



**THEATRICAL  
ASSEMBLIES  
AND THEIR  
DISCONTENTS**  
**REPRESENTATION AND  
RESENTMENT IN THE LIGHT  
OF A PANDEMIC**  
**LEON GABRIEL**

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*Bühnen der Altermundialität: Vom Bild der Welt zur räumlichen Theaterpraxis (Stages of Altermundiality: From World-Picture to Spatial Theatre Practice)* (Berlin: Neofelis); 2019. *Das Denken der Bühne: Szenen zwischen Theater und Philosophie (Thinking on/of the Stage: Scenes Between Theatre and Philosophy)* ed. with Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (Bielefeld: Transcript).

## KEYWORDS

assembly, representation, demonstration, resentment, sharing/division

## MOTS-CLÉS

assemblée, représentation, manifestation, ressentiment, partage

# SUMMARY

This essay analyses the self-proclaimed *Querdenken* (lateral thinking) demonstrations against the Covid-19 politics in Germany. This reactionary movement shares the assumption of certain artistic activist strategies, that political force lies in such assemblies. As a starting point, a comparison between *General Assembly* by Milo Rau (2017) and *Querdenken* is drawn, as both performed a 'storming' of the German parliament. Following up on this comparison, the essay develops the tension between the critique of representation undertaken by (populist) assemblies and the phantasmatic assumption of forming a coherent sovereign through the assembly itself. The argument concludes with an emphasis on sharing and division, and an outlook on what can be learned for theatre and performance: to measure assemblies by how they deal with their inherent complexities, asymmetries, and exclusions.

# RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les manifestations auto-proclamées de *Querdenken* (pensée latérale) contre la politique du Covid-19 en Allemagne. Ce mouvement réactionnaire partage l'hypothèse de certaines stratégies artistiques militantes, selon laquelle il existe une force politique dans les assemblées en tant que telles. Le point de départ est une comparaison entre *General Assembly* de Milo Rau (2017) et *Querdenken*, qui ont tous deux pris d'assaut le parlement allemand. Dans le prolongement de cette comparaison, l'article développe la tension entre la critique de la représentation entreprise par les assemblées (populistes) et l'hypothèse fantasmatic de former un souverain cohérent à travers l'assemblée elle-même. L'argumentation se termine par un accent sur le partage et la division et une perspective sur ce qui peut être appris pour le théâtre et la performance: mesurer les assemblées par la façon dont elles gèrent leurs complexités, asymétries et exclusions inhérentes.

# Foreplay: Storming Representation

A scene taken from a well-known angle: the *Reichstag* building in Berlin, seat of the German parliament, is in the centre at some distance, its green meadow in front. Then, on command, a group of demonstrators runs towards the building, jeering loudly, some waving flags. The whole thing does not last a minute, the crowd already stops again on the forecourt of the seat of Reichstag, and they dutifully do not enter the blocked stairs of the building. The participants stand around somewhat awkwardly, later there is a rally on the lawn with a concluding concert.

A second scene, this time filmed with a shaky camera, probably via smartphone: a rally already on the forecourt of the Reichstag, driven by a speaker, the crowd storms up the stairs of the building, waving lots of flags, especially the black-white-red *Reichskriegsflagge* (German imperial war flag) and the *Reichsfahnen* (German imperial flag). These pictures later go through the press and around the world (compare “‘Anti-corona’ Extremists Try to Storm German Parliament’ 2020; Bennhold 2020).

# Against the Consensus of Assemblies' Dissensus

In 2017, Swiss theatre director Milo Rau staged the first scene described as the symbolic conclusion of his project *General Assembly* and at the same time as a re-enactment of the Russian Revolution's storming of the Tsar's Winter Palace in 1917 — which actually was itself only a staging by Russian director Nikolaj Evreinov (compare Arns, Chubarov, and Sasse 2017). The second scene described above was not a staging led by a theatre director, but happened in 2020 within one of the major demonstrations of the self-proclaimed *Querdenken* (lateral thinking) movement. *Querdenken* shares similarities with and even worked in part as a role model for other demonstrations against the Covid-19 pandemic containment measures that happened in different parts of the world from March 2020 until today.

These demonstrations have been widely reported by the press as well as the promotion of these movements through platforms such as Facebook, Telegram etc. Especially, *Querdenken* worked on their very own documentation as well as alternative media outlets because the movement sees the press as obedient to governments and thus full of so-called 'fake news'. Hence, the protesters were celebrating a symbolic triumph on their part with the pictures they took during their respective storming of the Reichstag described in the second scene. Now, they had impressive images for their claim to be a true uprising of 'the people' as a whole who supposedly were in open rebellion against the allegedly corrupt and conspiratorial elites of politicians, media, and industry (especially the sectors of technology and big pharma).

What can be learned from these two different but also similar stormings, particularly considering the potential of (theatrical) activism and the role of participants within such forms of political assemblies? The intersection that emerges here between Rau's artistic action and the attempted uprising of *Querdenken*, as well as their differences, are the reason for this essay's exploration of political-theatrical assemblies with their critique of representation in more detail — and I will come back to these two respective stormings. Of course, both events do not show something genuinely new. In the last ten years, many different political movements with public assemblies emerged worldwide: from the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street to the protests at Syntagma Square in Athens at the beginning of the last decade or especially the *School Strike for Climate* beginning in 2019. Accordingly, and with good reason, performative activism and antagonism — often against state-power — have been evaluated as a critical and emancipatory practice within the last years (compare, for example, *geheimagentur*; Schäfer and Tsianos 2016; Fisher and Katsouraki 2017). In the German-speaking context, the theatrical and performative possibilities of assemblies, gatherings, movements, protests, and politics of representation in the light of an ongoing crisis of liberal democracies have also been widely explored by artists such as She She Pop, Schwabinggrad Ballett, Sibylle Peters, Sebastian Matthias, Jonas Staal, and Ligna — just to name a few.

However, Rau's performance and particularly the example of *Querdenken* are brought up here for another reason: the aim of this essay is to scrutinise the assumption that engaged participants of assemblies

would already insofar be political, as they contest the mere spectacle of representational politics. According to this view, the assumed political force of assemblies would therefore lie in their potential as a multitude for direct action and critical engagement — instead of being just bystanders.<sup>1</sup> If protesters perform dissent, then it is also necessary to look at the specific assumptions that fuel such dissent and to lay open goals which it serves. Differently put, dissent is not an end in itself, neither are assemblies. Therefore, this essay will question a specific notion of the relation between assemblies and theatre (as well as performance): a fundamental misunderstanding, according to which theatre seems to be a place of negotiation, of participation, of politics per se *because* it also assembles. This misunderstanding connects very different artistic and activist strategies, for example, the two abovementioned stormings of the Reichstag. The essay also lays out the challenges that derive from the problematic idea, that a public, an audience, or any other assembled group forms ‘a whole’. The aim is to offer a critical exploration of the concept of ‘assembly’ and the problematisation of its all too often simplistic projection on the alleged political potential of theatre.

The essay will first take a short look at the early phase of *Querdenken*, the so-called *Hygienesemonstrationen* (hygiene demonstrations) in front of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz as it gives an insight into the connection between the critique of representation (and representational sites) as well as the aspirations of populist movements such as *Querdenken*. Then, I will look again at the two stormings on the Reichstag. Following up on this, I will give a deeper insight of the logics and

underlying concepts of *Querdenken* by highlighting three central common assumptions of those involved into it: on liberty, ‘the people’, and on sovereignty. Building on this, the essay comes to its central theoretical point. By analysing Plato’s verdict of teatrocracy, it contradicts the notion that theatre is *sui generis* a place of (political) assembly. Instead, the conclusion and outlook of this essay highlight the aspects of division and asymmetries, in order to think about what can be learned for theatrical and performative assemblies.

This essay focuses on the reactionary demonstrations against the Covid-19 pandemic containment measures and only at the end sheds light on critical, emancipatory movements that also happened during the pandemic, such as Fridays For Future or Black Lives Matter. It would be indeed important to further study those forms of protest and alternative politics that stand for critical positions. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the wave of New Fascist and Third Position movements (as most recently the Trucker’s protest in Canada) as well as the historical background of German Fascism and its theatrical stagings of the masses (compare Annuß 2018), I think it is also crucial to carefully study and understand those movements that one does *not* at all support. Especially because ‘taking the streets and public places’ is a strategy that has been appropriated by reactionary and fascist forces while claiming to be the alleged ‘alternative’ to the parliamentary system.

1. Of course, there are many other aspects that make public gatherings relevant, for example, empowerment, visibility, and agency, but their (academic) valorisation is often linked to an emphasis on the physical presence as opposed to representation (compare Diana Taylor 2020: 7). Even though I value the work of scholars such as Isabell Lorey on political movements, I am critical towards the notion of a ‘presentist democracy’ or ‘Democracy in the Present’ (Lorey 2022) as a way to undergo the dichotomy of representational democracy and assumed immediate presence.

# The Hygiene Demonstrations: A Short Note on the Prehistory of *Querdenken*

The German *Querdenken* demonstrations form very heterogeneous assemblies in which contradictory positions emerge. I will highlight some central motifs of their self-image in the next section of the essay. But no matter how heterogeneous the movement shows itself in detail, there is nothing to sugar-coat about demonstrators who have no problem taking their demands to the streets together with those in favour of openly anti-democratic, racist, and anti-Semitic positions. Wearing Jewish stars that say ‘unvaccinated’, the claim that mouth-nose coverings equate to slave masks, and the titling of the German Infection Protection Act that passed in November 2020 as an ‘Enabling Act’ (as reference to the Enabling Act of 1933 passed by the Nazi party) are only the tip of the iceberg.

The fact that people demonstrate per se, that they disagree with the decisions taken by governments and show this is, first of all, the exercise of an important fundamental right. Demonstrations do not have to be allowed in Germany, they can at most be prohibited for certain reasons. The fact that the publicly visible criticism of the Government formulated by means of demonstrations has been appropriated by *Querdenken* represents ‘a real dilemma for an emancipatory left for which the criticism of state surveillance and control actions was and is constitutive’ (Wulf 2021: 327).<sup>2</sup> Already at the beginning of the pandemic, various

2. If not stated otherwise, all translations from publications in other languages to English are by the author. For a leftist critique of the EU’s ongoing anti-human rights policy against refugees under Coronavirus, see Loick 2020.

critical voices pointed to the alarming increase in power both for the state as well as for pharmaceutical and online corporations, some of them, however, with a rhetoric of overbidding and maximum inaccuracy (more on this in an instant). In the wake of this, some first demonstrations emerged, particularly in front of Berlin’s famous theatre, the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz.

In April 2020, the dramaturges/publishers Anselm Lenz and Hendrik Sodenkamp founded the *Kommunikationsstelle Demokratischer Widerstand* (Democratic Resistance Communication Office) and its weekly newspaper. They mobilised in front of the Volksbühne for the hygiene demonstrations under the hashtag #nichtohneuns (not without us). Very quickly, well-known figures from the German ‘Cross-Front’<sup>3</sup> scene such as Martine Lejeune, Ken Jebsen, and Jürgen Elsässer (Betschka 2021) as well as outspoken anti-Semites such as the Right-wing extremist Nikolai Nerling joined the hygiene demonstrations (compare Piontek 2020).<sup>4</sup> Lenz had already published in the ‘Cross-Front’-leaning portal *RubikonNews* in 2019 (Lenz 2019) which is known for spreading conspiracy ideologies.<sup>5</sup> But nevertheless, Lenz and Sodenkamp themselves were seen as leftists before, coming from the cultural sector. They declared Giorgio Agamben as patron saint of their movement, even editor of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. In their newspaper and blog articles, they referred time and again to the Italian philosopher and his theory of the ‘state of exception’ (Agamben 2005). Although Agamben denied being in contact with the publishers (and even of knowing the newspaper),

3. Cross-Front (*Querfront*) is the German version of the so-called ‘Third Position’ fascist movement that sees itself between capitalism and communism as well as beyond a traditional opposition between political Left and Right, instead proclaiming alliances between both.

4. Anti-Semitism is intrinsically linked with conspiracy ideologies, and it plays a constant role within *Querdenken* (compare Balandat, Schreiter, and Seidel-Arpac 2021).

5. The portal also contains the more recent pamphlet, denoted by Lenz (2020) himself as his central text which clearly contains conspiracy ideologies.

it is no surprise that his very own outspoken statements on the Covid-19 policy were taken up. Agamben himself may have mentioned some points worth considering, but made above all sweeping and false generalisations. His mistake ‘in confusing his conception of biopolitics [...] and the material facts of an all too real virus’ was sharply criticised by several of the philosophers who were otherwise close to him such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito (Castrillón and Marchevsky 2021: 7).<sup>6</sup>

But what exactly is it about the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz being the starting point for these demonstrations? Despite their differences, the Reichstag building and the Volksbühne are comparable as places of representation.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Sodenkamp and Lenz had both been involved in the occupation of the Volksbühne that had happened in 2017 and which turned against Chris Dercon as artistic director and against the city’s housing policies. As a concrete as well as symbolic place, the Volksbühne figures as an important locality where the role of public stages and the call for visibility connect. Unlike the Théâtre de l’Odéon occupied in Paris in 1968, the Volksbühne is a theatre with proletarian rather than bourgeois history. Even if it clearly appealed to a bourgeois audience, the reference to the critical art of the GDR on the one hand and to proletarian culture in general on the other was the cement to the long-transformed working class (think of the slogan

6. Inacceptable were those statements such as the one that the virus would not be dangerous or that university professors who would participate in online teaching are the ‘perfect equivalent of the university teachers who swore allegiance to the fascist regime in 1931’ (Agamben 2020: para. 6). At his worst, he claimed in July 2021 against the political decision to loosen the restrictions of civil rights for those citizens in Italy (and Europe) that are vaccinated and thus against the so-called green pass (the vaccination document): ‘[T]he vaccine is thus being turned into a kind of political-religious symbol designed to discriminate between citizens [...]. The “green pass” turns those without it into virtual yellow star bearers.’ (Agamben 2021: para. 2).

7. On representation as a duality of ‘*vertreten* (“represent”) and *darstellen* (“re-present”)', see Spivak 1988: 276.

‘East’ emblazoned on the roof under its former long-time director Frank Castorf, which Dercon had dismantled). This background, as well as the central location for urban development, were essential factors for the protest at the time to turn against the policy Dercon stood for at the moment of his appointment (Goetz and Laudenbach 2018).

For the protesters at the time, who had come together under the collective *Staub zu Glitzer* (dust to glitter), it was not least about art and its possibilities in an increasingly market-driven city (Graw 2017). However, this was not the case with the hygiene demonstrations. Rather, the struggle against the big picture, the alleged ‘Corona regime’, was and is on its agenda. Although some of today’s actors of *Querdenken* were thus recruited from the former environment of the occupation and the protest against Dercon, the overlaps are rather small. With a view to the early phase of *Querdenken*, it is noticeable that with the hygiene demonstrations an attempt was made to copy a certain appearance and thus dock onto the occupation of the Volksbühne.<sup>8</sup> This theatre also offers the ideal ground for this copy because, in the logic of the struggle against the ‘big whole’, this place, like the Reichstag, can stand for certain practices of representation, which are then to be overcome in favour of a self-representation of ‘the people’. The place of the people’s stage must consequently be taken over to create an assembly that proclaims to be itself direct, in action, and thus fully ‘present’ (instead of only being representational).

8. Hito Steyerl suggested that there is an intrinsic structural connection between the Hygiene demonstrations and certain aesthetic conceptions of German theatre: ‘The birth of the Corona Denier movement open to the right [arises] from the spirit of the transgressive Gesamtkunstwerk.’ (Geiger, Steyerl, Güleç, and Deuflhard 2021).

# Storming the Reichstag: Two Symbolic Strategies

At this point, it is worth looking again at Rau's project and the storming by *Querdenken*. It is one of the special side effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that a new light is shed on many events very quickly and statements age badly within a short time. Of course, Rau could not foresee that there would be another event resembling his staging, but with far more media attention (and with a very different political background). His idea to symbolically link the (staged) storming of the Tsar's seat with the storming of the seat of a functioning parliamentary democracy, of all things, was in my opinion already a rather questionable idea. Its objective is clear: to create *one* impressive artistic image with historical-aesthetic resonance towards *one* other image. But this strategy is somewhat symptomatic of underestimating the politics of images in today's age of social media. Unfortunately, the 'Querdenkers' with their many activists on platforms etc. seemed to have understood today's dynamics of image production better and taken advantage of it.<sup>9</sup> Their attempted storming became all the more effective due to the sheer proliferation of *many* images that all undermined the proclaimed power of the masses. *Querdenken's* claim when storming was not to protest for another kind of representation and other politics within the existing system, but to overthrow the assumed political caste, to take back the Reichstag as 'their' proper house and to abolish the German constitution, the *Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (Grundgesetz)* (Kleffner and Meisner 2021). It is specifically this turn against

9. This point also shows an important difference between the logic of a staging coordinated by one 'mastermind' and the one of disseminating many images by many people that are affectively charged.

democratic politics themselves that was long downplayed in the public discussions but became more and more evident in the aftermath of their respective storm on the Reichstag. However, Rau still said in the beginning of September 2020 that the crowd of *Querdenken* should have been 'let in and despair of their own lack of ideas' (Höbel 2020: para. 8). But not even two months later, a group of far-right YouTubers actually invaded the Reichstag building, thanks to the help of some representatives, in order to molest some of the well-known politicians and members of the Government. And, as it is well known, less than four months later, a mob of right-wing terrorists invaded the US Congress.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Rau's proposal proves to have aged very badly.

Both 'stormings' are symbolic politics in that they live from the creation of images and affects.<sup>11</sup> Although they have commonalities, their closeness must not be overinterpreted, nor their strategies confused. Somewhat perplexingly, Rau interprets the reactionary demonstrations as an aesthetic phenomenon, but his artistic projects are supposed to be art that becomes 'real'.<sup>12</sup> It is hence necessary to put some distance between what Rau himself claims about his works and what actually takes place in them. *Querdenken's* assault on the Reichstag and Rau's staging both turn against the kind of representation that this building stands for, but they do so, however, for very different reasons, with very different goals, and ultimately by different means. Rau's action proves

10. In the face of a globally networked Alt-Right, it is possible and plausible that these rioters could have been motivated not only by Donald Trump's speeches but also by the images from Germany.

11. So when Rau formulates that the storm of *Querdenken* 2020 was 'nothing more than a pseudo-political psychodrama' (Höbel 2020, para. 8), the question inevitably arises why this does not apply equally to his own action, especially since his image production has had even less effect in the longer term.

12. This point of view was again underlined by the director after the storming of the US-Capitol, compare Rau 2021.



Participants and spectators of the project *General Assembly* by theatre director Milo Rau stand at some distance in front of the German Reichstag building in Berlin, on 7 November 2017. Their gathering is part of the symbolic storming that Rau staged as a reenactment of the *Storming of the Winter Palace* by Nikolai Evreinov from 1917.

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## 'The Great Resentment' as a Basis for Populist Movements

to be problematic as it overestimates its activist potential while neglecting its underlying theatrical apparatus. The problem stems from a paradox. In order to become 'real', it must be overplayed as far as possible that anything in the theatre might look like our shared everyday life, but in order to do so, we must forget the aesthetic process behind it — in the case of Rau, his theatrical actions are shaped according to historical references and a dramatisation.<sup>13</sup> Rau's staging of the storming of the Reichstag was meant to be a symbol for a coming politics that itself is generated by theatre as an engaged art that fuels political debates. And even though this aims towards an understanding of art as a political tool, the distance between the artistic-activist representation itself and its point of reference — politics and revolutions — ultimately always remained intact in this action: this is a *symbolic staging* in the sense of an orchestrated depiction of a storming. It is theatre, which is not to be confused with its reference (even if some of the participants and even parts of the press might have mixed up these points). The preservation of this boundary, on the contrary, is by no means discernible among the participants of *Querdenken*. The underlying reasons and goals make a difference that is also important for the consideration of other political assemblies: the staging of the storming within *General Assembly* was concerned with an expansion of the Parliament for the benefit of those who have not been covered by it so far,<sup>14</sup> whereas the *Querdenken* protesters are concerned with a removal of the Parliament or at least the majority of Parliamentarians who are not considered 'on the right side', that is the one of the assumed people as such.

This claim to be the people and the rejection of political representation with its complexities (and of course also its flaws) is not only inherent to *Querdenken*. It lies at the core of various populist movements and was only pushed and fortified due to the pandemic. Whether it is the Brexiteers, the Trump supporters, or the protests of those who trivialise/deny Coronavirus, the reactionary movements of the twenty-first century collect fears of loss, desires for supposed old glory, conspiracy ideologies, plans for overthrow, and, consequently, fantasies of destruction. Eric Fassin has described this bundling of the new reactionary thinking as 'the great resentment' (Fassin 2019: 73–83), increasingly turning out to be a visitation of the neoliberal era. As Wendy Brown adds, resentment channels affects that are fed by the very area that the apologists of neoliberalism have denied, namely the social (2019). Because neoliberalism has seemed to have no alternative on a global scale for more than two decades, Fassin warns against social movements that present themselves as alternatives and use right-wing strategies — for example, in the form of a 'left populism' (Mouffe 2018). Especially the rejection of the 'opposition between left and right' in favour of an 'opposition between "them" and "us"' is dangerous in his eyes (Fassin 2019: 116). As he makes particularly clear in the extended German version of his essay, this has been the case with the French yellow vest's movement (*gilets jaunes*) who denied 'any trade union or political representation' as well as with, for example, the social movements in Italy and Brazil in 2013 that 'have fed the rejection of the system and thus played into the hands of the extreme right' (ibid.: 116–7). The resentment, it seems, aims rather broadly against any complexities — though it might not be completely false in criticising certain institutions or measures, it does so by refusing and rejecting in general.

13. Even to the point of underlaying a dramatic structure, as in *The Congo Tribunal* (2015–present). For this hint and our ongoing discussions on the matters of this essay, I thank Jörn Etzold.

14. Contradictory to this programmatic approach stands at least one important aspect of Rau's concrete selection of observers and deputies for the *General Assembly*: of seven observers, only two were women and only two came from the Global South, both male. Of sixty-four delegates, only eighteen were women.

So, as clearly as there are overlaps and transitions from (petit) bourgeois desires as well as from those of the ‘old centre’ to right-wing and even extreme right-wing ideas, these overlaps are of course not all of the same extent. Despite all the heterogeneity of *Querdenken*, in my view three central demands can be crystallised, which are charged to varying degrees with an anti-democratic (and that usually means also an anti-representative) impetus that can only tentatively be outlined here: the call for freedom, for sovereignty, and for the people. Whereas all three show different degrees of congruence with other political positions, it is their combination that is characteristic for *Querdenken* as well as other reactionary populist movements. And it is the call for sovereignty that links the other two demands: in that logic, citizens should be sovereign in their rights to freedom and property, but at the same time, the nation state should be sovereign in the sense of a unified people.

On the one hand, ‘freedom’ in a common understanding is very often linked to ideas of ownership (freedom as something I *have*, including the concept of self-ownership as prominently formulated by John Locke; Locke 2003: 111), on the other hand, it enables a *removal from the social* or a selective switching on. This becomes clearer in the case of Coronavirus deniers and belittlers than in the case of other calls for freedom, as they are calling for a liberation *from* the social; i.e., from the interdependencies and consequences of cohabitation, but *within* the social (Rebentisch 2016: 9). In contrast and in a critical understanding, freedom means to ‘change both ourselves and the social practices of which we are a part’, a process which in turn ‘is rooted in the immediate experience of self-difference’ (ibid.). Such a self-difference is of course an experience of alienation from a pre-supposed and idealised, autonomous self. Dealing with it therefore means to accept a certain degree of being entangled with other actors and forces, of being exposed and being subjugated to others — without falling into a mere passivity.

Against such a different concept of freedom, the thinking of freedom as property and detachment from the social is subsequently now combined in resentment with that of sovereignty. In liberal democracies, state and individual sovereignty are mostly not in conflict — but, in the pandemic, ‘the isolating state sword and the fortifying private handgun’ clash head-on (von Redecker 2020: 224). If revolutions involve specific modes of relating (Adamczak 2017), the *Querdenken* demonstrations want a relation to the world from their untouched private ‘parcels’ (von Redecker 2020: 225). The call for a different representation as well as the storm against representation and its places show up in the light of this as a call for a closed stage of the sovereign. In performative terms, this means a stage that allows a non-alienated, undisguised appearance seemingly free of social ties. Citizens who see themselves deprived of their sovereignty demand a phantasmatic return to a state sovereign that corresponds with them: as if a public is eager to see a spectacle, where the protagonist (the state) performs his self-possession and serves as a source of identification for each one. In both cases, bodily integrity is proclaimed. The state as a consistent body as well as the individual body have to remain untouched by what is seen as alienating, external forces.

At the same time, one has to take the importance of the claim of ‘the people’ (*das Volk*) into account. Because while calling for a sovereign state, it is also the assembly of engaged participants who each individually see themselves as sovereign and, simultaneously, want to become the protagonist together. In the initial example of the storming of the Reichstag, a collective can be seen of which each participant seeks to manifest his or her freedom from restrictions and social bonds. Furthermore, as a collective, these participants claim to be not just any collective, but *the* people as such that now enter the historical stage, supported by the distribution of their own image via social media.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the participants of *Querdenken* (and similarly, those Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol) aim at an enormous scale of their

own movement — and precisely this also serves, in the greatest possible imprecision, as the famous lowest common denominator: ‘The revolution of *the whole*, however, is only possible if society is imagined as a totality and the universal subject is endowed with a metaphysical guarantee of omnipotence in order to be able to bring about the world-historical rupture at all.’ (Marchart 2010: 294). This large scale of the political call and the turn towards conspiracy ideologies as such might stem from a very simple fact but also a tremendous narcissistic wound. In a pandemic, individual citizens are mainly thrown back to the modern condition that they all are very often reduced to being only a number within a huge population.

As mentioned, the figure of ‘the people’ as a whole offers the guarantee for such a universal subject, even when it is used by *Querdenken* participants not in a *völkisch* (racial) sense, but with reference to their allegedly ‘democratic resistance’.<sup>16</sup> Agamben, who today shares certain affinities with those who are against vaccinations and/or deny Covid-19 (see above), once pointed out the ambiguity of the word ‘people’ (Agamben 2000: 29–36): ‘on the one hand, the totality of the (state) people, on the other hand, the group of the declassed and excluded’ (Marchart 2010: 340).<sup>17</sup> From this, one could now either conclude that the

totality of the (state) people could cover the group of the excluded (which is impossible) or recognise that the ‘democratic sovereign is thus in difference to itself’ (ibid.). The call for the abolition of false representation in favour of ‘real representatives of the people’ is thus nothing other than the desire to overcome the inherent difference as such (which does not mean that every kind of representation and every exercise of it is right per se).

## The Misunderstanding of the (Theatrical) Assembly

Moving away from the closer observation of *Querdenken*, I will further examine the often-proclaimed proximity between theatre and politics. There is a specific notion of the relationship between theatre and assembly that, in my opinion, can be found both in Rau’s project and in parts of the hygiene demonstrations that emerged from the occupation of the Volksbühne. At the core of both, a false but common reversal seems to have taken root: because politics is based on assemblies and because theatre is an assembly par excellence, resembling parliaments in this respect, theatre seems therefore also to be a place of politics, of participation, ‘an agonistic arena in which society can negotiate their conflicts’ (Malzacher 2020: 170), and ‘thus a zone of experimenting with the way democracy can function’ (ibid.: 172).<sup>18</sup> But theatre is not

← 15. As Judith Butler notes: ‘If the people are constituted through a complex interplay of performance, image, acoustics, and all the various technologies engaged in those productions, then “media” is not just reporting who the people claim to be, but media has entered into the very definition of the people’ (Butler 2015: 20). Even though Butler is rather looking here at those gatherings that are evaluated as emancipative from a leftist standpoint, there is no doubt that: ‘Such gatherings are not the same as democracy itself. We cannot point to one provisional and transient gathering and say, “that is democracy in action,” and mean that everything we expect of democracy is emblemized or enacted at such a moment’ (ibid.).

16. It is part of the proclaimed image (to be the resistant and excluded ones) to appropriate symbols and slogans of historically suppressed and wretched groups — for example, by attaching a yellow star.

← 17. This does not mean that there is a ‘good’ former Agamben and a ‘bad’ new one. Different scholars have pointed out, from early on, that Agamben shortens political concepts such as ‘biopolitics’ in a highly problematic way, compare Deuber-Mankowsky 2015.

18. Even though I contradict this generalised standpoint, it is important to highlight the critical explorations into the potentials of theatrical assemblies undertaken by Malzacher’s project *Gesellschaftsspiele: The Art of Assembly* (Malzacher 2021).



Protesters occupy the stairs of the German Reichstag building in Berlin after their attempt to storm in at the end of a demonstration called by far-right and Covid-19 deniers to protest against restrictions related to the new Coronavirus pandemic, on 29 August 2020.

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political as such just because it assembles.<sup>19</sup> I understand as ‘political’ that which works out both the connective and the divisive in order to break up entrenched constellations of the social (Marchart 2010: 293–301). This may well take place by means of assemblies, but this depends on their form, their demands (as heterogeneous as they may be), and their practices. Specific works of theatre, performance, dance, etc. can create a space for the political as conceived in this sense, but it does not simply result from the mere act of gathering. Rather, it requires the working through of one’s own conditions of performing, thus the inherent contradictions and asymmetries. Finally, the specific context to which the assembly relates to is crucial (especially so in the case of artistic interventions).

Paradigmatic for the prominent position that deduces the political potential of performative arts from gathering is what many historians and scholars till today have commonly understood as a central quality of the ancient theatre of the Attic *polis*, especially in its evaluation by post-Socratic philosophy: the recourse to Athens seems not only to offer a founding narrative of theatre and democracy respectively, but also to explain an intrinsic connection between the two.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, it is worth underlining the differences in the understanding of politics then and now. Indeed, in the Platonic dialogues, for example, a proximity of politics and theatrical assembly can be seen again and again: in the *Republic (Politeia)*, for example, Socrates paints a picture of democracy in its state of decay towards tyranny. Central here is the people: ‘The people — those who work with their own hands — are the third class. They take no part in politics and have few possessions, but, when they

are assembled, they are the largest and most powerful class in a democracy.’ (Plato 1997a: 1175) However, it is easy, according to Socrates, to deceive and seduce the people by speeches as well as by actions of skillful self-promoters. Thus, the theatricalisation of politics is depicted as inherent in democracies, as they urge for constant profiling under the gaze of the people instead of a search for deeper truth. It, therefore, also seals democracies’ end, which is why Socrates also sees the ‘poets of tragedy’ as those who ‘praise tyranny’ (Plato 1997a: 1178).

Plato’s condemnation of democracy as a theatrocracy, as articulated not only in the *Politeia* but also in the later *Laws (Nomoi)*, has been commented on many times, especially with regard to the proximity of politics and its theatricalisation. Particularly noteworthy is the rejection of the ‘impudent, bold, excessive freedom of the arts’ supposedly brought about by the dissolution of genres, which first makes the democratic revolution possible, but then makes the decline of democracies inevitable (Rebentisch 2016: 45–6). The arts imitate in the wrong way as they mix, misrepresent, and confuse. This is particularly the fault of the poets who — ‘in their idiotic way’ — ‘did have a natural artistic talent, but they were ignorant of the correct and legitimate standards laid down by the Muse. [...] The result was a total confusion of styles’ (Plato 1997b: 1389). Pushed by the applause of the audience, the poets would create dangerous confusions that for their part gave ‘the ordinary man [...] the arrogance to set himself up as a capable judge. The audiences, once silent, began to use their tongues; they claimed to know what was good and bad in music, and instead of a “musical meritocracy”, a sort of vicious “theatrocracy” arose’ (ibid.).

Theatre that is not based on the principles of the (supposedly) right leads to derailment. Ultimately directed against *mimesis* and representation itself, Plato nevertheless recognises in his dismissal the potential of the crowd. According to Juliane Rebentisch, Plato can indeed

19. Athenian theatre is often interpreted ‘as the philosophical presentation of the political. That is, it appears to us as the “one” presentation of being-together’. But its case rather shows that theatre ‘is neither political nor philosophical at the same time’ (Nancy 2000: 71).

20. For a somewhat undecided position whether this connection between now and then is valid or not, see Barthes 1991: 76.

be read against the grain, thus recognising the crowd as a ‘multitude’ whose divergent judgements are fed by ‘historically variable experience’ — and no longer by ‘the problematic conception that the good is something that we, at least the best of us, can acquire as objective knowledge, the validity of which does not depend on individual experience’ (2016: 48–9). Nevertheless, it seems important that what the multitude does or demands, in the ancient understanding in general and in Plato specifically, is not to be confused with politics in the city-state and certainly not with today’s democracy — an accentuation of the ‘multitude’ cannot serve to absolutise it in favour of a supposed immediacy of the people’s will, but rather to valorise it within political representation, within ‘the separation between the representatives and the represented, the governors and the governed’ and therefore, within ‘relations of power and authority’ (ibid.: 245–6).

Another passage in *Laws* shows how close Plato’s condemnation of teatrocracy is to his understanding of politics, which ultimately cannot be transferred to today’s conditions, and with good reason. If the politics of the orderly *polis* is endangered by theatricalisation qua democracy, it follows that in the ideal state no tragedy poets should be admitted as long as their poetry does not contain ‘doctrines [that] seem the same as or better’ as those of the state constitution itself (Plato 1997b: 1484). Addressed to the poets, the concept of the ideal state is explained as the best ‘representation’ itself:

Most honored guests, we’re tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create. At any rate, our entire state has been constructed so as to be a ‘representation’ of the finest and noblest life—the very thing we maintain is most genuinely a tragedy. So we are poets like yourselves, composing in the same genre, and your competitors as artists and actors in the finest drama, which true law alone has the natural powers to ‘produce’ to perfection (of that we’re quite confident). (Plato 1997b: 1484)

According to this, the *polis* consists in the processing of politics, which is not, however, determined by the crowd, but is only ‘correctly’ imitated by the crowd in accordance with a unifying order — in contrast to those imitations that are seen as wrong because they are mixing and alienating. ‘Theatricality demonstrates its subversive power when it forsakes the confines of the *theatron* and begins to wander: when, in short, it separates itself from *theatre*. [...] It is the stability of place and the durability of placing that teatrocracy profoundly disturbs’ (Weber 2004: 37–8). If theatre were really to serve as a model for politics from the understanding articulated by Plato, one would not get more democracy, but a tightly organised state choreography, performed jointly by all its components, which would have to be in the ‘right place’ for the sake of their unity. At the same time, one has to remember that contemporary parliamentary democracies are by no means protected from simply processing politics and thus immunising themselves against its inherent difference-with-itself.

## A Case for Divided Assemblies

As the investigation into Plato’s argument underlines: theatre is not political (and democratic) because an assembly takes place there. Theatre is not the agora<sup>21</sup> and just because a parliament has a certain form of assembly, this does not make the assembly in the theatre a parliament or automatically an environment for testing out democracy.<sup>22</sup>

21. For a critique on the ‘equation of democracy with gathering on the *agora*’, especially by Arendt, see also Schäfer 2016.

22. In the ancient *polis*, the two political and male-coded places of assembly, the agora and the *keramikeion*, were clearly separated from the third public place, the theatre. The latter was the place for what had no place in the rational *polis*: pathos, lament, affects (compare Loraux 1990).

But if theatre cannot be determined per se as a place of political assembly, this by no means implies the *claim* to make theatre a place of negotiation and/or the political should be abandoned. The latter, however, requires an examination of which specific form of assembly is inherent in which theatre and which modes of staging underlie which assemblies. Instead of proclaiming theatrical assemblies as political as such, this essay has highlighted their discontents but also possibilities by taking a closer look at the connection between the protest of *Querdenken* and their turn against representation. There is thus a conceptual connection between theatres as public stages and the call for publicity, in the sense of visibility, but this is based on an assumption about the public that runs the risk of merging the mere taking place in front of many people with the political (which, again, can also be said about the mere ‘processing’ in parliaments that can turn democracies into an empty shell of bureaucracy).

Theatre is often seen as mediation between the realm of the private and that of the public (compare Balme 2014: 25), even though these spheres are not that distinct as they might seem and, thus, I would argue that theatre might rather expose their always existing interrelation. Both realms were elaborated in more detail by Hannah Arendt in particular, but also derived from the ancient *polis* in a thoroughly normative conception. According to Arendt, it is only the space of the public that provides the sphere of the political, which is sharply separated from the private.<sup>23</sup> Through this separation of the political from

<sup>23</sup> However, in the ancient *polis*, only those who are free from the constraints of life (these are assigned to the realm of the private, the *oikos*) have access to the space of the public: wealthy male heads of family in possession of slaves (compare Arendt 1958: 199–207). The problematic side of Arendt’s distinction between the spheres of the public and the private can be seen in her assessment of the US civil rights movement, which is ultimately normatively derived from her own theory and was already widely criticised when it appeared. In particular, the collision of Arendt’s concept of the space of appearance with racist practices of exclusion should be further investigated (compare Arendt 1959; Weissberg 2012).

the private, the specific conditions in which people find themselves and which regulate who can participate in the political are categorised as apolitical or pre-political. However, every public sphere, contrary to its ‘idealised conception [...] is characterised by visibilities and invisibilities’ and ‘the possibilities of (political) participation [are] regulated or restricted’ (Raimondi 2014: 183). Who can participate in the assembly and in which manner is regulated by the form of assembly with its inherent asymmetries.

Already within Arendt’s propositions, elements can be found that subvert the sharp distinction between public and private, helping to understand how any public and any assembly is already in difference to itself. Whereas the concept of the *space of appearance* is otherwise used by Arendt almost equivalently to that of the public sphere, it describes also a political potential outside of the public sphere. But this specific aspect arises only marginally: ‘The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.’ (Arendt 1958: 199)

As part of the human condition, however, human action itself, which always takes place between us, already bears within itself the possibility of the political — and this is what Arendt is concerned with at the core of her argument, not in the sense of normative determinations, but as a condition for the inconclusiveness of the political. It can potentially arise everywhere between everyone, but it is not something stable. The political possibility lies in this in-between-ness, starting with the encounter between each other in action and speech, i.e. through, at the same time, sharing and division (*partage*, compare Nancy 2000: 61). Therefore, an assembly itself cannot be political or apolitical ‘just like that’. It can become political because everything that is shared can

be *politicised*. That which binds the people's gatherings must first be worked out, as any community consists of 'intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places' (Rancière 1998: 137). And from the point of view of theatre studies, it remains to add that every 'scene and every scenic representation [...] is not limited in itself, but (unlocatably) "divided" in itself' (Menke 2018: 209). The phantasmatic sovereignty demanded by the Coronavirus deniers proves to be a reaction towards the narcissistic wounding, that everyone is dependent on each other not only in political appearance, but also in human active and contemplative life in general. It is that which one shares, which therefore divides and connects, albeit along differently distributed preconditions.

## Final Remarks on Critical, Emancipatory Movements

The aggressive protest of *Querdenken* and the media attention quickly pre-empted the topic of demonstrations during the pandemic. All too easily, some critical, emancipatory (left) political forms of assembly can be missed that also took place during the pandemic and which are worth devoting attention to. These are social movements that take into account the relationality of their concerns, raise a voice of solidarity for 'the part of those who have no part' (Rancière 1998: 30), and adapt the form of their protest in the sign of a concern for the possibility of gathering that has been changed under Coronavirus. To mention some examples that took place in Germany at the same time: many of the non-official commemorative gatherings for the victims of the right-wing terrorist, racist, and anti-Semitic attacks in the German cities of Hanau (from 19 February 2020) or Halle (from 9 October 2019) organised by local initiatives and left groups;<sup>24</sup> the demonstrations for the dissolution of refugee camps at the EU's external borders; the Fridays For Future or the Black Lives Matter movements. Unlike *Querdenken*, these initiatives or movements do not claim to be able to speak for all or 'the people' and to be directed against a supposed wholeness (the government defamed as a regime, the world conspiracy, etc.).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>. While in particular these gatherings and manifestations could only take place under the strictest conditions, events by *Querdenken* — as documented many times — were mostly not prevented, despite massive violations of contact restrictions, distance, and mask requirements.

<sup>25</sup>. Fassin proposes replacing 'the people' with 'a politics of publics', i.e. by all means a politics of minorities, but one that is not absorbed in what the state and state affiliation cover (Fassin 2019: 16). He admits that right-wing movements also claim this for themselves — there may well be parts of the *Querdenken* movement that do not see themselves as a 'people' in the sense of an oppressed majority, but as an excluded *part of those who have no part*.

Interestingly, these critical movements that also took place during the pandemic do not turn *against* democratic representation, but rather *towards* parliaments and civil society, in order to point out the flaws of liberal, representational democracies’.

They take into account the asymmetries that permeate the public sphere and their consequences (compare Raunig 2016: 190).<sup>26</sup> They perceive the social as an unstable ground from which it cannot be detached. For example, Black Lives Matter obviously did not take up ‘I can’t breathe’ (uttered by Eric Garner when murdered by police forces in 2014) as a general claim, but as a specific phrase that highlights the death of Black people in racialised societies.<sup>27</sup> When the slogan came up again in 2020 due to the death of George Floyd, it was of course even more relevant in light of the pandemic, but did not change the specific call for justice for Black people. Moreover, it became evident also due to Floyd’s death that, under Coronavirus, Black people are even more exposed to death through the racial and class inequality in the health system (compare Benjamin 2020; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor 2020).<sup>28</sup>

Emancipatory movements challenge representational democracies’ established forms as well as conventional ways of coming together by experimenting with new ways of assembling. Thus, they can be measured by the extent to which they include the form of their protest itself in the protest, how they consider the process, and the manner of assembly itself.

<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, this quality is not given to every left movement as such (as in contrast to the here-critiqued right or Third Position movements). A good counterexample for a left extra-parliamentarian, but at the same time nationalist, populist, and anti-immigrant movement is the now nearly vanquished *Aufstehen* (‘stand up’), initiated and led by the German politician Sahra Wagenknecht as well as the dramaturge Bernd Stegemann in 2018.

<sup>27</sup>. Compare on blackness and breathing, see Fanon 1986: 28.

<sup>28</sup>. Compare on the continuity of the threat to Black people’s breathing, see Thompson 2020; Schade 2020.

Judith Butler has expanded Arendt’s approaches in order to show the political space of appearance as permeated by the private, i.e. the social, i.e. by concrete conditionalities and dependencies. Accordingly, politics and especially political assembly are not a pure sphere, but a sociality. In contrast to a concept of freedom and the associated concept of the subject, which targets individual beings with their property rights, Butler’s proposition insists on ‘vulnerability’. That does not simply mean to be violable, but hints at the basic disposition of openness and relationality that conditions any human subject (Butler 2015: 149).<sup>29</sup> Such a shared foundation is not to be romanticised. Rather, it requires thinking about the vulnerability of those who cannot appear in the concrete assembly — which leads to the question of what form an assembly gives itself in light of its exclusion, so that its shaping becomes part of the political process itself (Menke 2016).

Accordingly, the central question about political assemblies is: who can participate in them and how those who cannot attend, who are absent are accommodated? But as I finally want to highlight, this more general and broader point on the inherent division of assemblies and its politicisation also allows conclusions for assemblies that happen in, with, or through performances and theatre to be drawn. The pandemic makes it painfully tangible what ‘merely’ gathering and meeting can mean. But invocations of uniqueness, ‘live(li)ness’ or co-presence do not help here because they absolutise a supposedly given status of theatre as such. Theatre is rather to be understood in an extended sense as a term for specific references in each case: towards and between different audiences as well as scenic materials (bodies, lights, sounds, etc.) or between humans, animals, plants, gods, stones, and so on. With this potential, scenic arts can experiment, explore the absence of certain forms of

<sup>29</sup>. Butler writes with regard to collective assemblies that in this process the bodies reciprocally are ‘parking’ in the action of the other due to the mediated relationship between each and all subjects (Butler 2015: 9).

assembly in their specificity, and try out new ones, but also look for such assemblies that do not appear in the usual form.<sup>30</sup> The Frankfurt group *andpartnersincrime* (Artistic Director: Eleonora Herder), for example, linked research on the Frankfurt City Parliament with a reflection on digital production and their collective commitment to an artistic-social canteen project for the homeless as part of their production *After the End of the Assembly* (*Nach dem Ende der Versammlung*, 2021). Initially designated as a theatrical tour of the Frankfurt City Hall, the restrictions under Covid-19 for theatres gave path to this new concept.

Hence, when it comes to different theatres as particular assembly places and events, it would be necessary to explore which assemblies and their respective stages can accommodate the claim of enabling new and different accesses while being aware of their inherent asymmetries — especially those amongst different spectators that cannot be summarised as a homogenous audience. Instead of storming parliaments or romanticising the familiar without looking at its contradictions, the task remains to find new common references within multiple, overlapping, and contradictory assemblies. •

<sup>30</sup>. On the (banned) gatherings of Black women at the beginning of the twentieth century and a different historiography in the method of 'critical fabulation', see Hartmann 2019: 229–57.

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