

21. “In Berlin, I feel free – but COVID-19 made the city feel like a giant prison”

Julia Gerlach with Nadine Abdalla

Julia Gerlach: Nadine Abdallah, you are a frequent traveler between Berlin in Cairo. Nice to meet you!

Nadine Abdalla: Exactly, I am a frequent traveler. At the moment, I am living in Cairo. If not for COVID-19, I would be in Berlin in the summer in addition to two to four visits a year. I previously lived in Berlin for three-and-a-half years intermittently. I was in Berlin for the last year-and-a-half of my PhD in 2012–13 and a postdoc year at Freie Universität Berlin in 2015/16. I also spent the summer of 2019 in Berlin, thanks to an AGYA fellowship at Freie Universität Berlin.

J.G.: Tell us a little more about yourself. Who are you?

N.A.: I am an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo. I finished my Ph.D. in Political Sociology in 2014 from Sciences Po Grenoble after completing my master's at Sciences Po Paris in 2006. My research field is social movements, especially workers and youth movements in the MENA region, with a focus on Egypt. I am also a columnist at the Egyptian daily, Al Masry Al-Youm. Even though I did my Ph.D. in Grenoble, I received a fellowship from SWP (*Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*) in Berlin. So, I spent the last year of my Ph.D. writing in Berlin. That was a very special year, 2012/13, with many things happening in Egypt, and at the same time, me having to finish the thesis. That last year of writing the Ph.D. is always very tough. Being far from Egypt was also challenging, with all the exciting political developments happening there. Being in Berlin softened the experience for me.

J.G.: What do you mean?

N.A.: I met very interesting people. At SWP, I learned a lot from my colleagues and from the highly interesting debates there. In Berlin, there was a great interest in what was happening in Egypt and many debates. I felt I could participate and give something back to the city. I met many people from the Arab World and Germany.

On a personal level, it was a great year. Berlin is very open and easy to live in. I believe no other city would have been as nice for me at this time.

J.G.: Sounds fantastic. No downsides?

N.A.: There were downsides, as well. For example, it is not always so easy to communicate my point of view and analysis of the political situation in Egypt to European colleagues. Quite often, I realized that the perception, assessment, and focus of the research were different.

J.G.: What do you mean?

N.A.: Let me find a good example. Western researchers often get information on the situation in Egypt from English sources. This means they have information on only selective parts of reality but not the whole picture. This is not always helpful in a debate. It often leads to formulating conclusions and beliefs that might be very different from what we actually want to highlight. The Western academic sphere is very focused on publication and research production. So the feelings and the experiences of the people actually living in the turbulent situation they are working on are often not considered.

J.G.: You spent the period from the summer of 2012 to the summer of 2013 in Berlin. That was a very interesting year, with many events in Berlin related to the uprising in Egypt and the other countries in the region.

N.A.: Yes, I missed Mohammed Mursi's year in power and returned to Egypt right after Abdelfattah al-Sisi had come to power. The most significant difference between the debates in Berlin and Cairo was that the people in Cairo were in the middle of it all. They lived the events, with all the ups and downs. In Berlin, most academics focused more on writing and publishing. That's understandable, in a way. However, I think it would have been good to avoid the kind of academic tourism where people go very briefly to Egypt, talk to a few people, and come back with simplistic conclusions to write down in their papers.

J.G.: Interesting! For me, it was the other way around. I lived in Cairo then, working there as a correspondent for German Media. I sometimes came to Berlin to participate in panel discussions on what was happening in Egypt. I found the discourse in Berlin much more rigid and even more polarized than the already very tough debates in Cairo. At a time when people in Cairo still had some doubts or would admit what to believe and what not to believe, people in Berlin were very straightforward in their conclusions and judgments.

N.A.: Then you understand what I was trying to describe! Formulating a clear point of view is easier if you are not part of what is happening. But the problem is that this clarity reflects a very simplistic analysis that neglects the situation's complexity.

J.G.: You mentioned Berlin as a city that softened this experience for you. What is it that you like about Berlin?

N.A.: Berlin is a city that is easy to connect to. I like the many events and small concerts where you don't have to pay much, and everybody can be there and participate. In Kreuzberg and Neukölln, for instance, I attended concerts performed by Turkish bands, others by a band with Palestinian and Lebanese performers, and others with Egyptians and Germans. Once, I attended a film in Kreuzberg by a Palestinian filmmaker about the situation in Palestine. After the film, there was a discussion with an audience of both Arabs and Germans. It was extremely interesting. You can find many events like this. It's intellectually and culturally rich. Many of the events are based in the Arab community. But – and this is the nice part – there are also many others who go there. Many Germans find it exciting and cool to attend these events. I also like the many green spaces in Berlin. You have the feeling that you can breathe. The urban landscape is designed in a way that lets you feel freedom.

J.G.: Do you mean that Berlin is greener than other European cities?

N.A.: Yes. In many other cities, you typically have narrow streets. That's also nice, but you find this extraordinary atmosphere in Berlin. There is a unique energy in this city. I do yoga, meditation, and energy healing. So, I am very sensitive to the energies surrounding me. Even if many parts of the city were destroyed, unlike other beautiful European cities, you can enjoy Berlin's freedom through its green spaces, broad streets, and vibrant nightlife.

J.G.: At the same time, you have enough people from the Arab World not to feel like a stranger, right?

N.A.: Yes. There is another big difference compared to other European cities. In Berlin, you will find many Arabs, but still, people mingle. German Berliners still find it interesting to go to Arab events and migrant neighborhoods, and vice versa. This doesn't mean Arab migrants don't encounter difficulties and racism, but integration has great potential if the right policies are pursued. I hope this mixing will continue despite the rise of populist currents in Germany and Europe. It would be a pity if there were more segregation and separation of the cultures.

J.G.: Some people talk about Berlin as the new cultural capital of the Arab World. Is that an exaggeration?

N.A.: I think it is an exaggeration. Berlin is a great city, but we shouldn't romanticize it. Yes, you have many artists and intellectuals coming to Berlin. But at the same time, it's not a wealthy city, and it's challenging to find jobs and flats and meet basic needs in this city. This pushes migrants to other German cities where job opportunities are more readily available.

J.G.: You wrote an article about how Berlin has changed during COVID-19.

N.A.: Yes, it was after a trip to Berlin in December 2021. Honestly, I would like to forget what I saw. I don't want to return to Berlin under COVID. It's a different city, and it reminded me of a giant prison. When I arrived at the airport, I realized the energy had changed. People in the street had changed their level of energy. They were so slow. And you were constantly asked to show your vaccination record and get yourself tested. People were not going out anymore. They were afraid to meet in groups, so they only met one-to-one. If people are afraid to meet, it is no fun to meet them. The best part about Berlin is the vibrant social life; people go out, and you can meet new people at these friendly small events. But they didn't exist anymore. I understand why the government is introducing these rules to protect the population, but at the same time, it destroys the city's atmosphere.

J.G.: Sometimes people have different personalities depending on where they are.

N.A.: Yes, same here. In Berlin, I feel freedom. I mean, in general, not now under COVID-19. I like the feeling that you can move freely in public spaces. I can't do that in Cairo simply because of the absence of public spaces. Everybody can enjoy public spaces in Berlin, while those spaces are very limited and increasingly privatized in Cairo. I hope that Berlin can keep this spirit.