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Cultures of rejection in the Covid-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a collectively developed analysis of the Covid-19 crisis as it relates to contemporary cultures of rejection, i.e. the socio-cultural conditions in which authoritarian and right-wing populist politics thrive, in Europe. We explore how the pandemic and its management reinforces, transforms and/or overrides existing antagonisms and institutes new ones in Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Germany and Sweden. We discuss how the Covid-19 crisis affects the rise of new statisms; gendered patterns of social reproduction; mobility and migration; digital infrastructures; and new political mobilizations.

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This article offers a collectively developed analysis by a transnational research group (www.culturesofrejection.net) investigating contemporary socio-cultural conditions in which authoritarian and right-wing populist politics thrive. The authors conduct research in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Sweden: five states and societies that together constitute a political space instituted by the migration movements since 2015 and the political struggles that have emerged with them (Jonsson 2020). The “welcome culture” (Bojadžijev 2018) that had initially emerged with these movements and struggles has since been overshadowed by a conjuncture of right-wing mobilisations and an authoritarian turn in European, and the emergence of

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what we term “cultures of rejection”. In this contribution, we sketch the multi-faceted impact the Covid-19 crisis has on cultures of rejection.

We have developed the heuristic and deliberately provocative concept of “cultures of rejection” to investigate socio-cultural conditions in which authoritarian and right-wing populist politics have become acceptable. This approach both diverges from and illuminates the existing research on right-wing populism or neo-fascism. We introduce the concept of *cultures of rejection* fully aware of the role “culture” plays in neo-racist discourses (Balibar 1991, 22). We consciously refute any essentialist understanding of “culture” and a de-politicizing “culturalization” of social phenomena (cf. Fornäs et al. 2007; Lentin 2014). Instead, we draw on the critical tradition of Cultural Studies which “insists on a ‘deep’ understanding of culture, which looks ‘up and out’ at the structures of power, history and economics, but also ‘down and in’ at the structures of feeling which animate it” (Alexander 2016, 1434). Thus, we consider cultures as conditions of “concrete social life”, assembling, as Fredric Jameson (1971, 16) put it, “words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities,” in which subjects navigate terrains of contradiction and antagonism. Our desire is to research the material and everyday conditions of existence, both in the ways in which we live it, and in ways in which we feel they ought to be lived (Cole 2020). Supplementing well-established terms such as “othering” and “exclusion”, the notion of *rejection* provides us with a focus on attitudes and practices in the everyday life of workers, that combine and articulate well-known cultural operations of othering and exclusion (Balibar 2005) with the rejection of *apparatuses of authority*, such as state institutions or established media outlets. In all five countries, our research has shown that the objects of rejection may vary and combine differently, but often include immigration, domestic political elites, institutions of civil society and media, shifting gender relations, and racialised or culturalised Others. If we address so many “varieties of reality” and think of them as more than just a composite, it is because we believe our time demands “archaeologies of the future” (Jameson 2005). Thinking the current conjuncture through the notion of cultures of rejection helps us understand the modality in which experiences of transformation and crisis are lived across Europe today (cf. Hall et al. 1978, 394).

Cultures of rejection and multiple crises

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic plunged our world(s) into an exceptional global crisis, scholars have identified elements of an ongoing “multiple crisis” (Houtart 2010). More recently, informatization of labour processes (Raj-Reichert, Zajak, and Helmerich 2020) and the logistification and digitalization of migration regimes (Altenried et al. 2018) have added new dimensions to these dynamics of change and crisis. It is within this specific literature that

the concept of *cultures of rejection* has emerged. In our empirical investigations (Harder and Opratko 2020), we have encountered a number of themes that indicate how subjective investments in cultures of rejection are articulated with experiences of crisis. These include a wider detachment from discourses and institutions of authority, such as state institutions and “politics” in the broadest sense, shifting gender relations, which were both in turn linked to the rejection of migrants and “non-belonging” Others, and a rejection of news media. We highlight these topics because they are currently re-negotiated, re-articulated and reinforced under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have used the current situation to jointly reflect on our initial findings under the conditions of the global pandemic. While our discussion remains inevitably sketchy, we believe that we can provide valuable observations on how the Covid-19 crisis is affecting cultures of rejection by reinforcing, transforming or overriding existing antagonisms, but also by instituting new ones. With wide-ranging quarantine measures affecting people’s everyday lives in unprecedented ways, shedding light on the state of public health systems, and a pandemic-induced global economic crisis, questions of ethical and political authority, of trust in and consensus with moral and political leadership, have come to the fore. In this light, this contribution, written in Summer 2020, focuses on five selected fields that play an imminent role in our research: (1) The re-articulation of the role of the state during the pandemic, and the rise of new statisms; (2) the re-negotiation of the domestic sphere and gendered patterns of social reproduction; (3) practices of mobility and migration and political attempts at their regulation; (4) the role of digital communication infrastructures; and (5.) new political mobilizations against anti-COVID measures.

(1) The rise of Covid-19 statisms

The Covid-19 crisis has reinforced some longer-term tendencies in the way European states act (and are perceived to act), particularly in the context of deeply entrenched neoliberal policies (Standing and Davies 2020). At the same time, we observe indications of new ruptures in the relationship between state, society and economy. Three dimensions are particularly important in relation to cultures of rejection. First, in an acute crisis like the current one, executive powers gain the upper hand over parliamentary and judicial procedures. It is the proverbial “hour of the executive” (a formula often attributed to Carl Schmitt). In many European countries, governments suspended the decision-making power of parliaments and ruled by means of decrees. While the introduction of a “state of emergency” may seem as extraordinary as the pandemic itself, the disempowerment of parliaments and the introduction of authoritarian elements within formally democratic structures has recent predecessors, for example in France and Spain (Oberndorfer 2020).

Secondly, many European states relied heavily on policing and military aid in their crisis management. Quarantine and social distancing measures were or are punishable by law. The often invoked call for “solidarity” was flanked by coercive measures, some of which, as in the case of Austria, turned out not to be covered by law. In Vienna alone, 3,300 administrative criminal proceedings were appealed against, according to the City authorities, and the Constitutional Court ruled that some of the restrictions put in place by the Federal Government in March 2020 were unconstitutional (Ehs 2020). These dimensions of state action have long been familiar elements of an “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff and Tansel 2019), i.e. a focus of state action to punitive and disciplinary measures, or what Bourdieu (2000) called the “right hand” of the state. Thirdly and finally, many European states and the European Union rediscovered Keynesian forms of governing – i.e. deficit spending in times of crisis. Even neo-liberal political actors and governments advocated that the state should be the institution to lead the way out of the economic crisis by providing financial support to the economy or offering compensations to businesses and the unemployed. In our pre-crisis research, building on interviews with workers in the retail and logistics sector in five countries, we have encountered wide-spread rejection of the welfare state among workers who considered it “too generous”, subsidizing lazy do-nothings while taking away money from hard workers such as themselves. Now, with a dramatic rise in unemployment and majorities welcoming the “left hand” of the state, we expect changing antagonisms in this field. Sweden appears to be an interesting outlier here, with policy responses emphasizing consent and voluntary precaution rather than enforced lockdowns. While the health-related and epidemiologic results of this are debatable, the political outcomes so far indicate increased public trust in government (Novus 2020a, 2020b). But this trust meets with increased tendencies of rejection and insubordination in certain parts of the political landscape, in terms of, at least in the symbolical sense insurgent, movements, mainly in Germany and Serbia, albeit in different ways (see below) that re-articulate the rejection of state institutions in new ways.

(2) Social reproduction and the renegotiation of the home

The imperative to “stay at home” was perhaps the strongest state message during the first phase of the pandemic. In the states’ dominant interpellation, to remain cloistered was framed as an act of solidarity and prevention, both an act of self-care and a way of caring for others, not least elderly loved ones. Here, we witness a renegotiation of the role and function of the home as a material and symbolic place. While the home is supposed to be a safe haven, a place of comfort and protection, it is at the same time a place of work. During the pandemic, official and dominant discourses reinforce

both aspects at the same time. The home becomes the place of protection par excellence, but also, through home office and the introduction of new technologies, it needs to be *productive*. Both aspects become problematic in their own ways. Recent numbers show that productivity rates remained relatively stable, indicating that public and private spheres could easily be integrated in the production process at no or little cost. Subjectively, for some segments of the populations, this was certainly the case. At times, we could witness a “romantization of the quarantine”, when staying at home was portrayed as free time and a chance for personal growth. The less loud voices soon started stating the obvious: that quarantine is a class privilege for the non-migrant population (Altenried, Bojadžijev, and Wallis 2020). Not only could the majority of workers not actually work from home, but the digital divide affects even one’s access to healthcare (Ramsetty and Adams 2020). And even for the ones who could work from home, inequalities appear on various levels. The overlap of public and private gets complicated when there is additional work to be done, such as care for children or elderly relatives. With kindergartens and schools closed, the care and education services are taken away from the institutions and placed back to the private sphere, which of course is heavily gendered. Patriarchal patterns in the division of domestic labour and gendered modes of subjectivation acted, once again, as a resource in crisis management (Hajek and Opratko 2016; Allmendinger 2020). One early indicator for this in our own academic context, albeit of limited explanatory value, is the fact that there are significantly lower numbers of women appearing as single authors in peer reviewed journals (Dolan and Lawless 2020; Flaherty 2020). While the “productive” aspect of the home becomes problematic in this way, the “protective” one does so, too. For many people, staying in the private sphere is not. There is mounting evidence of an increase of gendered domestic violence across the globe during lockdowns (Bao 2020; Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020; Campbell 2020; Usher et al. 2020).

This renegotiation of the role of the home, and in a wider sense of the relationship between the public and the private sphere, is highly relevant for the study of cultures of rejection. Many of our informants experience the public sphere as an annoyance, as overwhelming and stressful, and centre their lives around a rather restricted space of the private home. When this very home becomes a point where government techniques, public health strategies, economic imperatives, and patriarchal structures intersect in novel ways during the pandemic, we expect new social tensions to arise.

(3) Migration and mobility

Since 2015, authoritarian and right-wing movements and parties have successfully translated issues of national identity and nationalist discourses

into a “question of migration” (Bojadžijev 2018). This has been the case regardless of the actual numbers of migrants or patterns of movement in different European countries. The “question of migration” was a decisive contributing factor in the deepening crisis of the European Union itself, exacerbating an inner conflict between nationalist and sovereigntist forces on the one hand, and “Europeanist” or cosmopolitan ones on the other. This constellation has been at least temporarily broken by the pandemic. With the closure of the EU’s external borders as well as many of the internal ones, the suspension of the right to asylum and restrictions on freedom of movement within the Schengen area, the far right’s core issues regarding the “question of migration” were undercut and their old demands for closing EU and national borders sounded like an echo from a distant past. At the same time, COVID-related scapegoating and hate crimes have reinforced various, racisms, and extreme violence and human rights violations in Europe’s “borderlands” continue and are even exacerbated during the current crisis. In Croatia, the Border Violence Monitor Network continues to report illegal push-backs, involving the use of electric discharge weapons and fire arms, arbitrary detention in substandard facilities, and humiliating treatment such as forceful undressing and spray tagging (Border Violence Monitoring Network 2020a). Inequality has been sharpened further for migrants since the onset of Covid-19 lockdowns, limiting access to asylum, healthcare, adequate accommodation, and safety from brutal collective expulsions (Border Violence Monitoring Network 2020b). Similar observations are reported in all countries of our study from Sweden to Serbia, where the “left hand of the state” has not only failed to assist the migrant populations most vulnerable to the pandemic but has openly ignored their human rights.

In interviews with workers in the retail and logistics sectors in Croatia conducted during the pandemic, we also witnessed the growing influence and rapid spread of anti-migrant sentiment on social media across the Balkan countries, as well as covert racism towards co-workers of different ethnic backgrounds among Croatian informants. This contrasts with recent quantitative data from the European Social Survey (ESS) on attitudes towards immigration, where 60% of the population in Croatia believe the state should allow immigration from the poorer non-European countries (European Social Survey 2020). This result places the country among the European nations most open to migration, even in comparison to their neighbouring countries (Italy: 51%; Serbia: 45%; Austria: 39%; Hungary: 8%). Even though the ESS fieldwork was done during 2018 and 2019, the numbers are surprising given the ongoing reports of human rights violations in treatment of migrants coming to or transiting the territory of Croatia during 2019 and 2020. However, we should be wary of these results, given the problems conventional cross-cultural quantitative studies are prone to (Buil, de Chernatony, and Martínez 2012). The ESS numbers have been portrayed by media

in Croatia as unquestionable evidence of Croatian general openness – triggering reactions in the population questioning not only the validity of the data, but the integrity of scientific and educational institutions in general. We read this as another example of a conflict emerging on the basis existing cultures of rejection. In this case, a number of crucial antagonisms – against migrants/migration, against “mainstream media”, and against scientific institutions – intersect to produce a new and potentially volatile constellation.

(4) Digital infrastructures in the Covid-19 Crisis: Public broadcasting, networked publics, private networks?

The pandemic has been a catalyst for digital infrastructure in terms of media use, political authority, and demand for technology providers. These developments impact both processes of labour (e.g. remote work, virtual consulting, digital surveillance) and social reproduction (e.g. online retail, delivery services, streaming). Protest mobilizations relied on digital infrastructures for spreading information and making sense of the crisis, and deepened contradictions between public broadcasting channels and digital communication platforms. YouTube, Twitter and Facebook increased their content moderation to curb the dangers of an “Infodemic” – misinformation and mass confusion (Ghebreyesus 2020). At the same time, German public broadcasting saw record numbers in viewership and trust during the crisis (ZDF 2020). In Germany and Sweden, the necessity to render the pandemic understandable and to justify state interventions propelled experts in epidemiology and virology into the public spotlight, commenting on current developments in daily podcasts, talk shows or on Twitter. A conjuncture of state policies, expert knowledge, broadcast and social media turned virologists into prominent figures. If and how this development actually solidifies public broadcasting regimes remains to be seen. Early interviews in Germany stress the ubiquity of instant messaging services like WhatsApp or Telegram for conducting relationship with pre-existing private networks of friends, colleagues and neighbours. During the crisis, platforms facilitating individual and group conversations outranked public platforms like Facebook for sharing information and making sense of politics during the pandemic, chiefly among friends or colleagues (Nielsen et al. 2020, 13). Fatigue regarding online publicity (cf. Lupinacci 2020), media overstimulation (Nicholson 2020) or the paralyzing effects of endless negative headlines (Watercutter 2020) might contribute to the increase of political discussions on instant messengers, instead of Facebook. WhatsApp and Telegram can serve as means for the deliberate disconnection from broader publics (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2018) and serve as a crucial vectors for nationalist, conspiracist and racist content that eludes regulation (Holnburger and Welty 2020). The intensified – and understudied – role the these more opaque, private and personal

platforms play in the circulation of information complicates and, in the case of right-wing groups and channels, explicitly counteracts the constellation of state policy, expert knowledge and media broadcasting, which is framed as authoritarian, technocratic and overbearing. Simultaneously, political mobilizations focusing on the risks for vulnerable populations and issues of inequality eclipsed by the state of emergency, employed digital infrastructures in a different manner. Protests against the mistreatment of refugees, the impending climate crisis or structural racism mobilized primarily through social media and utilized the platforms' global scope to highlight the transnational dimension of these struggles. Live-streaming, hashtags and videoconferencing allowed the creation of public congregations that linked diverse digital and physical environments. Use of digital infrastructure was less a rejective act against specific media constellations than a strategic tool for the choreography of assembly (Gerbaudo 2012). By digitally directing, instructing and framing public congregations, physical protests were both in line with pandemic measures and connected to global issues of migration, police brutality or wage inequality.

(5) New political mobilisations

While far-right and authoritarian populist parties in most European countries initially struggled to find their place during the pandemic (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020), right-wing movements did find new issues and means to mobilize under new circumstances. In Germany, despite the fact that assemblies were officially prohibited and social distancing rules ordained, more than 10.000 people attended protests nationwide in May. Protesters demonstrated their rejection of protective measures against the pandemic and their general sentiment of rejection, and often did so in the name of democracy and the rule of law. A number of demonstrators held up copies of the Constitutional Law of the Federal Republic of Germany during their manifestations, protesting against the alleged "abolition" of fundamental rights, against the "outdated elites", the "bringing into line" ("Gleichschaltung") of the media as well as the "abolition of public discussion" because of the Corona pandemic measures. The protest movements were a heterogeneous mixture of predominantly right-wing extremist movements and parties, esoterics as well as anti-vaccination activists. On a symbolic level, an "info war" took place: a disturbing play with symbols (LGBTQI flags, "No one is illegal"-banner, anti-fascist symbols) of the "other side", reversing their meanings and integrating symbols of democracy and anti-fascism into an authoritarian mobilization. One striking example was the framing of anti-pandemic measures as an "Enabling Act", alluding to the historical Enabling Act of 1933 which brought Adolf Hitler to power. Because the Infection Protection Act, passed by the Federal Parliament on 22 March, included limitations and

restrictions on the right to assemble, protesters called it a “de facto dictatorship” and compared it to the Nazi regime, notwithstanding the fact that a significant number of the protesters came from Neo-Nazi milieus themselves (Vieten 2020).

Civil activism expressing other demands, for example for justice, equality and democratic empowerment, have also emerged during the C19 pandemic. These protests largely accepted the restrictions imposed by the Corona measures and included an international “online demonstration” by the Fridays for Future movement, as well as numerous manifestations against the conditions in refugee camps and shelters and for the reception of refugees in Germany, which were often broken up by the police and led to arrests. The largest demonstrations took place on the weekend of Pentecost in several European cities in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

The largest and perhaps most momentous mobilisations took place in Serbia, where huge protests took place against the government’s mismanagement of the Covid-19 crisis. The mobilisations were triggered by the government’s zig-zag course, from neglecting the challenges of the “funniest virus in the world” (February 2020) to imposing the strictest lockdown measures in Europe (April 2020) to an early return to “normalcy” in May 2020. Protesters included members of left and liberal groups as well as a large number of supporters of the far-right. Police reacted violently and significantly increased its presence in the city of Belgrade. In the following few days, after one day of peaceful protests with the slogan “Sedi, ne nasedaj” (“Sit, don’t be deceived”) – perceived as a liberal response to state violence – police started firing teargas and randomly arresting protesters. Groups aligned to the political left were visible in the protests from July 4, attempting to raise the voice and attract attention among citizens against the very loud and organized right-wing groups. The protests revealed the impotence of the oppositional parties and groups to construct a coherent narrative and develop common demands. They also revealed an authentic rage and dissatisfaction among the Serbian population. They often articulate a desire to return to a “pre-political state”, evidence of a culture of rejection directed against politics and politicians in general, coupled with a deep dissatisfaction with social conditions in the country. Many attempts on social media to formulate demands on behalf of the citizens faced negative response and didn’t produce any substantial result. At the time of writing, it seems like the far-right has been able to capitalize on the protests, becoming more visible and entering the public mainstream more easily, with potentially dramatic long-term consequences.

Conclusion: new contradictions

The pandemic has created the perspective of a global threat through latent and increasingly economic-ecological contradictions – in regard to climate

change and viral spread – while simultaneously creating the desire to return to a pre-pandemic state, open businesses and the democratic pretension that the way of doing economy is and was valid. Caught between a deep rupture in the self-evidence of the economic and social order and the inability to find feasible political alternatives, feelings of inescapability or being “locked in” can arise. In his 1944 crisis drama *Huis Clos* – translated as “No Exit” in English, but literally meaning “Locked Gates” – Jean Paul Sartre prefigures the fundamentally rejective reaction to this pandemic: “Hell is other people”.

As we have shown above, the Covid-19 crisis has multiple and deep impacts on the various aspects of cultures of rejection. In some cases, existing antagonisms – such as those instituted around the figure of the “migrant” or the “asylum seeker”, or against established media and scientific institutions and discourse – are being reinforced and charged with new layers of “viral” meaning. Other antagonisms – such as the rejection of the welfare state as “too generous” may be weakened by the experience of a deep public health crisis and mass unemployment. And finally, new antagonisms – such as those articulated by protests against quarantine measures, social distancing and the wearing of face-masks – arise and link up with existing ones, creating new potential lines of conflict and, perhaps, solidarity. Future research will have to take account of how the new contradictions arising from the pandemic and its management affect cultures of rejection in different locations and over time.

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