (cf. Agar 2020).

In Israel, the general practice of protesting has changed in the past few years. During summer 2011 the biggest protest in countries' history emerged which demanded "social justice to the people" and involved the participation of approximately 250 thousand people (cf. Hertzog 2013). Since then, "protest" became a more common civilian tool for many Israeli citizens. Under this shift, COVID-19 brought a higher number of protests that spread rapidly on a daily basis.

1. Pandemic in post-modern times and public reactions in past decades

By the year of 2008 the *HIV/AIDS* pandemic took the lives of 25 million humans all over the world and got 33 million infected. It is considered to be the first global postmodern pandemic with devastating costs (cf. Kallings 2008). "AIDS took the world by surprise […] (and) had provoked panic, stigmatization and scapegoat finding, […] put the limelight on discrimination and social problems" (Ibid: 218). Kallings is trying to give a wide perspective on the variety of epidemics' dimensions, which includes social acts and responses such as stigmatization, scapegoating and xenophobia, evolving within the process of dealing with an unknown enemy such as a virus. In connection with sexual liberation of gay men in the US and the ability to follow epidemiology, "AIDS became associated with homosexual men and a 'decadent western lifestyle" (Ibid: 231). According to Kallings, in Europe HIV infections were related to people's immigration and migration from high risk countries such as Africa. "In Asia, HIV only started to spread towards the end of

the 1980s […] It was then transmitted to the heterosexual population through female sex workers, transmission in Asia is still primarily linked to injecting drug use" (Ibid: 232). Kallings emphasizes that at the beginning of pandemics' spread different conspiracy theories emerged. A professor from east Berlin claimed that the virus was "allegedly planted as deliberate disinformation by the KGB during the cold war". Accordingly, HIV was "constructed by man from related viruses in sheep and cattle, and was spread deliberately by the CIA" (Ibid: 239). Similarly, Wangari Maathai from Kenya, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, claimed HIV to be a biological weapon created by an evil scientist in the West in order to control the African population. Kallings concludes: "There seems to be a reflex-like tendency to oppress and exclude deviant individuals and groups, causing discrimination and stigmatization of people living with HIV/AIDS as well as of homosexual men and ethnic minorities" (Ibid: 240).

Another example to look at is the case of *influenza H1N1 (*swine flu) outburst in May 2009, which began in southern Mexico and spread globally (cf. Smallman 2015: 2). The majority of the US population believed that federal government, corporations or both were involved in at least one conspiracy to cover up health information regarding *influenza H1N1* (cf. Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Mexico became the main focus of American scapegoating due to the shared border (cf. Faix et.al 2009). As a result, the Mexican and Latin population within the American borders were stigmatized as carriers of the virus, whereas in Mexico, people worried about the transport of swine flu from the United States (Smallman 2015). In Egypt, the political forces were driven by health and ideologic-religious reasons and blamed the farmers who raised pigs during the pandemic (Ibid: 8)

The outbreak of H1N1 pandemic in 2009, moved civilians world-wide to create narratives about the virus, which "reflected their fears not only of the disease but also their mistrust of authorities" (Smallman 2015: 17). Moreover, the appearance of a virus shifts the main focus from health issues to larger systems of social, political, and economic relationships." At the core of these narratives was the question of trust, which often entailed conspiracy theories" (Ibid)

Eleven years later, COVID-19 attracted similar thoughts in a variety of spheres such as the political one. In terms of IR (international relations) – president Donald Trump established one of the early conspiracy/scapegoat notions by blaming China for the spread of the virus. Trump and secretary of state Mike Pompeo referred to it as "Huan virus", and thereby followed the goal of empowering the US as a world leader (cf. Lake: 2006; Nye: 2015). China as well, in some cases, claimed that the virus was created in a US military basis (Miller 2020) and a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry claimed for some time that the USA had imported the virus into China (Uhlig 2020). Already in the beginning of March, European Media pointed out the possible connection between racism and xenophobia when the virus is called **"China-virus" (cf. *Europe Today 2020*). Under the headline of "xenophobic scapegoating", "Al Jazeera" reported that democrats, immigrants and law representatives attacked president Trump in reference to his tweet on the decision to suspend all immigrations to USA because of "the invisible enemy" (cf. *Al Jazeera* 2020). Some media channels argued Trump's scapegoating of foreigners is a xenophobic strategic weapon due to up-coming elections (cf. *The Guardian* 2020). "Time" magazine reported cases of exclusion of Asian look civilians, immigrants and tourists worldwide (*cf. Time 2020*).

1.1 The logic of scapegoating and conspiracy theories

Besides the spread of disinformation and the behavior of political actors, COVID-19 has spawned a vast number of conspiracy theories and allegations against certain groups and individuals, which exceed those statements of world leaders mentioned above. Across historical pandemics scapegoating has been one mechanism to compensate fear, anger, desperation, uncertainty and feeling of powerlessness in times of crisis.

Scapegoating can be understood as the "process of directing one's anger, frustration, and aggression onto others and targeting them as the source of one's problems and misfortunes" (APA 2020). As a hostile tactic it is closely related to stereotyping and exclusion, but can also function as a mechanism to displace or project

anxieties onto groups and individuals. Throughout history, scapegoating has included almost every imaginable categorization of people (race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation etc.), but is also applied to organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) or political groups.

Conspiracy theories share certain characteristics with the mechanism of scapegoating: In general, conspiracy theories try to explain the causes of significant events by asserting they are due to secret plots by powerful groups or actors (cf. Taylor 2019: 63). They construct a group of conspirators who follow a secret agenda and enforce it to harm a third party. In this respect, the alleged power of the accused group is one key element, which cannot be found in all case of scapegoating. Moreover, as an attempt of a secular world explanation, conspiracy theories are closely linked to antisemitism on a structural level, which can be characterized by three structural elements: Personification, Manichaeism (interpretation of the world as antagonistic contrast of two principles, Good and Evil) and the construction of identitarian collectives (cf. Haury 2002).

While mass protests were playing out in many countries like India, Chile or Hong Kong prior to the spread of COVID-19; especially the responses of governments to the ongoing pandemic have led to protests and demonstrations around the world. Various strikes have also occurred. Often people protested the worsening of economic conditions, they demanded assistance from the government, better health protection or the end of the lockdown. Sometimes scapegoating was used to blame certain minorities for the negative impacts of the pandemic. Moreover, conspiracy theories and rumors about the virus spread worldwide.

2. COVID-19 related protests in Germany

Protests directly related to the social and economic impact of the virus outbreak took place in Germany since March 2020. The topics of the protests are as varied as their forms, particularly because the initial regulations and contact restrictions made it necessary to find new ways to protest.

The difficult situation caused by the pandemic was brought to the attention of various economic sectors such as tourism, the event industry or the gastronomy sector, especially by owners of small businesses in Germany. For example, on the 24th of April 2020 the "empty chairs" campaign drew the attention of restaurateurs who had to close their premises due to infection prevention measures to their plight (cf. DPA 2020). The initiative called for an increase in short-time work compensation, a permanent reduction in the VAT rate and higher subsidies for companies in need. The protests took place in almost 80 cities across the country (cf. Ibid).

So far, protests were also held on to other relevant socio-political issues during the pandemic. First of all, there were demonstrations on the subject of refugee migration. The protests occurred in several German cities, criticizing the European refugee policy in general, the conditions in German refugee camps (cf. Zier 2020) and, due to the catastrophic situation in refugee camps on the external borders of the European Union (such as in Moria, Greece), called for the acceptance of refugees in Germany (cf. NDR 2020b). Several hundred people attended in various demonstrations, in some cases around 200 - 500 people in large cities (cf. NDR 2020a).

Protests of the climate protection movement "Fridays for Future", which in Germany, as in other countries, are primarily organized and attended by young people and students, also continued during the pandemic. But not in the conventional way: On March 24th, an online demonstration was held, which was broadcasted on several social networks such as Facebook and reached up to 20,000 simultaneous viewers (Tagesschau 2020). The demonstration was directed against the neglect of the climate crisis, especially in times of pandemic, and for example against the reintroduction of a bonus for the scrapping of cars. In addition, thousands of posters and placards of the movement were placed in front of the government building "Reichstag" in Berlin. Further small actions took place in different cities (Ibid).

In addition, there were other small demonstrations and protests, e.g. on the subject of nuclear waste transports, the situation of homeless people during the pandemic

or by employees of the nursing professions, e.g. from hospitals and old people's homes.

In summary, the demonstrations were rather small in terms of the number of participants and were rarely linked thematically. In general, the applicable infection control measures were observed during the demonstrations. Many protests, especially those on the subject of refugee migration, were nevertheless dispersed by the police. But more importantly, the sporadic characteristic of demonstrations also included the strengthening of strict opponents to the measures implemented in order to limit the spread of the virus.

2.1 Authoritarian rebels – a new type of protest?

During the COVID-19 pandemic many conspiracy theories about the source of the virus and the cause of the infections' agent emerged. As mentioned before, many countries have seen demonstrations during the pandemic with various political or economic demands, but in Germany vaccination opponents, political activists with drastically different political views and conspiracy theorists protested together. The biggest rally in May in Stuttgart was joined by more than 5000 people. Besides the US, this form of anti-lockdown-protests has been rare.

In the following, the protests of the so-called "Corona-rebels" and factors, which contribute to the emergence of this "national particularity", will be analyzed.

While small protests of conspiracy theorists could be observed in many countries, in Germany such demonstrations, where people with contradicting political convictions and interests came together, prevailed in the public sphere. Some political scientists describe this phenomenon as the emergence of a "new political cross-front", which connects esoteric leftists, right-wings extremists, populists and other conspiracy ideologues (cf. Rensmann 2020). During the protests this unlikely alliance united under various names, for example "Corona-rebels", "Resistance 2020" (Widerstand 2020), "lateral thinkers" (Querdenker) or hygiene-rallies. Here, the protests will be subsumed under the term "Corona-*rebels*" as it is of analytical value as well.

Except for the United States, where President Trump stages himself a savior in the struggle against a global elite, the deep-state and the "China-virus", such anti-corona protests were uncommon. Despite, also the situations in the US and in Germany differ, as in the former libertarians tend to be the main agents of the protests. In contrast, in Germany people united under the idea of "national community": Many protesters consider themselves as neither left nor right, but as "the people", who come together to resist against "those in charge", a small elite or minority. Even though the participants follow widely ranging motives, they share the idea of a small corrupt elite, which is conspiring and using the pandemic to control and manipulate the majority. Conspiracy ideologues draw upon this perception and try to radicalize it. This propaganda is facilitated through the evolution of many liberal democracies during the 21st century towards "post-democracies" (Crouch 2004), the rise of neoliberalism and social atomization.

Disease outbreaks foster the spread of conspiracy theories, especially when the nature of the disease is rarely understood (cf. Taylor 2019: 63). For the case of COVID-19, the idea of compulsory vaccination to be carried out and used for the purpose of "controlling the population", is one key element in the propaganda of the agitators.

In general, feelings of fear and powerlessness amplify the need to express and to process the own discontent: Authoritarian ideologies or esoteric thinking, which open up an opportunity to get rid of these feelings, become more attractive in times of crisis. On the individual level this can be understood as "flight into security", a pattern of people in modern capitalist societies to escape from uncertain and stressful situations, which provoke insecurity and anxiety (cf. Oesterreich 2005).

Similarly, conspiratorial beliefs offer a "solution"[1] to the tormenting conflict between the desire to be independent and strong and the feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. Consequently, participants of the anti-corona-protests gain security in

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[1] Nevertheless, conspiracy theories as a cultural pattern are no more of a solution than neurotic manifestations ever are; the underlying conflict is not removed but just silenced and in some cases it might not solve anything in relative terms, but leaves the individual caught in new suffering. This underlines again that human behavior is not always rational and purposeful, but also driven by irrationality and unconscious forces.

a twofold manner: On the one hand against the torture of doubt through the adoption of a Manichaean ideology which reduces complexity and dissolves ambivalences, on the other hand by finding themselves united with others who share the same ideas. Next to the relief from the burden of uncertainty, a sense of urgency arises as conspiracy theorists claim privileged insight into the hidden powerful groups who control the world.

As a result, the formation of the anti-corona-protests can be classified as "authoritarian rebellion."[2] Economic motives play a minor part in the protests. Here, it needs to be reflected that Germany – compared to other countries – does not suffer from high unemployment yet as a result of the crisis (cf. Davar 2020). Anyhow, the protesters do not want to establish other social conditions, under which people would be less vulnerable for pandemics or economic crises. Economic laws for example are considered as "natural" or unchangeable fate. Instead, the participants deny the threat of COVID-19, they personalize or ethnicize social problems and project everything negative on alleged culprits. Hence, they imagine restoring the idealized status quo ante, but this time as a homogenous community, where all contradictions of modern societies are dissolved.

This tendency to personalize politics and the pattern of friend-enemy distinction (Us vs. Bill Gates) constitute distinct features of right-wing-populism. In addition, the idea that there is a homogenous will of the people and that politics should just be an expression of that will, underline the anti-democratic character of the protests. Because the national elite is considered as too weak it should be replaced by an authoritarian leader who embody the people's will.

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[2] That the protesters seem to fight against those forces like the government that block their independence and freedom, but are still characterized as authoritarian might sound contradictory. However, their fight against authority is rather defiance and an attempt to overcome their feeling of powerlessness. Whether the authority actually furthers their interests or protects them is of no relevance for the rebellion. Psychologically, for authoritarians the longing for submission remains, even though they stage themselves as "rebels" (cf. Fromm 1941: 167-168).

While protesters stage themselves as "freedom fighters" against "corona dictatorship", their propaganda is based on the self-stylization as victims. Throughout Germany demonstrators used this tactic of self-victimization to voice their (secondary) antisemitic resentments: Slogans like "Masks will set you free" or "Vaccination will set you free" have been used on banners, protesters started wearing six pointed, yellow stars with the word "unvaccinated" on them and dressed up as concentration camp prisoners – just to name a few incidents. This form of antisemitism, motivated by the deflection of guilt, is still widespread in Germany and manifests itself in the anti-corona-protests. Apart from this specific guilt-defensiveness antisemitism, the logic of conspiracy theories and the mechanism of scapegoating, are closely related to antisemitism and share certain structural elements.

For example, the widespread idea of Bill Gates as a powerful and sinister manipulator, who wants to poison the "ordinary people" with vaccines and plans to enrich himself through the control of the pharmaceutical industry, is linked to a range of classical antisemitic stereotypes. Instead of offering plausible explanations for complex problems, conspiracy ideologues present individuals as scapegoats and thereby reduce complexity of the world to a minimum.

But why did these kinds of anti-corona-protests spark all over Germany and not similarly in other countries?

In general, political opportunity structures are necessary conditions that must be present for protests to occur, but alone do not provide sufficient cause for the emergence of social movements. In Germany the Constitutional Court ruled in April, that citizens have the right to hold political protests, if they adhere to social distancing rules. Beyond the factor of opportunity structures, contingency in moments of protests always needs to be taken into account. However, it is possible to identify a number of factors which contributed to the emergence of the widespread anti-corona mobilizations in Germany.

First and in light of the country's low coronavirus death rate, exactly that very success became a driving force of the protest: As Germany has been relatively successful in curbing the spread of the disease it is easier for conspiracy ideologues

and populists to persuade people the pandemic is either just a flu, a hoax or even a part of a greater plan to control the population.

Secondly, even though the protests attracted heterogeneous participants, they could grow on already existing networks – especially in social media – and also its basis is constituted by people who have been ideologically convinced before. Apart from the networks, also on an ideological and rhetorical level the protests draw upon different protest movements of the last years, namely the Vigils for Peace (Montagsmahnwachen) in 2014, that arose after pro-Russian protests in Ukraine, and PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West), a formation which had its peak during the so-called refugee-crisis in 2015 and can be considered as an authoritarian, anti-democratic movement. Both of them attracted people with far-right tendencies, an antisemitic and/or anti-US worldview and participants share an exclusive idea of "the people" as an antithesis to a "global elite" which allegedly plans to implement a new world order. Here, the resemblance to the anti-corona-protests is evident.

Thirdly, the mobilization against the lockdown-measures functions as a platform for occultism and anti-vaxxers: Compared to other European countries, Germany has a relatively high proportion of people who refuse vaccinations, around 20 % of the population are skeptical when it comes to vaccines (cf. Horstkötter et al. 2019: 32) Moreover, also homeopathy, anthroposophy and the back-to-nature movement originate from Germany. Some leading figures of the growing esoteric community called for protests against mandatory vaccination; with conspiracy theorists and the far right they share an opposition to science, as well as an affinity to antisemitism and a hostility to modernity. Even though esoterism cannot be assigned to just one political camp, it resembles authoritarian ideologies insofar, as it is based on the idea of superior powers like fate or nature to which the individual has

to submit oneself (cf. Adorno 1974). This provides a fertile soil for anti-vaccination propaganda and social Darwinism.[3]

Furthermore, the anti-corona-measures were implemented in Germany at a time when the influence of the far right was strong. Especially far-right prepper groups, fantasized about a day X and a deep crisis, which could accelerate the collapse of the liberal order. The corona crisis fits into this narrative and fosters mobilizations and also radicalization.

Last but not least, skepticism towards the danger of the virus was fueled by different media campaigns targeting for example the prominent coronavirus expert Christian Drosten, who has been subject to a series of attacks by Germany's most read newspaper BILD. In addition, the newspaper gave critics of the corona measures a prominent platform and headlined among others "Lockdown was a huge mistake". These articles can be considered as part of a broader campaign in order to reestablish the status quo and serve the interests of employers and capital. Its influence on the social discourse and on the anti-corona-protests should not be underestimated.[4]

To conclude, many factors contributed to the emergence of these specific anti-corona-mobilizations in Germany. Nonetheless, protests led by conspiracy theorists were not confined to Germany and also the majority of the population support the government and the measures introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19. While participant numbers of the rallies dwindled drastically in the last weeks, analysts assume that the protests fostered radicalization and fed potential violence.

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[3] One part of a speech of Ken Jebsen, a main figure of the anti-corona-mobilizations, he held at a rally at the aforementioned Vigils for Peace in 2014 illustrates particularly well how the posited superiority of nature is inherently anti-democratic: "*My role model is nature. In the forest there is no war, the forest does not produce rubbish. And the migrant birds make it to Africa every year. If they were organized democratically, they had only reached Sylt [a German island, F.K]. No, they get along fine without democracy*" (cf. Geyer 2014). In the ideology of Jebsen, nature represents a strong power, psychologically this satisfies certain desires for submission.

[4] But the corona-rebels agree with these players of the capital side not only in terms of the dismissal of the lockdown: Even though the ideological backgrounds might differ (nature vs the market as superior powers), neoliberals, right-wing authoritarians and also parts of the political left share the idea of social Darwinism and conceive society as "struggle for existence". In order to assess a continuity of fascist eugenic and euthanasia and its relevance for the anti-corona-discourse today further research would be needed.

In addition, the protests point out the authoritarian potential in the German society and the threat of an antidemocratic rebellion; when the limits of the sayable shift, in many cases it may be just a small step from the belief in conspiracy myths to advocate manifest antisemitism.

3. Israeli protests and scapegoating in the era of COVID-19

When COVID-19 started to spread in Israel, foreign caregivers' employees with Asian appearance from India, Thailand and more far-east countries became the first victims of racism (cf. MEKOMIT 2020; MAKO 2020). At the same time and similar to other countries, civic protests emerged. A variety of socio-economic, political and health demands led to protests from bottom-up: The first protests were initiated by independent self-employed business owners who rallied against unequal neoliberal welfare state distribution of financial support due to COVID-19. Following this, thousands of stage performers, sound and back line technicians representing Music and culture industry workers started to protest. On July 11th, at least 10,000 people[5] (as estimated by police) participated in a protest at the central square in Tel Aviv under the slogan *"Financial Corona"*. Certainly, the demands are linked to the unemployment rate of 21 %, that puts Israel second to the US in the level of unemployment amongst OECD countries (cf. Calcalist 2020: b). Moreover, students protested nationwide in demand of future exit plans and financial support as many lost their job due to the pandemic. Social workers organized protests and criticized the shortage of staff and that they are considered as vital employers but still underpaid. Likewise, the Teachers union representatives refused to extend the year of school on their own expense (cf. Calcalist 2020: a). Moreover, protests against violence toward women emerged: On one hand continuing the theme of *#MeeToo* protests from latest years, and on the other hand due to the fact that the quarantine had led to a rise of 16% in cases of domestic violent against women and children according to police reports. This development could be oberserved in many countries worldwide (cf. *BizPortal* 2020).

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[5] The public that took place reported an estimation of 80,000 participants, but since there is no definitive way to know the exact numbers, we chose to stay with the official police report.

Similar to what happened in the US, but in much smaller scale, other protests referred to the struggle against Police violence – locally against the Ethiopian community – and on the matter of over policing towards Arab community due to the death of a young innocent Arabic in Jerusalem recently (cf. *Ynet* 2020: a). Even though obvious restrictions on personal distance of 2 meters from each other exist, there were no lawful prohibitions regarding protests in Israel. This also enabled the emergence of protests against the decision of national annexation plan: People protested in demand of not undermining the existing balance in the middle east with signing on an allegedly new territorial agreement made by president Trump and Prime minister Netanyahu (Ynet 2020: b). Similarly, leftists and centre voters protested against a new pandemic-related law including public surveillance by the secret service and the expansion of police authority in private houses. The most significant political protest named "Black flags protests" targeted the new government established after three public elections within a year and a half. Protesters claimed that the latest actions offended the rule of the law, due to the fact that the Prime minister Netanyahu is serving the public and at the same in three indictments accused of allegedly bribe, deceive, and miss-conduct behaviour. They continue to demonstrate daily in different areas surrounding the prime ministers' house, the Israeli parliament and in central location around the capital Jerusalem and other cities and central junctions (cf *Walla! News* 2020: a).

Particularly relevant to the issue of xenophobia or scapegoating were the remarks, acts and expression against the *orthodox Jew community* settled in specific cities across Israel. It was fostered by public media, which for example connected reports about the rise in the number of people infected with COVID-19 with images of an orthodox Jew wearing a mask. To conclude, scapegoating towards this certain community can definitely be identified. The reasons for that are not absolute, and can be related to the early fragile relations between seculars and religious Jews in Israel. Nonetheless it also points out the "normative" effects of the atmosphere during a pandemic and its common reactive actions created by it.

3.1 Scapegoating as an anti-virus reaction

From the very beginning of quarantine policy in Israel, there was a problem of police reinforcement of restrictions, especially in the orthodox communities around the country. Due to this fact, xenophobic notes, remarks and actions began to arise from the public sphere but also from the political one. Most of the rabi-leaders of the big closed orthodox education facilities with space for hundreds of students, ordered that these remain open and to continue schooling as usual, and by doing so, objecting to the states rule of prohibition on social gatherings (cf. IDI 2020). In contrast, all the public orthodox girls' schools were shut down immediately as ordered by the ministry of health. Moreover, scholars already had reported orthodox Jews' wide use of public transportation during the month of March. In addition, also synagogues in the strongly affected areas remained open during the first week as the government ordered severe restrictions nationwide.

The Israeli Institution for Democracy points out four main causes for these types of resistance arises from the orthodox community in Israel during the outbreak of COVID-19: 1. Religious reasoning 2. Religion-state relations 3. Disinformation 4. Life structure and orthodox customs. (cf. Malachi et al. 2020). On 19th of March, Israeli government approved a set of emergency regulations regarding COVID-19 strategic. In terms of law, it was not allowed to leave the house borders without a vital cause. With the facilitating of government orders as part of the law, the orthodox leadership obeyed this type of orders more strictly, compared to the first restrictions regarding the demand of publics' new behaviour such as wearing masks and distance keeping. It is also linked to the policing authorities which took more actions of reinforcement even before the emergency regulations were established, so the orthodox community managed to eventually blend in and follow the rule of law.

By all statistics, COVID-19 had spread more easily in the orthodox communities compared to other populations, not only in Israel but also in the US for example. In Israel, the national centre of fighting COVID-19 reported in March that 30% of new infections originated in the orthodox community during their staying in religious facilities such as synagogues (Ibid).). As an expectable result, reactions of

scapegoating emerged right after this data was published. One of the Israeli parliament members Ya'akov Asher sent a letter to the general manager of ministry of health in which he asked to *"publish data in order to stop the brutal incitement against the orthodox public that carries out a lot of multi-child families"* (cf. *The Marker* 2020). Asher's warning was not created in an empty space.

According to the report of the governments unit for coordinating the fight against racism, published under the headline "The epidemic of hate: a flood of incitements complaining against orthodox Jews", out of a total number of 159 complaints received during March 2020, 131 of them involved incitements against the orthodox public. In comparison, last years' data regarding the same time and theme includes a total of 25 complaints (cf. *IsraelHaYom* 2020) At the beginning of June, one of the official regulatory bodies – the authority of media and radio communication – revealed a report saying that one of Israels' top news anchor expressed a racist opinion regarding orthodox Jews during the era of COVID-19, and by that "scapegoating the whole community" (93FM radio 2020).

Apart from politicians and media influence, in some cases also employers in the private sector expressed a general assumption that orthodox Jews are more contagious than other Jews. One of them worth mentioning is the case of NOVA-MED company, which produces cotton swabs that are required to detect COVID-19 laboratories. It announced to its employees in the beginning of April it realizes all the orthodox Jew workers to a long term unpaid leave of absence, while all the other "ordinary" workers, continued as usual in this vital facility. After publishing the story, most of the employees kept their jobs, but were still separated as they were assigned to work only on night shifts (Ibid).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Bedouin community was also considered suffering from scapegoating because of high-infected areas mainly in villages of the south. But unlike the orthodox group, the community faded from the spotlight as soon as other Jewish cities were considered "red zone" areas that contained a high number of people infected. But the scapegoating against orthodox Jews still continues, regardless of media criticism, politicians speaking out against it or all

the other zones of high-infected areas. Also several minor protest from orthodox Jews had not led to a change of the discourse yet. One of the latter took place on July 11th in Jerusalem, joined by a few hundreds of orthodox protesters, asking the government to stop what they referred to as "selective quarantine and police rein-forcement". At the same time, the big protest against "the financial corona" was set in *Kikar HaBima* in Tel Aviv which resulted in mutual violence from demonstrators and police forces. Here, it was obvious that it was impossible to reinforce COVID-19 regulations like masks and distancing. Besides, most news-headlines focused on the violence, not just by police, but by participants who threw stones at a central bank charter in the area, vandalised other private and public goods and blocked a few central junctions to continue the protest. The main issue was the lack of gov-ernments' financial support on independent workers (cf. Ma'ariv 2020). The day after, a second protest of orthodox sparked in Jerusalem with hundreds of partici-pants including verbal and physical confrontations with the local police forces. Po-licemen were called "Nazis" and pelted with eggs, claiming that the community is against selective and racist reinforcement and quarantine (cf Walla! News 2020, c). The Minister of the Interior, Arye Derei, a Sephardic orthodox himself and head of a coalition-member party, blamed the police in pre-intended violence and selec-tive reinforcement when it comes to orthodox Jews and compared the incidents to the events of the protest occurred just the day before in Tel Aviv. He claimed that in Tel Aviv the police didn't attack participants violently even though they breached all regulations regarding social distance: *"[…] this must end. We set together with the minister of homeland security to find a solution […] as a representative of the orthodox community in the government I cannot except the hard violence of police forces against orthodox communities. This must stop."* (*Walla! News* 2020: d).

In Israel, there might be a few domestic reasons that can contribute to the under-standing of the form in which scapegoat against orthodox Jews was facilitated. The first and most obvious one is the neoliberal system and its consequences in a pandemic: The absolute dependence on the free markets' assumption and the idea of the self-responsibility of the individual. In this perspective groups in the Israeli population that do not pay taxes or work for a living such as the orthodox Jews but

get financial support from the state are blamed an excluded from the so called "normative citizens". The orthodox Jews could not have stood a chance against working-class citizens and others, who went broke almost overnight.

Secondly, the influence of summer 2011 big protest occurred in Tel Aviv in the claim for "social justice" (cf. Filc and Ram 2013), but this time groups protested rather separate from one another and not unified. Consequently, the orthodox community which usually does not take part in civic society actions, is leaved in a vulnerable place and attacked by those who try to resist the government. Hence, the way to stop this is taking self-action as the latest orthodox protests in Jerusalem did.

A third factor can be drawn from the current political situation of Israeli society: The struggle of establishing a government after three elections in the past year and a half which at the very least indicates political instability and led to mistrust. Consequently, citizens do not trust politicians and therefore the use of civic protest to approach problems becomes more eligible. This can explain the large number of protests against the Israeli government, but also reflects the lack of political ability or desire to unite the people from all sectors. So, scapegoating and discrimination has more space, simple because it is possible and easy.

Fourthly, it is a known fact that security concerns always occupy Israelis, that is particular valid for those who are heavily exposed to security threats, due to mandatory military service. The orthodox community almost definitively does not take part in the service what furthered tensions between the secular community and the orthodox one since the country was established in 1948. That is the base of one of many Israeli deep conflicts that also excludes orthodox Jews from Israeli definition of "normative" citizens.

Fifth and last, while analysing terms like scapegoating or racism and the tool of protest we have to consider the mutual influence of globalization on all western democracies. As the global spread of George Floyds' ethos *"I can't breathe"* from the US showed, through social media and the networking of movements worldwide

protests at one place of the world can contribute to the emergence of protests at another. Moreover, western democracies often face similar problems and conflicts.

4. Conclusion

As shown above, COVID-19 led to a spread of different protests and also changed the way people protest around the world. From being a public health crisis, the spread of the virus has soon turned into an economic, social and political crisis. While many anti-government protests emerged already prior to the pandemic, the policies introduced by governments to curb the spread of the virus had devastating consequences for many people. Therefore, strikes also occurred during the pandemic due to different factors like hazard or low pay and unsafe working conditions. Other protests targeted the lockdown regulations; anti-vaxxers and the far-right used the protests as a platform.

Clearly, the pandemic functions as a burning lens for existing conflicts and contradictions in societies. Psychological factors also play an important role in the way in which people deal with the threat of pandemic infection, but also for coping with feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. As a result, pandemics provide a fertile soil for scapegoating and conspiracy theories, even though the underlying ideologies and the authoritarian potential of the population are nothing new in a qualitative sense.

For Israel, as well as for Germany, we can assume that much more is left unknown yet as the pandemic is still an ongoing situation. In order to conclude the contemporary state of public reactions we can notice similarities and differences. In both countries various protests emerged: While scapegoating plays a role in Israel, in Germany a spread of conspiracy theories and antisemitism could be observed. Beyond, also pandemics prior to COVID-19 fostered reactions based on conspiracy theories and scapegoating. Therefore, during times of pandemics societies should pay attention to xenophobic and authoritarian actions and prevent at least the rise of violence.

Stopping scapegoating and the spread of conspiracy theories during times of crises is not just a question of the political will. The psychological basis for authoritarian ideologies and the exclusion of minorities, is rooted in the economic and social conditions. Here, sea changes are necessary: The precarious self-preservation of the individual, the idea of self-responsibility with the lack of control, the feelings of isolation and powerlessness are characteristic for modern capitalist societies and increase the affective appeal of authoritarian pseudo-solutions to existing conflicts and contradictions. Where people feel inferior and weak, where inequality persists, also nationalism and other anti-emancipatory ideologies will rise.

Without a question, is it necessary to react to racism and scapegoating unambiguously, But at the same time we should move away from a myopic focus on a simplistic conception of "defending democracy" against the threats of populism and the far right. If we do not consider the social basis for authoritarianism, this struggle will remain a Sisyphean task. In light of the ongoing pandemic and also future ones, it is important to change the social conditions and make people less vulnerable for similar situations. While this paper focused on protests related to COVID-19, psychological and social factors need to be considered in order to understand and to manage societal problems associated with pandemics. To conclude, protests play an important role to raise awareness for existing problems and offer the opportunity to express political demands. It could be shown that in times of pandemics, also stigmatization and xenophobia increase: Next to social media, especially rallies and demonstrations were used ass platform for scapegoating and the spread of conspiracy theories. COVID-19 has intensified problems and inequalities that have long existed. If the political left wants to offer an emancipatory alternative to authoritarianism, the crisis has to be confronted with solidarity, different social movements have to unite and fight for a society where the health and the needs of the people are more important than profits for a few.

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