Alexander Harder

Of Cars and Riots

After 22 years, the social-democrat majority in the Berlin Senate has come to an end. At the election in February, the conservative party (CDU) received 28% of the votes, putting them ahead of the Greens and the Social Democrats (SPD), tied with only 18%, as well as the left-wing "Die Linke" (12%) and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), receiving 9%. Negotiations for a grand coalition between CDU and SPD are underway, and it is likely that the conservative candidate Kai Wegner will become the next mayor. Regardless of their success, it is my impression that the election illustrates how the CDU has succeeded in wresting the position of „protest party" from the AfD. They did so by launching a campaign geared towards a somewhat surprising electorate: car drivers.

Against the backdrop of proposals by the Greens that included a car-free city center, the reduction of parking spaces, or a city toll, the CDU mobilized around the car. „Red-Red-Green demonizes the car and wants to re-educate Berliners into cyclists„, reads the website of their Berlin branch. Remarkably, their program makes quite a few concessions regarding communal traffic policy: They demand the expansion of public transport, the extension of fare zones, the improvement of cycling and pedestrian paths, an e-charging infrastructure, and even dream of a Hyperloop – a high-speed system developed by Elon Musk – for the city. But in the campaign, their candidate Kai Wegner preferred to present himself as a protector of motorists or a "patron saint of car drivers", as he stated in a pre-election interview. In the CDU's election program, car drivers need to be protected from threats and demonization by the previous red-red-green coalition. This message was condensed onto the CDU's election slogans plastered across the city: "Berlin ist für Alle da. Auch für Autofahrer" – "Berlin is for everyone. Including car drivers".

The CDU Election Slogan "Berlin Is for Everybody. Including Car Drivers" at Hermannstraße in Neukölln (copyright: Haiko Tobias Sprengel/DER SPIEGEL]

The CDU's focus on motorists was accompanied by a second focus on crime. On New Year's Eve, the Berlin police department reported 145 attacks on law enforcement and emergency personnel, including police officers, fire fighters, and paramedics. This report sparked a moral panic concerning the "Silvesterkrawalle" ("New Year's Riots") as they came to be called. Politicians and newspapers attributed the events to young migrant men in districts such as Neukölln, sparking a debate around the supposed unwillingness of migrants to integrate and the necessary strengthening of criminal. In the ensuing debates, the CDU demanded to know the first names of the suspects, so as to offer "precise prevention measures". In actuality, this inquiry was set to determine the migrant identity of the suspects not on the basis of their citizenship status – which by then was known – but on the basis of their name. Kai Wegner defended this controversial strategy, and accused the red-red-green coalition of turning a blind eye to migrant crime. After the initial debates, it was revealed that the number of attacks was much lower than originally reported, and

that the majority of those arrested were German citizens. Racism was a crucial element of the discursive escalation: The riots were reflexively understood as a "migrant problem" of insufficient "integration", and belonging to German society, according to the CDU's inquiry, was ultimately not established by citizenship but on a first-name basis. In the light of these circumstances, the slogan „Berlin is for everyone" read much differently. Berlin should in no way be there for everyone, but in a subtle way especially for the remarkable figure that is "the car drivers".

In this blog post, I argue that these two phenomena – cars and riots – are related. I thus follow-up on our research in the project "Cultures of Rejection". In the project, we investigate how transformations of everyday life are interpreted in the context of multiple crises. We ask what offers for subjectification, for identification and rejection circulate, and how they are leveraged by right-wing actors. From this angle, "the car drivers" in particular are a fascinating phenomenon. What is the symbolic significance of the car, that makes it a potent point for political mobilization? How do car drivers emerge as vulnerable figures in times of looming climate collapse? And what – if at all – could this staging of the car tell us about the current conjunctures of racism (Demirović/Bojadžijev 2002)? In order to draw a preliminary picture of the current conjuncture and the strengthening of right-wing parties and movements, it is important to understand how social, political, economic and ideological antagonisms are negotiated when figures such as car drivers enter the scene (cf. Hall/Massey 2014:209).

Cars in the auto-mobile society

In this spirit, I want to attend to the car and its prominence in historical and current political discourse, before investigating its drivers. In his essay "Driving While Black" (2001) Paul Gilroy claims that cars ".. are the ur-commodity". He writes that they "...help to periodize our encounters with capitalism as it moves into and leaves its industrial phase, they also politicize and moralize everyday life in unprecedented configurations" (Gilroy 2001:104). The production of cars and the mobility they

provided were foundational for the social formation of “Fordism”, roughly dated between the 1920s and 1980s. Fordism shaped countless, intersecting dimensions of everyday life, ranging from the organization of work (the assembly line) and leisure time (holiday travel, consumption), the architecture of the city (suburbs and inner cities), the gendered division of labor and, not the least, the industrial relations of expropriation, extraction and exploitation with global impacts. Cars are materially and symbolically entangled with this societal model, and as such provide countless connotations ranging from freedom and ownership to masculinity and virility. In the German context, industry, politics, and media contributed to an entanglement of the car with narratives of national progress.

The car was initially a luxury and distinction object for the aristocrats in late 19th century Germany (Sachs 1987:581). The first attempts at turning it into the mass product that we know today were undertaken by the National Socialists. Their goal was, as Adolf Hitler put it in 1934, to “remove its class-based and thus unfortunately also class-divisive character; it must no longer remain a luxury item but must become a utility“ (quoted in Sachs 1987:584). National-socialist propaganda presented the motorization of the “Volksgemeinschaft” and the development of a robust automotive industry as a national path out of the turbulent Weimar years. The car stood for a uniquely German trajectory into modernity, based on expediency, utility, and the mastery of technology. The practical designs of German car models were contrasted with lavish and low-quality US-American counterparts by the press, exhibiting the supposed superiority of the German national character (Rinn 2008:103). Despite increases in production, actual car ownership remained a privilege for the few. By 1939, manufacturers such as Volkswagen were instead supplying war equipment by exploiting forced labor, in order to aid the struggle of the “Volksgemeinschaft” against its enemies (Heussner 2013:3).

After the war, the association of cars with national progress remained intact. After abetting the war effort, the automotive industry now provided a path towards the

economic and social recovery of the Federal Republic. The “economic miracle” of the 1950s was founded on the growing sector – the total number of passenger cars tripled between 1953 and 1957 and production levels increased in the same vein – and its economic success abroad (Grieger 2019, Rinn 2008:119). The German Association of the Automotive Industry (VDA) made sure to present the industry as the “engine for reconstruction” that enabled the prosperity of the post-war year, and which rested on the efforts of industrious and strong-minded engineers (Rinn 200:113). Until the 1970s, „… the number of cars quadrupled, the number of driven car kilometers tripled, and the length of the federal motorways doubled“ (Sachs 1987:586). Today, the quotidian significance of the car constantly increases and the country is plastered with highways, leading Wolfgang Sachs to speak of an “automobile society” in his cultural history of the car (Sachs 1987). The German Automobile Club ADAC stresses new connotations of the car, now linking it more closely with freedom and individual liberty. According to the club’s former Vice President Hans Bretz, freedom was “…the highest and most desirable good of man, and […] the motor vehicle is the great mediator of this freedom.” And further: “If you want to subjugate freedom, you must first shackle the mediator of this freedom” (quoted in Rinn 2008:132). The discursive connection between car and freedom thus makes “the car” a perfectly viable vehicle for moral panics.

The industry also contributed to Germany’s role on the global market. Out of the 3.3 million cars produced in West Germany in 1973, more than half were shipped abroad, contributing to Germany’s later status as “Exportweltmeister”. Beginning in the 1970s, the oil crisis and the growing competition from Japanese car manufacturers threatened the automotive industry’s leading role. Societal concerns regarding traffic congestion arose and were later followed by concerns about the ecological consequences of motorization. More generally, the social formation of Fordism appeared to erode. The industry adapted to new production models by internationalizing and flexibilizing their manufacturing (Heussner 2021:4). To counter regulations on motorized traffic in the 1970s, industry and lobby groups doubled

down on the link between freedom and the car. The VDA claimed that „traffic-policy dirigisme“ threatens a “space of freedom” afforded by the car (Rinn 2008:204) and the ADAC coined the slogan “Free citizens demand free driving” (“Freie Bürger fordern freie Fahrt”).

While Fordism entered a crisis, the car aided the new flexibilization of everyday life and patterns of social reproduction of post-Fordism (Haas 2018:555). Car ownership remains on the rise, and car manufacturers provide about 5% of the total German GDP, 4% of all German workers are in some way linked to the industry. But social and political conflicts concerning the car and the automotive industry have heightened, as climate regulations and civil society protests increase. The demanded shift away from combustion engines and towards electric cars involves structural changes to infrastructure, but also new production methods, different value chains focusing on batterie and semiconductors, and new international competitors. The fact that such a transformation cause anxieties not only about economic developments but about the looming “Decline of the Auto-Nation” indicate that the link between the car and the nation in Germany remains intact.

Victimized Drivers

Taking this story of the rise and the continuing significance of the car as a background, when and how did “the car-drivers” emerge in contemporary political discourse? Early attempts to pick up on “the car drivers” as an instrument for political mobilization date back to the late 1980s, when the crisis of Fordism was already in full swing. Following the example of the Swiss “Auto Party,” a steady stream of small parties emerged in Germany that specifically targeted “the car drivers.” These included the “Auto and Citizens‘ Party” (ABD), the “German Car Driver Interest Group – People’s Party” (DAFIG), the “Automobile Taxpayer Party” (ASP), or the “Car Driver and People’s Interest Party” (AViP). The chairman of the ABD claimed the “Auto” in the party’s name indicates the “economic basis of our prosperity” (Anon 1989). In addition to the expected opposition to traffic regulations, the party

programs demanded the expansion of security policies, the rejection of EU regulations, anti-migration and anti-asylum positions, and, in the case of the far-right DAFIG, the priority of the interests of "members of our people".

The longest-lasting of these parties was the "Car Driver and Citizen Interests Party Germany" (APD), founded in 1988. Against the perceived excessive environmental regulation and "increasing anti-car hostility" the APD advocated for "unrestricted traffic flow" (Der Spiegel 1992). At the same time, it stirred up sentiments against "economic refugees," while claiming that asylum seekers "come with wealth", and demanded accelerated judicial and executive measures against immigration. The satirical documentary "Deckname Dennis" (1997), surveys the political landscape of Germany in the 1990s. The film includes authentic interviews with APD board members, which in absence of other historical sources, provide some insight into their discourse on "car drivers". In it, the general secretary describes the APD's political allegiance: "We see ourselves as a party of the center. Specifically, right of the center" (quoted in Frickel 1997). In the same sequence, a board member of the APD presents the situation of car drivers with a historical comparison, using more drastic language: "The car driver is the modern Jew, and if we don't nip it in the bud, things will be very bad. (...) Here, a trend repeats itself, the persecution of a group of people, who, in this case, happen to be car drivers" (quoted in Frickel 1997).

Pictures of APD-Members in Front of the Brandenburg Gate in 1995. Copyright: DDC TV / "Deckname Dennis" (1997), Director: Thomas Frickel.

The same member comments on the 1993 "ozone experiment" in Heilbronn, where industry and car traffic were reduced for four days in order to reduce pollution: "Last year, in a city called Heilbronn near Heidelberg, we weren't allowed to drive our cars for four days, which meant it was like a small concentration camp in the city" (quoted in Frickel 1997). Besides trivializing anti-Semitic violence and downplaying the Shoah, such statements exemplify the notion that car drivers are victims of dictatorial and potentially exterminatory policies. Positions such as these did not turn the "car parties" into a "super product that has the potential to become the third strongest political force in Germany", as the APD chairman confidently

postulated shortly before their dissolution in 2002. However, the various attempts to mobilize car drivers from the right can be seen as test balloons for current discourse strategies that built upon the invocation of a victimized subject from the right.

We can see such an interpellation of a victimized subject in the discursive strategies of AfD as well. The party's foundational program questions climate science and the existence of global warming, and accordingly they routinely mobilize the supposed persecution of car drivers against climate policies, specifically the shift away from motorized individual mobility and towards electrical alternatives. In the 2023 Berlin election – the one that the CDU won – AfD candidate Kristin Birkner also addressed car drivers. Her poster read: "Hunt criminals. Not Car Drivers". Car drivers, in this case, are not criminals, yet they are illegitimately "hunted". Criminals, on the other hand, are not "hunted" but they should be. By looking at the AfD's campaign material concerning their policy demands regarding domestic security, it becomes clear that crime is immediately and almost exclusively attributed to "foreigners" and calls for their deportation. The car drivers are interpellated in order to demand that the state should be tough on immigrants, not on car drivers who are implied to be, for lack of a better word, "autochthonous". In "Fossil Fascism", Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective term this a "syndrome of selection" common to far-right positions on global warming. Instead of climate change, "the problems we really should fret about have to do with immigration" (Malm 2021: 61).

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AutoMotorSport is advertising a new Mercedes, Der Spiegel titles: "Culture War for the Car"

A second invocation of car drivers in the service of rejecting migration can be found when one considers the above-mentioned convergence between the car and economic prosperity in the "Auto-nation". Representatives of the AfD, including transport policy spokesperson Dirk Spaniel, member of the Bundestag Thomas Ehrhorn and federal leader Alice Weidel, claim that the ideological crusade against the internal combustion engine car threatens the economic prosperity of the Federal Republic. In 2020, Ehrhorn held a speech in parliament that was widely shared on social media. Ehrhorn addressed all car drivers, before launching into a speech centered on the relentless persecution of cars and their drivers by "green ideology", embroiled in "a never-ending war against the car and the German car driver", so that "in the future, no sensible car with an internal combustion engine can be built in our auto-nation". In a YouTube documentary on the car industry published by the AfD in 2019, Weidel claims that this "war" is directed against the prosperity of German citizens and taxpayers, whose well-being and employment depends on the car industry. The Greens would turn Germany into a "low-wage country" where productive jobs would be replaced by "pizza delivery men and parcel delivery drivers". The choice of examples is telling. With her worker example, Weidel evokes the figure of the largely migrant and precarious workers of the platform economy. The car drivers thus emerge as the counter-figure of the "productive" worker imagined as a skilled laborer in an economy based on the combustion engine.

Tolerance for Motorists

The core of this program appears to be a stubborn insistence on a declining mode of production with the comprehensive program of social, cultural, political, and ideological socialization that it entails. It articulates a longing for the old times, where things were still in order and one's own status was secured. This nostalgia is accompanied by a second, highly relevant theme: a "moral panic" that is directed against migration. The suggestion is made that if we really implement all the changes

that come with the abolition of driving, then – in extreme terms – we will all become migrants.

The debates concerning the "New Year's Riots" involved representatives of most centrist parties. But the CDU managed to forcefully present itself as a law-and-order party that protects Berlin residents and security personnel from the corrosive consequence that "unregulated migration", as it is often termed, entails. Wegner demanded an "uninhibited investigation" into the events and called for a "...strong state with clear messages ... it is the only thing young migrants respect". Stuart Hall has analyzed similar linkages between crime, the moral decay of society and racist discourses. He and other authors of Cultural Studies understood such "moral panics" as a "...bridge, between the real material sources of popular discontent, and their representation, through specific ideological forces and campaigns" (Hall 1980:172). The conditions that characterized British pre-Thatcherism differ radically from today, but the mode of legitimizing authoritarian politics appears similar.

This is demonstrated in the CDU's slogan "Berlin is for everyone. Including car drivers." Here, motorized individual mobility is stylized as a marker of cultural difference and inserted into the liberal and so-called "woke" language of diversity. The car and its driver are condensed into a figure worth protecting. The slogan demands tolerance, respect, and recognition – and establishes a discursive equivalence with questions of racism and sexism. A minoritarian and vulnerable character is repeated and, in this case, bestowed onto car drivers, who make their claim on authoritarian protection against threat and displacement. What applies to all oppressed groups, the implication goes, must especially apply here, where the prosperity of an entire societal model is at stake. Respect is demanded for those especially vulnerable minorities who are threatened not only by far-reaching climate protection measures but also by unregulated migration: car drivers. To understand how right-wing and reactionary politics manage to organize majorities in the current conjuncture, it is necessary to continue investigating such performances of

vulnerability from the right.

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Alexander Harder, M.A. *is a research assistant at the Institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt University Berlin where he works at the VW-Funded project "Cultures of Rejection – Conditions of Acceptability in socio-spatial and digital environments". His research interests include digital anthropology, cultural studies and conjunctural analysis, as well as far-right politics. His new research project,"The Social Life of XG. Digital Infrastructures and the Reconfigurations of Sovereignty and Imagined Communities" investigates the imaginaries of community in belonging that emerge in the context of the European expansion of digital Infrastructures such as 5G.*