24. Beyond Berlin

Why the rest of Germany also matters

Jan Claudius Völkel[1]

Introduction

Since being designated the capital of unified Germany in 1991, Berlin has gained tremendous national and international standing. Riding on its particular image as "poor but sexy", a frame famously bestowed upon it in 2003 by the mayor at the time, Klaus Wowereit (Ewert 2016), Berlin has become a "capital of cool" (Frary 2018). Concurrently, Berlin has steadily improved its score in the Global Power City Index, bringing it to rank eight in the 2022 edition, a slight slip from rank seven occupied in the two previous 2020 and 2021 editions.[2] Berlin has attracted a growing number of people from all over the world as new temporary or permanent inhabitants. This includes expatriates from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), whose number has significantly risen among Berlin's population over the last decade. Especially Syrians, who had to leave their home country in great numbers and moved to Germany due to the civil war back home (Streitwieser et al. 2017: 231), have made the city

1 The author wishes to thank Rabia Ergen and Korbinian Ferstl for their invaluable help in the conduct of this research.

2 (Berlin's positive ranking is mainly due to its good achievements in the categories "Livability" (rank 7), "Cultural Interaction" (8) and "Environment" (9), whereas evaluations for "Economy" (26), "R&D" (16) and "Accessibility" (23) were less favorable (https://www.mori-m-foundation.or.jp/pdf/GPCI2022_summary.pdf).

a favorite host for Arabs.[3] Most of the chapters in this book provide plentiful insights into their lives and realities in today's Berlin.

Berlin offers an unmatched fabric of history weaving together threads from Germany's Prussian, Weimarian, Fascist, and Socialist past, as well as its democratic present. It is a city that constantly redefines itself and charms visitors with its creativity, flexibility and, sometimes annoyingly for its permanent residents, unpredictability. As a result, the editors of this book assert that Berlin symbolizes a location where transformation processes begin and new activities, possibilities, lifestyles, and experimental spaces open up. This dynamic is, for one, rooted in Berlin's unique history of glory, devastation, division, and resurrection; but it also results from very mundane circumstances, such as affordable rents and decent living costs, especially when compared to London, Paris, New York, Toronto and other metropolises that have become leading centers of immigration.

This mix of vibrancy and affordability, plus the underlying political liberalism and economic potential the Federal Republic of Germany offers, has made Berlin a prime destination not least for persons under political persecution. Irrespective of frequent, and probably legitimate, criticism of cumbersome bureaucracy, lengthy asylum processes, and decade-long lives in limbo for foreigners seeking refuge (Tize 2021), Germany has become a preferred destination for gagged opponents of illiberal regimes, and its capital exerts a unique attraction: It is where top Turkish journalist Can Dündar escaped to after being convicted for espionage in his home country in 2016. Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny was brought to Berlin after suffering severe poisoning in Russia. Chinese artist and regime detractor Ai Weiwei lived in Berlin from 2015, before moving to the UK four years later after criticizing that Germany was "not an open society" (Ponzanesi 2020: 233).

Australian-Egyptian sociologist Amro Ali (2019) has argued that Berlin has developed a transformative power that cannot be found in any other city, be it in Germany or elsewhere. All other cities "appear to have a relative absence of ingredients that lead to the blossoming of a full-fledged political exile community like we are witnessing in Berlin". He concludes this has made Berlin the most important host city for the "exiled Arab body politic".

3 As of December 31, 2020, 1,344,612 inhabitants of Berlin had a "migration background", with almost 500,000 coming from other European countries (incl. the Russian Federation). 789,076 of the total 3,769,962 registered inhabitants had a foreign passport. From the MENA region, the by far most dominant Berlin group were Syrians (41,418), followed by Iraqis (9,472), Iranians (9,124), Lebanese (8,279), Egyptians (5,279), Israelis (5,239), Tunisians (2,984), Libyans (2,858), Moroccans (1,943), Jordanians (1,527), Yemenis (1,174), Algerians (1,118), Saudis (698), Kuwaitis (107), Bahrainis (95), Emiratis (59), Qataris (32), and Omanis (16) (https://download.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/fa93e3bd19a2e885/a5ecfb2fff6a/SB_A01-05-00_2020h02_BE.pdf).

This chapter here argues that while Berlin has undoubtedly gained largely unparalleled importance for politically woke citizens with roots or interests in the MENA region, other regions beyond Berlin should be brought to their notice, as well as these can generate transformative energy too. If, as stipulated by Amro Ali, a new "Berlin school of thought" is required among Arab thinkers that goes beyond philosophical ideas about a better political future in the Arab world and this school of thought should be stimulated by the environment they actually live in, then members of the Arab body politic need to leave Berlin to expand their horizons to explore other German regions. There they will detect features of today's Germany that deserve consideration. These are not only shining and positive examples; many are more worrying than encouraging. But given the benefits of learning from failure over learning from success, negative aspects deserve as much study as the positive ones do. They can send important signals back into the societies across the MENA region that suffer from authoritarianism, outright dictatorship, a lack of security, insufficient human rights protection, and economic perspectives (Völkel 2022). So while Arab body politic members might prefer to meet in hip Berlin, venturing out beyond the capital bears true promise.

Before we venture out on a tour of the German regions, however, let's look briefly at some specific German characteristics that are important for the theme of this chapter.

The Nazi past in Germany's DNA

2021 marked Germany's 150th birthday after the founding of the German Empire in 1871. Yet hardly any Germans took note of this anniversary, let alone celebrated it. This might in part have been due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but no major commemoration events had been planned even before. Where they did occur, they were reflective and educational – museum exhibitions, lectures and discussions among historians and social scientists, intellectual analyses in newspapers, radio features and academic publications, and official commemoration sessions in parliaments and other places of public relevance. There were, however, no mass festivities, no music festivals, no military parades or pompous galas on TV celebrating "Germany at 150" (Matthies 2021).

This absence of national self-celebration is connected to Germany's broken national pride (Blank/Schmidt 2003: 298), resulting from its difficult history, most obviously the devastating Nazi era. The twelve years under Adolf Hitler's fascist regime from 1933 to 1945 left a lasting mark on Germany that can still be sensed almost everywhere.

This broken national pride is only one aspect particular to modern Germany; another is a broad consensus on the need for power diffusion. In the former German

Democratic Republic (GDR) communism had dominated politics from a centralist perspective, with the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and its omnipresent state security organization *Stasi* ruling the country under Soviet guidance from East Berlin. By contrast, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) began as a decentralized political system. This meant that in Bonn, an intentionally chosen modest capital (Campbell 2003: 13), the executive had to be firmly rooted in the parliamentary majority, and the president, as the state's highest representative, had only strictly limited powers. Power was also dispersed geographically among the eleven and later sixteen federal states, or *Länder*, which have enjoyed a remarkable level of independence, albeit under the pretext of far-reaching symmetry – the claim that living conditions everywhere should be "equivalent" (note: not equal!), as expressed in Germany's Basic Law (Article 72.2). This means that the *Länder* were to provide all citizens with comparable living conditions: access to education, health, and public services, but also jobs, public transportation, and overall security.

One surprising result of this decentralized system is that Germany's two highest courts, the constitutional court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) and the federal court of justice (*Bundesgerichtshof*), are both located in Karlsruhe, a medium size city in southwest Germany, some 675 km away from Berlin (and 280 km from Bonn). This has historical roots, but even after unification in 1990, both courts were not moved (back) to the capital – a telltale that power was meant to remain distributed as an overarching principle in the reunified, "new" Germany. The Federal Administration Court (*Bundesverwaltungsgericht*) moved from its two former seats, West Berlin and Munich to Leipzig in 1997, occupying the historic building of the German Reich's supreme court.

Likewise, to this day, half of the federal ministries have kept their main seat in Bonn and have only secondary seats in Berlin. Berlin is thus one of the world's few capitals that does not host all relevant state institutions. It has even ceded Germany's leading airport (Frankfurt, Munich), leading industries (the Ruhr area, Munich, Stuttgart, or Wolfsburg), leading media outlets (Cologne, Hamburg, Mainz), and leading football clubs (Dortmund, Munich) to other cities. And while Berlin's universities have found their way back into the country's scholarly elite, students receive excellent higher education in other German university towns such as Göttingen, Greifswald, Jena, Siegen or Tübingen – towns and cities that many people might need to search for on a map.

Egyptians would probably disagree if asked to relocate their supreme court to, say, Minya or Luxor, and Tunisians would certainly not consider opening their constitutional court in Kasserine or Gabes. Jordan's leading universities are in and around Amman, Algeria's leading airport is in Algiers and Lebanon's financial district is in Beirut. By contrast, Germany proves that national capitals do not need to be the undisputed center of power per se and that comprehensive regional devel-

opment is a goal worth striving for. Morocco is the only MENA country with similar features, where the capital, Rabat, is economically less powerful than Casablanca and historically less important than Marrakech or Fez. Israel (Tel Aviv versus West Jerusalem) and Palestine (Ramallah versus East Jerusalem) are obviously special cases. So is Türkiye, with its break from the Ottoman Empire and the resulting choice of Ankara over Istanbul as the republic's capital. In all other MENA countries, the capitals are the largely undisputed national centers. Regional development meanwhile has remained insufficient, and citizens outside the capital often lack access to health, education, and other fundamental state services. This is not so in Germany.

Places of transformative relevance outside Berlin

In the following, some places across Germany are presented that bear a transformative relevance for certain aspects of democratization, such how minorities and outcasts are treated, borders and boundaries are managed, citizens are involved in state activities, and economic and social needs are met. These cases afford insights which stand for themselves and that cannot, or can only in limited terms, be gleaned in Berlin itself. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but only to illustrate a variety of inspirational and possibly revolutionary impulses outside the German capital.

Minorities and outcasts

Just 200 kilometers to the south of Berlin, the Lusatia region would be a worthwhile area for members of the Arab body politic to learn from. Home of the Sorbs, a West Slavic ethnic group who have gone through decades of assimilation at the risk of extinction (Magris 2018: 105–115), they have nevertheless kept their cultural traditions, including their own language. State authorities started in the 1950s to massively expand the exploitation of the major lignite reserves. Industrializing the region, they brought in workers from all over the GDR, who in time outnumbered the native Sorbs and gradually marginalized them. Apart from the Danish minority in Southern Schleswig (northern Germany), the Frisians in the coastal regions, and the Romani people, the Sorbs are the only legally recognized and formally protected ethnic minority in Germany that run their own schools and cultural centers and keep their distinct language and culture alive. For that purpose, Leipzig University features an Institute for Sorbian Studies, going back to the "Societas Lusatorum Sorabica" founded in 1716, and the city of Bautzen features a Sorbian museum to keep this specific part of German history alive. Lessons to be learned here might include impulses for how a marginalized minority has been involved in developing institutions to cultivate cultural identity, under both dictatorial and democratic conditions.

Bautzen is also worth exploring for its distinct history of imprisonment. Originally founded in 1906, the "Bautzen II" prison became an important site for the Weimar Republic's efforts to reform incarceration from pure punishment to crime prevention through the rehabilitation and "moral advancement" of offenders (Wachsmann 2014: 118). A miserable place of torture and degradation during the Nazi era, Bautzen II then gained sad prominence by becoming one of the leading *Stasi* penitentiaries for political prisoners. Inmates were kept there without giving reasons or providing proper legal assistance, and imprisonment destroyed future prospects. The *Stasi* aimed at breaking the prisoners rather than rehabilitating them, seeing their value only in the ransom they could generate if sold to the Federal Republic for Western currency (Horster 2004). A visit to the Bautzen II complex, now an official commemorative site, provokes questions about inviolable rights for jail inmates, the relation between state authorities and citizens, and the function of punishment.

Borders and boundaries

Not far from Bautzen lies the city of Görlitz, one of the very few German cities that suffered no major destruction during the second world war. It also survived the following period of post-war reconstruction largely unchanged, when many German cities lost additional historic buildings to "modernization" – primarily because cars were given unconditional priority over public transportation, bicycles, and pedestrians. Görlitz, however, kept its medieval character, and thanks to the quick response of the fire brigade on November 9, 1938, even their synagogue survived the *Night of Broken Glass* largely undamaged. Yet Görlitz's historic city center stood to face imminent destruction in the 1980s due to decade-long negligence. Only after German unification were such plans scrapped, and Görlitz was admitted to the exclusive consortium of historic cities, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft historischer Städte,* then numbering only three in Western Germany – Bamberg, Lübeck, and Regensburg. Meißen and Stralsund have since joined as additional Eastern German cities. Today, Görlitz's old town is comprehensively renovated, albeit at the price of gentrification.

Historically, Görlitz struggled with a challenge related to its sudden location on the periphery. Though it had enjoyed a central location, lying between Dresden and Wrocław (*Breslau* at the time) in the German Empire and the Weimar Republic, it now found itself divided at the Polish-German border, with its eastern boroughs beyond the Neiße river forming the Polish city of Zgorzelec. Former German citizens were expelled, and the city found itself in a militarized border zone with more and more Poles settling in. The end of the Cold War brought a remarkable healing effect: in 1998, Görlitz and Zgorzelec declared their collaboration under the joint label *Europastadt* (Europe city).

It would be similarly informative to visit one of the former German-German border crossings, such as the *Grenzübergangsstelle* (GÜST) Marienborn–Helmstedt. At the time Europe's largest border point, this well-preserved checkpoint is now a museum and memorial of the Stasi-controlled migration management. While the apparent aim was to prevent escape from the East to the West, visitors to the GDR and even transit travelers from West Germany to West Berlin were thoroughly checked and investigated. This included psychological pressure, recalled by Germans on both sides of the border – although Western memories might overrule Eastern perspectives in retrospectives today (Knischewski/Spittler 2010). A visit to this remarkable spot not only reveals lessons about authoritarian state security, border control, and the general mistrust of one state towards its (and other) citizens; considering the arbitrary acts of massive state power and the way it has been dealt with since 1990 also speaks to questions of transitional justice, oral history, and conciliation.

Citizens in uniform

Munich and Hamburg host two universities of the German armed forces (*Universität der Bundeswehr*), Münster hosts the German Police University (*Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei*). These special institutions of higher education are not simply military or police academies that serve the primary purpose of turning out professional soldiers or police officers; they were created to make civil education available to them while on duty, following the concept of military personnel as "citizens in uniform" (*Staatsbürger in Uniform*), born in the 1950s to discuss the rearmament of the Federal Republic and the eventual foundation of the *Bundeswehr* in 1955. According to this concept, soldiers and police officers remain citizens of the democratic polity with all of their rights and responsibilities. They are entitled to exercise their democratic rights and to strive for political education. The populace being protected by fundamental democratic ethics places limits on military orders, which soldiers are encouraged to disregard should they deem them illegal. Finally, the "citizens in uniform" concept emphasizes that both the armed force and the police force are not homogenously comprised of cadre elites but reflect Germany's pluralistic society (Koltermann 2012: 113). For all these safeguards, the security forces have a persistent problem, namely racism and the non-discriminatory performance of their duties. Globally, and not least in the MENA region, relations between the armed forces, the citizens, and the state are contested and problematic. Interviewing staff and students at these German universities could provide interesting insights for transformative thinking.

Economic and social transformation

Arab body politic members could also visit the Rhine-Ruhr area between Dortmund, Duisburg, and Cologne, Europe's largest urban agglomeration (Zimmermann 2013:

104). This was the prime destination for Arab migrants in Germany between 2007 and 2017 (Heider et al. 2020: 9–10). Its former rich coal mines made the region Germany's traditional industrial powerhouse. The population here will remember the exorbitant levels of air pollution along with decent neighborhoods in the early decades of the young Federal Republic. Many lost their jobs in the ongoing transformation of the former steel mills into more sustainable enterprises. Millions of "guest workers" (*Gastarbeiter*) who were initially supposed to stay for a limited time eventually stayed indefinitely, giving rise to diversified restaurant menus, shopping opportunities, lifestyles, and arts. Second and third-generation migrants have grown up in a Germany that is both home and hostile to them. The changing needs of both locally born and immigrant citizens have grown from purely economic to include cultural and social expectations (Akmir 2015: 148). They have been exposed to xenophobia, racism, exclusion, prejudices, and suspicion. Economists explain how unavoidable change has destroyed formerly prestigious specialized professions like mining. Politicians have struggled to decide whether mines and steel mills should be closed, and city planners have been obliged to make their cities keep pace with staggering social, economic, and political changes. Migrants from the MENA region have been an integral part of those changes with their ups and downs. No wonder the DOMiD, the Documentation Centre and Museum of Migration in Germany, is located not in Berlin but in Cologne, which also hosts Germany's most prominent mosque since 2018.

Conclusion

For multiple reasons, Berlin is an attractive city for Arab expatriates who have had to escape their countries or have chosen to live outside the MENA region. But it is not the only place in Germany that holds relevance for those who try to understand social phenomena and political and economic relations under changing conditions – aspects that we commonly associate with transformation.

Germany with its unique history has a lot to offer regarding safeguarding the indispensable dignity of humankind vis-à-vis the state, and of citizens within their society. That is not to deny massive breaches through racist and disrespectful behavior. It contains impressive examples of changing living conditions in cities and the countryside, where socioeconomic and demographic change challenges have required political and economic responses encouraging the "winners" of transformation and cushioning the "losers". Germany has not succeeded in all these challenges, as attested by the growing tensions between progressive Germans and those who have lost their trust in political institutions and now support anti-democratic, even fascist deputies in the federal *Bundestag*, the 16 *Länder* parliaments, and the many city councils. But Germany's failures and ongoing socioeconomic struggles do hold

lessons for Arab aspirations for reform and transformation and be it to show how things should *not* be handled.

Ultimately, looking beyond the Berlin horizon offers great transformative insights. Germany's federal system, first and foremost, aspires to ensure comparable living conditions all over the country. Could it be that life outside capitals such as Amman, Cairo and Tunis would improve if only they were no longer idealized over other parts of the country? Then, focusing on the specifics that its various regions and municipalities offer, Germany narrates stories steeped in the challenges of overcoming its nationalist past that may help to generate ideas for contemporary transformation processes as well.

Last but not least: revolutions might happen in cities (Lévesque, 2019: 21), but people in their majority live outside such metropols. Germany's 14 cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants each host not more than 15 of the country's total 82 million inhabitants. Most Germans rather live in mid- to small-size cities or outright villages. Questions of how to provide them with sufficient childcare and quality education, comprehensive medical care, efficient transportation solutions, attractive jobs and affordable housing are crucial for the overall social transformation in Germany; and they are not less crucial for the transformation trajectories in Arab societies. Neglecting the daily realities of these non-metropolitans bears the potential risk of neglecting the majority of Arab citizens as well. Missing their empathy and support, however, would likely mean that no transformation can ever take societal roots and consequently take off. Neither here nor there.

References

Akmir, Abdelouahed (2015) European Arabs: Identity, education and citizenship. *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8(2) 147–162 (https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2015.1016762).

Ali, Amro (2019) On the need to shape the Arab exile body in Berlin. Open Democracy, February 18 (https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/on-need-to-shape-arab-exile-body-in-berlin/).

Blank, Thomas; Schmidt, Peter (2003) National identity in a united Germany: Nationalism or patriotism? An empirical test with representative data. Political Psychology 24(2) 289–312.

Campbell, Scott (2003) The enduring importance of national capital cities in the global era. Urban and Regional Research Collaborative Working Paper 03–08 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan).

Ewert, Benjamin (2016) Poor but sexy? Berlin as a context for social innovation. In: Brandsen, Taco; Cattacin, Sandro; Evers, Adalbert; Zimmer, Annette (eds.): Social innovations in the urban context (Cham: Springer) 143–158.

Frary, Mark (2018) How Berlin became the capital of cool. The Times, April 14 (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/static/how-berlin-became-capital-of-cool).

Heider, Bastian; Stroms, Peter; Koch, Jannik; Siedentop, Stefan (2020) Where do immigrants move in Germany? The role of international migration in regional disparities in population development. Population, Place and Space 26(8) e2363 (https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2363).

Horster, Maximilian (2004) The trade in political prisoners between the two German states, 1962–89. Journal of Contemporary History 39(3) 403–424.

Knischewski, Gerd/Spittler, Ulla (2010) Memorialization of the German-German border in the context of constructions of Heimat. In: Niven, Bill; Paver, Chloe (eds.): Memorialization in Germany since 1945 (London: Palgrave Macmillan) 318–327.

Koltermann, Jens O. (2012) Citizen in uniform: Democratic Germany and the changing Bundeswehr. Parameters 42(2) 108–126.

Lévesque, Carole (2019) Finding room in Beirut. Places of the everyday (Goleta: Punctum Books).

Magris, Claudio (2018): Journeying (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Matthies, Bernd (2021) Heute vor 150 Jahren war Berlin erstmals Hauptstadt. Der Tagesspiegel, January 18, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/jubilaeum-ohne-jubel-heute-vor-150-jahren-war-berlin-erstmals-hauptstadt/26825656.html.

Ponzanesi, Sandra (2020) The art of dissent: Ai Weiwei, rebel with a cause. In: Buikema, Rosemarie; Buyse, Antoine; Robben, Antonius (eds.): Culture, citizenship and human rights (Abingdon: Routledge) 215–236.

Streitwieser, Bernhard; Brueck, Lukas; Moody, Rachel; Taylor, Margaret (2017) The potential and reality of new refugees entering German Higher Education: The case of Berlin institutions, European Education 49(4) 231–252.

Tize, Carola (2021) Living in permanent temporariness: The multigenerational ordeal of living under Germany's toleration status, Journal of Refugee Studies 34(3) 3024–3043.

Völkel, Jan Claudius (2022) A disastrous decade. Regional Report Middle East and North Africa, Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung) (https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BTI_2022_Regional_Report_MENA.pdf).

Wachsmann, Nikolaus (2014) Between reform and repression: imprisonment in Weimar Germany. In Wetzell, Richard F. (ed.) Crime and criminal justice in modern Germany (New York: Berghahn) 115–136.

Zimmermann, Horst (2013) Berlin: An almost symmetrical case. In: Nagel, Klaus-Jürgen (ed.): The problem of the capital city: New research on federal capitals and their territory (Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Autonòmics) 103–121.